

## Nothing about Kissing

This morning she has a cleaning shift, starting an hour earlier than everyone else and hurtling through the deserted spaces with a cloth and some cleaning fluid. She's only ever done one cleaning shift before, and is nervous. She remembers the first time. The other attendant, one of the friendly, very young attendants, whisked her around the building, showing her what to do. The young woman was fast, whereas she was, or anyway felt, slow. Cleaning has never, ever, been her forte. She is trying to be efficient, cleaning as much as is needed but constantly aware of time passing and the fact that upstairs other work is waiting for her and it needs to be done before the other staff arrive. There are bollards to be arranged outside the entry and desks to be set up for ticketing. There are visitor guides to be laid out and electronic guides to be taken off the chargers and stacked in crates ready for the day.

She is thinking about all of this when she arrives at the bright ceramic figurine which has become a talking point among visitors. This museum is renowned for its playful curation. Odd and striking juxtapositions of ancient and modern, priceless and cheap. It's known for irreverence. In a recent exhibition, a Giacometti sculpture stood at the far end of a long room, unnoticed by almost everyone who passed through. Only occasionally would a visitor gasp and hurry over and exclaim to her friend. Socialism among works of art, is the way she likes to think about it. No one thing more important than another. Of course, that's illusion, but these are the illusions this museum wants to create. With the figurine, they have gone one step further. *Artist unknown*, is what is written on the electronic guide. But the media has taken it up with a vengeance, saying it's a ploy by the museum to get attention, creating a fuss about nothing. The museum says that's exactly what the media does, and so it's become a stalemate. But speculation remains rife. And one name appears most often amid the speculation. Picasso.

Picasso didn't only paint. He loved textiles and ceramics and sculpture of all kinds. She remembers the gallery she once visited in Japan, a large two storey building in the middle of an outdoor sculpture park in the foothills of Mt Fuji at Hakone, stuffed with all sorts of Picasso works – ceramics, textiles, glass – but not a single painting. She'd had no idea. She had always previously thought of Picasso as a painter. So, she's given the possibility some credence. And she loves the figurine.

It's small, less than a foot high. A woman in a triangular green skirt and circular purple cape, her arms thrown outwards as if she's trying to fly. Her back is arched and her

black hair billows upwards and outwards. Her face seems to be in pieces. Flamenco dancer, is what she's privately decided, although there is something private about it. A dance performed for a lover perhaps. Or for herself.

This morning she regards the plinth on which the figurine stands. No glass covers the figurine so there is nothing for her to clean other than a few fingerprints on the very edges of the plinth, which arrive there despite the white line a metre back, meant to keep visitors at a small distance. She sprays a little of the cleaning fluid onto her cloth and wipes the fingerprints away in one swift swipe. It's then she notices the film of dust, which has gathered in folds of the skirt and cape and on strands of the hair. She stares. The dust particles stand out clearly. She is only ever to clean glass. She must never touch the art works themselves. She should be further on her way by now, wiping the glass expanses along the sides of the walkway, but she's riveted by these dust particles. *Dust to dust* goes through her mind like a refrain, like a mantra. The woman is twirling; she is ecstatic. No dust should have an opportunity to settle on her.

Before she knows it, she has reached out to wipe the thin veil of dust from the skirt. As soon as she touches it, the whole figurine falls apart. It is not one piece, after all, but many, a three-dimensional jigsaw. The woman has broken apart and pieces are falling in slow motion to the polished concrete floor. She watches as they smash into tiny shards in a semi-circle around the place of impact. She looks back at the plinth. Only black boots remain at its centre, shining and free of dust. Every other part of the twirling woman had been stacked upon this neat black base of boots. She was already broken. A woman of many parts, but unstable, likely to fall apart at any moment.

She doesn't panic. She's surprised she doesn't, but she doesn't. There's nothing to be done. She could leave everything as it is and hope that it will be assumed a visitor has caused the damage. There is, after all, no reason that has not already happened. But there are cameras everywhere and there is, anyway, no point in lying. She wonders what this figurine might be worth if it is indeed a Picasso. How many millions? She ponders the museum's insurance.

