

H. June Hutton / TOTAL ECLIPSE OF THE SUN

Of course, it's Mrs. Logan from Number 6 down the hall who finds me face-first in the laundry basket, crying over an old T-shirt of his that, being wedged into the far bottom corner, had escaped my purge. "Outside with ye," she says, her Manchester accent thick as cream, and snatches the basket from me, sliding it onto the counter. "This can wait. Go — do some gardenin'. Do ye good." Then she pulls a pack of Players from that cleavage of hers that runs right up to her chin, damn near. "Ah-h! Ye don't want any of these," she adds, thinking my plaintive look is at her cigarettes. But I'm looking at that bosom, at the solid body that women from her generation have, women who'd had one baby after another, like it was nothing. "Go — go," she urges again. "Do some thinkin'. Sort things out."

"Okay," I say. I do as I'm told these days. She's had two husbands, survived a world war, she knows what she's doing. "Go to a movie," she told me one night when she found me moping by the mail boxes, mine empty. I went, but I can't remember what the show was about. Lots of explosions and other gun noises, though, which suited me fine because I could snuffle my way through a box of Kleenex, undetected.

"Avoid the playgrounds," she advised one day, eyes darting at my pared profile, "they'll just make ye sad."

At the corner two blocks down I obediently pivot from the painful hee-haw of rusting chains swinging children into the sun, and turn my head sharply from their overalls, their ruffled skirts, their offensive freckled faces.

This garden, rustling with the stink of neglect because our landlord couldn't tell a daisy from a dandelion, choked and tangled by the haphazard plantings of incompatible neighbours, has become my refuge. Again, it's Mrs. Logan I can thank. ("Call me Ethel," she pleads, but she looks too much like somebody's great auntie.) Because of the landlord's black thumb and my mood and especially because, somehow, she has the power to do it, she shooed him from the garden

and made me resident landscaper. For therapy, Manchester-style. But I no sooner set the basket down and slip on the gardening gloves than the sun shunts westward, releasing from behind the wall a blade of brilliant light that smacks me full in the face and forces me to drop my gloves and cover my eyes. During this moment of darkness the thought first comes to me: I am the sort of woman men cheat on. That's why I did it.

Don't roll your eyes at me, Mrs. Logan, I know that's what you're doing. If we could hold my life up to that same slice of light, you'd see that it's shot through by the comings and goings of men — great gaping holes that flap like chanting mouths:

Now you see him Now you don't Now you see him . . .

and I teeter on the tips of endless ellipses, ever hopeful. For what? Answer me that.

I bend my head to the task in front of me, the pink flower bed that needs weeding. I still wonder, as I lay open a damp clod with the tip of my trowel and breathe in the fishy-shitty smell of fertilized dirt, what the rest of you would think if you knew how much I miss him. And him and him. That's right, it's happened three times — I said I am the kind — but this last was the worst. I'd barely adjusted to the collective noun fluttering in on party invitations and Christmas cards, when one day I opened my medicine cabinet and what do you think I found? Ear drops, *Preparation H*, and little scissors for clipping nose hairs.

That day left me completely unprepared for a swift return three months later to the singular. And get this: he left *me* to fill box after box with all his little jars and tubes and suppositories, as though the sight of them couldn't revolt me. No. Who would think a roll of *Tums* could make me cry? They were the last of his things I had exhumed from the place. Or so I thought, until I missed that T-shirt.

I don't know. Maybe three times is simply too much for anyone to handle. What do you think?

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Thick, grey clouds roll in and out above me while I toil over the

weeds, but it's the final and total eclipse of the sun by the far wall that wrenches me from my Vancouver roots and sends me rolling like a tumbleweed southward. In the brief flashes afforded by my head meeting my ankles at regular intervals, I see the splendour of Mexico City: the Zocalo, stretching to the horizon in concrete squares, devoid of trees but dotted with plastic parachute men the children drop over the subway vents, to be shot upward on a gust of wind from a passing train; the views from a cab of glamorous women in heels, men in dark suits; the half-dozen little fists that punch the air before my face when we stop at a red light, the little voices begging, "Cheeklet, lady, cheeklet?" The final glimpse, as I slow down just outside the city, is of sticky squares of Chicklets embedded in small, brown palms.

