

ONE

I will find the old Lux and when I do I will climb back inside her and sew myself into her skin so I never get lost again.

The last time I saw her, me, properly was at the Leavers' Ball. I was wearing the shortest, reddest dress I could find. This was before colours meant what they do now. And before I got lost.

I remember every detail and I can't say that about many times since.

I felt eyes on me all night. The gaze of those girls who feel pretty when they're hungry. And the guys – a host of blandly handsome XY chromosomes, winking at me in the semi-dark. Winking at every girl who walked by probably but, in the presence of wit and the black-tie promise of a beautiful life, I'll forgive anything.

It was the start of the summer; an elaborate ball to send off the Upper Sixth. The annual goodbye to another tranche of

maladjusted Artists set free to paint or pretend their way through life. I'd just finished Lower Sixth but our year was invited too; I don't know why as there has always been plenty enough people in each year to make a decent party.

In fact, despite the head director's best efforts, Richdeane Arts School is famous for parties. A few years ago, five Artists were caught doing ketamine and having sex on the golf course. After that particular incident, we had to stop calling the staff by their first names – like that would affect whether or not we wanted to interfere with each other by the ninth hole. There was even talk of a curfew for a while, as if Richdeane were a normal school, but the governors voted against it in favour of 'preserving Richdeane's liberal ethos'. Anyway, the 'orgy' was all over the papers and the Golf Course Five were expelled. I put a lot of thought into determining how I would deal with that kind of attention. Nonchalantly but as publicly as possible, I decided.

At the leavers' after-party, we all sucked on shots and toasted summer and goodbyes, showing the required amount of disrespect for the host's property.

I was in charge of the party favours, as always, producing pills and powders from inside my tiny dress like a pharmaceutical magician. Soundtracked by nineties' trip-hop, kids who had never spoken before shared muses and made each other promises they believed they would keep, while the many bedrooms and dark corners were claimed by temporary collaborators.

In the basement, a select crowd sketched, scratched, painted or inked our names at the edges of one of the long white walls while two girls worked soundlessly around each other to spray phosphorescent snowdrops, flags and faces in the middle. As

more of us added our names and messages, the wall began to belong to us, not to someone's parents. It took my breath away. Flanked by the friends I knew I would keep close for as long as I lived, I wished those journalists who were so ready to trash Richdeane could see what we could create together, without even really trying.

It was so, so hot down there and the spray paint fumes made me sway but I wanted to stay forever, watching our shared mural creep across the walls like neon vines.

When we couldn't take the basement heat any longer, we staggered up to the kitchen to do more shots of spiked bubble tea, which Mei said tasted like baby gravy, chasing them with Dirty Coconuts, a cocktail of vodka and coconut water.

I lost my virginity to a sculptor named Henry that night – seventeen was late to lose it; I was the last of my friends to give it up. My experience lagged behind my reputation, if only in that department. Henry was lean and hyper-focused. I chose him because it seemed the ideal collaboration – he was good with his hands and I could play the scene as required.

Plus, he'd been selling me drugs all year and it took zero effort to get him to follow me upstairs into a guest room.

I pulled him inside and told him to lock the door.

'There's no key. Should we find somewhere else?'

I didn't want to lose my nerve. 'No, come here. Be quick.'

'Romantic,' he said. He picked up an armful of coats from the bed and rolled them together in front of the door to block it.

'Come here,' I said again. I pulled off my shoes and lay on the bed, looking over my body down to my feet. Angry welts marked them where I'd done the straps up too tight. I thought

of Olivia and her dancer's feet and how she'd told me dancers aren't supposed to show pain or effort, they must silently turn agony into art. That's the Richdeane pledge: *We pledge ourselves to the will of the muses, and to the words of the greats. We give it to art and we let go.*

Music pulsed through the floor and up the stairs. It was a girl growling tunefully about being a black man in a cell and calling the government suckers.

I didn't take my dress off – it was so short I just pulled it up around my thighs and held my breath as Henry climbed on top of me.

'Is this OK?' he asked.

'Yes.'

He was a good kisser. A sweet guy really.

The lights were on and I could see powder collecting in the corners of his nostrils as his neck strained above me and he grunted towards the headboard. We were safe; I'd told him, 'No balloon, no party.' Henry concluded before the song did. He tasted how the word summer tastes to me now: a mix of tequila and ash.