When her last lover left her, friends said she was broken-hearted. In reality, she was broken-bodied. It was as evident as when she'd formerly had surgery that it would be a very long road to healing. She worked hard at it. She read in a book called *Brain Rules* that exercise was as good as an anti-depressant. She began swimming laps at the pool and walking at least 10,000 steps a day on top of all the steps she walked inside the museum. It took a long time – more than two years – for her body to feel whole again. Or as whole as it

was ever going to. She read that some people said losing your closest loved one was like losing an arm or a leg. When you lose a limb, you have to learn new ways of managing things like cooking or riding a bicycle. You have to learn to change all your habits to accommodate the loss. She found it was exactly like that.

She contemplates the broken pieces of the woman on the concrete floor. Tears ache at the back of her eyes. But she's put herself back together now. Hasn't she.

There is nothing for it but to finish her cleaning rounds, but later she can remember cleaning nothing after the figurine. When she finally goes upstairs to the entrance, she is still alone. Other staff begin to arrive while she is putting away the cleaning materials. She keeps one eye out for her supervisor. Her hands don't falter until he walks in the door. She abandons her task then, takes a deep breath, enters his office and closes the door.

Two hours later, after she has completed reams of paperwork, and spoken to five different senior staff members, she is allowed to resume her usual job in the gallery. The attendant who has replaced her is eager to hear what has happened, but she simply shrugs. Everyone will know soon enough.

She finds herself in her least favourite gallery in the whole museum. The Sex and Death Gallery. The attendants call it Velvet Room. Or just Velvet. That's due to the long entrance corridor lined with plush scarlet velvet curtains, which hang in luxurious folds from the ceiling to the floor. They are lavish and cost a small fortune.

She had been working at the museum for quite a few months before it dawned on her that the velvet-lined corridor is a representation of the vagina. You walk down the long red corridor and wind up in the womb. How could she have missed it?

She notices the man as soon as he emerges from the corridor, blinking at the brightly lit photo of a bullet hole in a skull. She notices because he turns back and looks down the corridor he has just walked along. He gets it straight away. She sees him get it and it makes her smile. She walks around smiling for a while. It soon wears off.

It isn't altogether clear why few of the attendants like this gallery. She used to think it was because, here, visitors don't ask the staff questions. They don't ask you to tell them about the owner of the museum and how he'd made all his money, or how long the museum took to build, or what had happened to all the sandstone removed to make room for it. They don't even ask you to show them again how to use the electronic guide to the museum. In this room, people keep to themselves. There is a lot to think about.

Perhaps it's the music attached to the two video screens on the ceiling. The same music, over and over and over, running on a loop which seems to reside in your head. She

finds her footsteps falling into sync with it. She likes the videos though. Of course, she can never lie down in the over-sized bean bags in the way visitors do. They sprawl there. They cuddle there. Sometimes they fall asleep. Other visitors gather above them, gaping upwards.

She likes one video more than the other, and today she focuses on it, trying to shun her endless mental questions about the figurine. Has someone cleaned it up? Is the whole section closed off while investigations take place and photos are taken? Her favourite part of the video is the beginning. The woman in the green dress with her strappy stilettos, walking across a street grid. She walks along one narrow strip of metal, delicately placing her feet one in front of the other. A fraction to the right or left and her narrow high heels would plunge through the grid. She would fall. Sprain an ankle. Break a leg. Instead, she negotiates the grid perfectly, strolling on her personal tightrope towards her assignation. And her steps remain nonchalant, as if she's not having to place her feet just so. But what she really loves is the skin on the woman's heels. The skin is cracked, aged, damaged. The woman in the film has feet like every woman of her age.

The woman's lover waits for her. They meet and mingle in a flurry of images – skin and jewels and cloth and flowers. The music builds slowly to a crescendo which everyone in the room feels in their body, and then, finally, the music suddenly lets go.

She's heard the soundtrack so many times now, it only makes her smile. She thinks about the books she's been reading. *An intimate history of the orgasm*. A strange choice perhaps for a woman now on her own. But she now knows more than she's ever even wanted to know about orgasms. She finds herself thinking about the part that says it can take a woman two days to be ready for sex. Women can orgasm in as few seconds as men. But to be *ready* for sex can take a long time. Dinner. A glance. A kiss. A few more glances the next day. Fingers trailing. A long hug. Whispered words. Whatever. And, finally, she's ready. For god's sake, even wombats run around a paddock or the bush, with the male giving the female an endearing bite on the backside every now and then. And think about a satin bower bird's display. The bigger the brain, so it seems, the more time and ritual it takes. Kissing is the bit she likes. She thinks kissing is seriously underrated. She corrects herself: kissing is the bit she *liked*.