I come to rest on the Avenue of the Dead, the grassy walkway leading to the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon at Teotihuacan. In my guidebook I read that the Aztecs named the roadway, thinking that the Indians before them buried people in the stone walls that line the avenue. But it's the Aztecs who held sacrifices on top of the pyramids. They were the ones absorbed with death.

Graham is marching two steps ahead of me, the backs of his knees winking at me as we climb higher and higher in the hot sun. A ridiculous time of day to be climbing, but we had no idea the bus ride here would take so long. At the top, I crouch in deference to the hot sky bearing down on us and picture the rivers of blood that must have rolled down these steps.

"That's the Moon," Graham says after a while, pointing to the smaller pyramid. I raise my camera and snap. "Hungry?" he adds. Oh, how ominous certain words are when heard in retrospect.

"Yup," I say, snapping one more shot of the wide, green avenue and the stone walls stretching into the distance. We scramble down and head for the rickety shops that form a little walkway to the side. Running about two blocks deep, the stalls bristle with fake arrowheads, then further on, blankets, after that, postcards, and on down to a roped-off cafe. I know better than to order water or a glass of pop with ice cubes. I choose bottled beer instead. But no one has warned me about the lettuce. I point to what the American at the table next to me has: refried beans, rice, a taco shell, and a side of shredded lettuce. The waiter nods and after a brief exit, returns with my plate of food. I

roll up my lunch and eat heartily.

What is the vacation of a lifetime? Is it seeing strange and wondrous sights like the ancient pyramids, tasting foreign and delicious food, and buying silver bangles for the price of plastic ones back home? Is it arriving, hot and tired, to our cool room in Mexico City where Graham produces a bottle of tequila from his bag, rings the desk for limes, salt, and glasses while I run a bath, so that, moments later, we can lie naked on the bed, sipping tequila, biting limes, licking salt?

I thought so.

The next day the train rolls us northward to San Miguel. I sit by the window, content to stare out at passing villages, fields — even abandoned rail cars that spill thick white blossoms from the pots set out on the rusting steps leading down from the chequered blue doorways, all evidence the squatters are families. Graham can't sit still. He wanders up and down the aisles, shaking hands, trying out his Spanish, buying trinkets from the hawkers who board at each stop.

We are almost there, and I begin to feel . . . odd. I barely notice the cobbled streets that climb straight up the steep hills to our terraced yard with the little pink house. I hurry through the gate and struggle up the hill, yelling over my shoulder, "Where's the key? Where's the key?"

An American that Graham met on a previous trip recommends a doctor in the village. I gladly swallow the medicine he prescribes, remembering little of what he has said to me in his broken English, except, "No lettuce. Si?"

For two days I do not move from our little house and garden. Every day begins with the same early-morning ritual: a little bonfire to burn the nasty bundles of toilet paper that Mexican plumbing can't swallow. Absurdly, perhaps it was the medicine fogging my reasoning, I view this burning of nasties as an act of intimacy, as proof of commitment, as though we were toasting marshmallows around the family campfire. And so I think nothing of his solitary trips into town. Quite frankly, I don't want him around once breakfast has ignited my intestines.

"You okay?" he asks as I walk him down the path past the huge nodding heads of the orange and red flowers, incongruous combinations in the north, but so natural here in Mexico.

"Fine." I grimace under another wave of cramps, leaning on the branch of the orange tree until I catch my breath.

"What will you do?" he asks, tapping me under the chin.

"I'll watch the geckoes," I say and manage a grin as I point to the brick wall and the green-brown fetus fingers spreading from the limbs of each lizard as it settles into a hot spot.



Yes. I can picture all of it. The trowel slips from my grip and dirt spills through my fingers as my mind continues sliding, ever southward, far from the mossy bricks of a Vancouver garden, down the terraced slopes to a majestic Spanish wooden gate that clicks shut as he heads down the hill toward town to visit our American friends.