In the bedroom mirror afterwards, I looked the same as I did before. I felt mostly the same too – lucky, happy, high – although I wanted my friends.

I mussed up my hair so there could be no doubt to anyone who saw us emerge about what had happened behind the closed door.

I had done it.

'You OK?' Henry asked.

'Yep.' I hadn't told him it hurt but he'd been gentle anyway.

I waited until I heard the zip of his fly going up, then I turned round. He pulled a little bag of white powder from his tux pocket. ‘Want some?’

I dipped my finger and rubbed the powder into my gums, then double-dipped for luck, not caring how many greedy fingers had already been stuck in the bag.

He tried to curl his hand round mine as we went downstairs. His fingers were cooler than they’d felt in the bedroom. Mine twitched away. I think I was nervous.

‘You don’t need to do that,’ I said.

Maybe he was relieved, maybe he was hurt. I don’t know; I didn’t look at his face.

‘Fireworks!’ came a voice from the garden.

‘That’s Davy,’ said Henry. ‘He and the guys have been planning this for weeks.’

‘I’m going to find my friends,’ I said. ‘See you later.’

A crowd tumbled out of the back door into the warm night and gathered by the side of a small pool. It was more for show or maybe for cooling off than for swimming, I think.

Mei and Olivia were already outside. I snuck up behind them and clamped a hand on each of their shoulders.

‘Guess who?’ I whispered just as a rocket burst above us, showering the sky with fiery teardrops.

I remember the thrill of it echoing across the sky; that’s how I know the old Lux was normal.

‘Only you would make an entrance to fireworks,’ said Olivia.

‘Where’ve you been?’ asked Mei.

‘With Henry.’

‘Called it, didn’t I?’

‘You did,’ Olivia replied.

‘Only took you a year to get it together.’

‘Oh, please,’ I said.

Colours exploded below the stars. Dense bursts of purple and green streaked the sky, their long smoke trails reaching down to us like willow branches. We faux-jumped with each bang, and oohed and aahed with sarcasm at first and then with real wonder.

Then came the fizz and scatter of white light as Davy set off more close to the ground. We took a collective step back, clutching arms and holding our breath.

It was our show. The neighbours could watch if they wanted but it was ours. We were the actors, the directors and the audience. Part of our script came from films we’d seen, parties we’d been to before. The rest we made up as we went along and it was perfect.

Whistles and crackles sounded above us, shooting out swarms of fireflies that faded before they reached us.

We were magic and fearless.

‘I want to light one,’ I heard myself say. I ran down to the end of the garden. ‘Davy, let me light one.’

‘Are you drunk?’ he asked.

‘Not drunk enough.’

‘Have you done this before?’

‘Tonight is a night of firsts.’

I took my lighter from my dress pocket and rolled my thumb over the top to make sure it would work first time. The flint caught and sparked a tiny flame.

‘Don’t be ridiculous – you can’t light fireworks with a lighter.’

Davy was pleased to have the opportunity to instruct me. I let him tell me what to do in exchange for lighting the last ones.

‘Use this.’ He picked up a little blowtorch like the one my father used to burn the tops of crèmes brûlées.

Henry appeared, saying, ‘Give her your gloves, Davy. And the goggles.’

‘Thanks.’

I put them on and waved to Mei and Olivia.

‘Go, Luxy,’ they yelled.

Davy led me over to where he and his friends had planted the last row of rockets ready for the finale. ‘Light one at the bottom and then get back quickly, even if it looks like it hasn’t caught properly.’

‘Careful,’ called Olivia.

‘She has no idea what she’s doing,’ I heard Mei say.

I leant down. My heart was banging but I couldn’t change my mind. At least fifty pairs of bright eyes were fixed on me. I fumbled with the torch a few times until the flame glowed steady. I lit each fuse and jerked my hand away as if they’d explode instantly.

I had this idea that I wanted to light them all in one go. The lit tails sizzled.

‘Get back,’ said Davy.

I shook my head and waved the flame under the tails of the three remaining unlit ones. As the last one caught, I scrambled to my feet and Henry pulled me to the side. A second later, the first one shrieked into the night sky, followed by the next, then the next, then the next, throwing their booming light across the garden and beyond. The crowd stamped their feet and cheered as my glittering comets rained down on us.