She does a slow circuit of the gallery, focusing on her breathing. Long breath in, long breath out. Keeping calm. A walking meditation. Past the sarcophagus. Past the chocolate suicide bomber. At other times she squats down and peers at him closely. The finely-chiselled, beautiful face, serene in death. The perfectly shaped index finger poised for the button. The chocolate guts spilling out where the bottom of half of his body would have been.

This week she hasn't been able to look. The Boston bombings have happened and she keeps thinking of all those nails flying into the legs and torsos and heads of children watching the marathon. Today she thinks as she passes, Why worry about a broken figurine when innocent people's bodies have been deliberately broken? Sometimes the suicide bomber makes her want to throw up.

She keeps her gaze averted from the Jenny Saville painting. Which is hard to do, because it's so big. Not that she doesn't like the huge body landscape. It's because her lover, her *former* lover, liked this work. *Like* is perhaps not the word. When he first saw it, it knocked the wind out of him. She's always wished she'd asked him why.

She glances at the Fiona Hall piece. She loves this artist's work. The knitted video tape puzzles people, but she just pictures the artist toting all this tape around with her, and her oversized knitting needles. The work and the love and the attention to detail. The anti-war message. Breathe in, breathe out.

The man is now sitting on the brown leather sofa of *My Beautiful Chair*. He's reading the computer screen and looking serious. She lingers in the darkness, watching him. She takes in his clothes. Expensive leather shoes. The sort that cost more than two hundred dollars. Sturdy soles that can go anywhere. A visitor from elsewhere, she would guess. Maybe a bushwalker. He's wearing a fleece jacket and blue jeans. He looks nice, she thinks. Interesting. Serious.

He is taking the suicide machine seriously. He lifts his hand and touches the screen, then sits back. He reaches out again. He's going to go all the way. Soon the green Nembutal in the syringe will slide into his veins, his brain will start to shut down, he'll fall unconscious and soon he'll be dead. She watches him go through each step, then pause and sit back in the sofa. He looks up then and notices her watching him. She smiles quickly and starts walking again.

This time around she looks into some of the niches in the gold leaf walls. Back by the video are her favourites. The golden Greek wine cup is beautiful, and there's something so tactile about it, it's as if you're holding it in your hand. She thinks about hands that held the cup, that made the cup. Lips that drank from it. All those people dead and gone. Do the dead outnumber the living? Or is the population today so great that the living outnumber the dead? She can't remember now which way round it goes. She moves on to the geode. Her favourite artefact in the entire museum and today it is so comforting. So unbreakable. It is 250 million years old. There is said to be water inside among the crystals at its centre. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in China, it was carved into the shape of a peach. Peaches symbolise longevity. There is

Chinese writing carved into it about longevity. It is the size and rough shape of a human heart. How she would love to get her hands under its silky, cold, golden weight. Here is nature and culture, the old and the new, the longevity of Earth itself and the brief span of a human life. What could one broken figurine matter in the scheme of things? The Greek cup was probably once in pieces.

When she finally moves away, she notices the man now standing up close to the Chris Offili work. She walks towards the end of the room. She wants to tell him he can sit in the ornate chair with his feet on the mountain lion rug. But he is bending close to the painting, looking at each of the little butterfly shapes. Each one is the rounded bottom of a woman, tipped up, with everything spread on display. They are no doubt photo-shopped, she thinks. The buttocks are as round as basketballs. Not a blemish in sight. No bikini marks. But it's a shock if you were expecting butterflies.

This painting has closed exhibitions, caused outrage. It upsets the devout. Here, it makes nothing happen. She likes the way this man pays attention to the painting's detail. Many visitors cast a cursory glance and move on. They go home and tell friends they've been to the new museum and weren't impressed. This man is attentive. She finds herself thinking, *believing*, he would be an attentive lover. She's almost certain he wouldn't mind waiting two days.

She stands along from him in the dark corner near the secret doorway. From here she can discreetly enjoy watching him bend to look at the butterflies. He has a nice face, she thinks. Open. Suntanned. Glowing in the light reflected from the gold of the painting. He squats down to look at the painting's elephant dung feet, first the one which says *Virgin*, then the other which says *Mary*. He looks up from that position and ponders the whole. Lithe, she thinks. Fit. Probably plays tennis as well as bushwalks.

The man stands up. He leans in close to the elephant dung breast jutting a good twenty centimetres out from the painting. He sticks out his tongue and licks it.