Thinking about all that colour and sound now makes my skull tighten and my brain shriek but at the time it just made me certain of who I was and who I was going to be.

‘Good job,’ said Davy. I hugged him and Henry, and skipped back to Mei and Olivia.

With the show over, some people drifted back inside. Maybe fighting melancholy, one of the leavers turned the music back up.

I had full-body goosebumps as the music shot through my skin. Its invisible wires were inside me, moving me like a puppet.

I thought I saw Davy kissing our friend Isabella out of the corner of my eye, but something inside me wouldn’t let me stop twirling so I’m not sure. Henry watched us for a bit and then he was gone.

Mei, Olivia and I flung ourselves around the garden to the beat until our hair stuck to our necks and our hearts raced in unison. For a minute, I forgot to dance like people were watching.

Song after song, we shook our limbs and swung each other round and round until, sweaty and brimming, we fell on the ground.

‘The sky is spinning,’ said Olivia.

‘Close your eyes for a minute,’ I told her, ‘you’re just drunk, it’ll wear off.’

‘I am absolutely car-parked, door-knobbed and gelatoed,’ shouted Mei.

‘Let’s swim,’ I suggested.

‘Easy tiger – I don’t think it’s heated.’

‘I’m going to dip my toes in.’

I pulled off my shoes for the second time that evening and plunged my feet into the cool water. Distorted beneath the rippling surface, my toes bulged like plasticine sausages.

‘So, where’s Henry?’ one of them asked.

With my back to them, I slipped a hand between my legs then trailed it across the surface of the pool. A shock of red billowed from my fingertips, turned candy pink in the chlorinated water before dissolving like soluble ink.

Henry.

I had finally done it.

I was everything I'd said I was. I'd finally caught up with myself but I couldn't make a big deal about it because I'd told Mei and Olivia I'd done it with an American I'd met a couple of summers before.

'Lux?'

I turned to see them lying on their backs on the lawn, making star shapes with their moonlit limbs.

'Grass angels,' sang Olivia.

I jumped up to join them.

The sky hung pregnant over us. I wanted to travel the world with my friends, to see whether the sky looked the same in Africa, Thailand, China, everywhere.

'One more year,' Mei breathed. The words sang out like fairy dust, sprinkling our tangled hair and flushed cheeks with wishes for the future.

We were quiet for a minute while the stars shone just for us.

'Do you think they're scared?' asked Olivia.

'The stars?' I said.

'The leavers.'

'What's to be scared of?'

'No more Richdeane,' said Mei.

'Doubt it,' I said. 'Sad, maybe; not scared.' I used to know all the emotions and understand which was which.

‘Let’s have the best last year ever,’ said Olivia. I tilted my head to look at her. Tears slipped out of the corner of her eyes, through her hair and into the grass. She smiled and I realised I was crying too. So was Mei. Not the noisy kind of crying, just happiness leaking out.

Love rushed through me. It wasn’t just the drugs; I was so lucky. So plugged in. I knew nobody had ever felt how we did. If they had, they would never have grown up. They’d have kept painting, writing, flying like Peter Pan, scared to land in case touching their feet to the ground ruptured the magic, making them old and scared and slow.

We hatched plans and whispered secrets until, too tired and overwhelmed to move, we fell asleep in the itchy grass.

I dreamed I was flying.

At first light, Olivia stirred next to me. She smiled and I knew we’d all been having a version of the same dream. My mouth was claggy but we hadn’t been asleep long enough to come down.

‘Morning, glories.’

I tipped my head back towards the voice to see Mei step out of the back door and tread over to us, a bottle in each hand and one under her armpit. She handed us each a beer. ‘Thought we might need a soft landing.’

The pool glowed golden under the rising sun.

We clinked bottles in the quiet dawn and whispered our pledge: *To art and let go.*

It was a perfect night and the last one like it that I remember. If I close my eyes and keep very still I can see us, laughing and dancing until the moon went down. The picture develops in the

THE TASTE OF BLUE LIGHT

darkroom in my mind and I feel it all again. I forget the stone in my stomach and the confusion in my blood. I was alive and brave and potent. I was found.

I will find my way back to that Lux.