Her mouth drops open. It takes her a few seconds to comprehend. She steps towards him and says, I'm afraid you can't lick the artwork, sir.

He looks at her in surprise. Then he looks back at the breast. They both do. It is an awkward sort of shape. Elephant dung is perhaps not as malleable as some other materials. All that savannah grass. It's rough, and skewed to one side. The nipple is large and black. He leans in and kisses it.

She gasps. The man stands back and looks at her again.

You said nothing about kissing, he says.

He smiles. He has a good smile, one which spreads into crinkles alongside his eyes and dimples in his cheek.

And she's smiling too, and she shouldn't be. She should be chiding him and giving him a warning about visitors being asked to leave if they don't follow museum protocol.

And then she stops smiling. Perhaps she's been wrong about him. Perhaps he's just another nutcase. Not a thoughtful, intelligent, good-looking, middle-aged man, but a crackpot. It could be exactly like the science talk she went to the night before. The audience were given two little plastic cups, one full of green liquid, the other of red. They were meant to taste and say which had more sweetener in it, the red or the green. Most people said the red was sweeter. The scientist said that was simply our eyes deceiving our tastebuds. To her they tasted exactly the same – extremely sweet – so she'd smugly thought she wasn't deceived by appearances. But now her smugness was evaporating. The book by the cover and all that. But his smile.

No kissing either, she says in her best museum attendant voice. In fact, no touching at all with any part of your body.

But then she spoils it by smiling at him again.

People, he says then, look very much the same on the outside. But inside... What goes on in their minds... We are so rarely privy to such things. This artist's thoughts have been made into something tangible.

Have you seen the geode? she asks him.

He shakes his head.

Follow me, she says.

She leads him to the little niche and they both lean in. There isn't really room for two people to look in at the same time, but they do anyway. His smell is earthy. Like sun on the ground after rain. She can feel the warmth of his face next to hers, hear his breath, a little fast, she thinks, or does she imagine this? His bare left arm lies against her bare right arm for its entire length, and it's as if every cell in her skin is gleefully yelling to her. Her mood is not that of someone who has just broken a possibly multi-million-dollar figurine.

She's suddenly thinking back to the previous night. She has finally, now she is mostly all in one piece again, begun seeing someone. He came to her house for dinner. They have previously been to the movies and drunk some wine and gone to their separate homes. Last night, he went home and she went outside and lay on the cold grass and looked up at the stars. How on earth would they ever make that leap into kissing? Even if they wanted to. And there's been nothing to suggest they want to. Nothing has been said about kissing.

Whereas, right now, jammed into a small space against this warm male body, peering at the gleaming geode, absorbing all it says in its impossible quest for longevity about the actual brevity of life, kissing seems to be in the headlines. Her lips don't even come into it. She's thinking about his lips on the elephant dung breast. On her breast. Oh, she's in trouble.

And then it's time for her to move on. Next position. She doesn't see the man again. That night she goes out and lies on the grass again, looking at the stars. This is real time, she tells herself, the time of stars, of suns. Our own brief lives insignificant. In the scheme of the universe, we are nothing. And yet – and this is the thing – to be here feels not at all like nothing. It feels like something. It feels special.

The man returns the next day. He searches for her throughout the museum (he tells her this later when they are in her bed) and when he finds her he kisses her on the mouth. He invites her to dinner. Oh, she's thinking, kissing can happen all of its own accord. No preamble. No leap.

You said nothing about kissing, she says into his mouth.

When she tells him about the figurine, he laughs and can't stop. It's Shakespearean, he says, and although she doesn't know exactly what he means, she laughs too.

He says, Like life, you expect it is whole, a whole thing, with a satisfying beautiful shape, but it falls apart in your hands. It's a broken thing, but the point is that it was broken all along. You didn't break it. You did nothing wrong. This is the way life is. Like any glass which has brokenness built into it, so does life. The problem comes only of living a perfectly flawless life for many years when young. This is why young people who've encountered and endured hardships early on are so much more mature and resilient than those who haven't. They know the secret of brokenness.

The headlines arrive. Nobody is confirming or denying, either the breakage or the provenance. Interest will last a week, at most. After a few weeks she stops feeling anxious about the figurine. The plinth disappears and then returns topped by a beautifully cast porcelain bust decorated in blue. It takes all her self-restraint to resist kissing it.