I rise from my chair, unaware that my future is stepping purposefully down the hill in sturdy Birkenstocks, and prepare to busy myself just as I had the day before: I fill the deep, tiled sink with water, add a few squirts from my bottle of traveller's soap, and plunge into the foam the few pieces of clothing I'd worn on the trip so far. We'll be here another month, there's no hurry, and I washed everything but two T-shirts yesterday. But I have nothing better to do and I am soothed by the motions of wringing and rinsing, am curiously satisfied by the snap as I lift each up and pin it to the clothes line just outside the kitchen door. Oh, God, I think now. I was turning into an earth mother.

Back then, utter contentment is what I feel. If it weren't for the cramps this would be perfect. I saunter along the paths, revelling in my solitude, picking several orange and red flowers, fat as babies' faces. I go back into the kitchen for the blue jug we used at breakfast, give it a quick rinse, then carry it outside where I slide it onto the tiled patio and drop the green stems in, jostling them slightly to arrange them, stepping back to enjoy the jolt of orange-red spilling from deep blue. I reach into my straw bag for my camera and snap pictures of the geckoes on the wall, the boughs groaning under the weight of green

oranges.

At 2:30 the daily rains arrive. Thunderous black clouds squeeze into the little sky framed by mountains, sending cool breezes tickling up my arms and giving me just enough time to scamper up the hill to the doorway, where I quickly spin so I won't miss the spectacle of rain pellets smacking into the dry dirt like bullets, sending up puffs of smoke that fade only when the ground turns to black muck. From the kitchen window I hear the roar of our own *rio negro*, an instant river of brown soup slurped up from leaky septic tanks and open garbage heaps from neighbouring terraces. I crawl onto the window seat to read and to eat slices of cheese and fruit and rolls that Graham brings back from the village shops. Finally the roar fades, the sky brightens and battered leaves spring up in the sudden warmth, releasing the burdensome liquid that drips like leaking taps.

The next day we have our first fight.

It's all my fault, he says, because I forgot to remind him to set back the time on our watches.

"But I was sick," I counter.

He gives me a look that says *boy are you ever*. I will never forgive my therapist for laughing at me several months later when I infer that *turista* led to our break-up.

"What about you?" I continue. "You were the one going into town. Why didn't you notice you were an hour off?"

"In Mexico?" he sneers. "Who notices time?"

"Well, then — ?"

But he stomps off into the house. I have no idea that his anger is fuelled by guilt, but I give him the finger anyway as I drop back into the patio chair and continue staring up at that fabulous sky.

Shortly after lunch when I was sitting in the same chair, tilting it back slightly, eyes closed, awaiting the familiar sensations of revolt below my abdomen, all sound ceased. I mean that. I'm half listening to distant singing, children shrieking, birds chirping, dogs barking, when suddenly a wall falls and not a single sound escapes. My chair tips forward and my eyes fly open. At first I think it's the daily rains but it's too early for that. No. The sky is growing dark as if this is the end of the world, as if a bomb is about to be dropped and everyone but me

has run for cover — when in a flash of remembrance, I scream. “The eclipse!” I run into the house for my camera and glasses. Graham reminded me about it yesterday but I wasn’t feeling well, I forgot. And he’s not here because one of us forgot to set our watches back. No, he forgot. I won’t take blame for that one. But he’ll be here in an hour when it’s all over, and since this is what we came here for and why we picked a house so high on the hill, he’ll be furious. Well, too bad. What could he be doing right now that he wouldn’t notice the excitement around him? People in town have been preparing for this event for months. This is the total eclipse of the sun and the best spot on the entire planet to see it. And that’s exactly what I’m going to do. I slip on the white, cardboard framed glasses with the red lenses and look up. The breath goes out of me. I was wrong before. *This* is what makes the vacation of a lifetime. I will never see a spectacle like this again. A wedge of light is all that’s left of the sun, and I know how the ancients must have felt, that the gods were stealing their light, as punishment, that nothing could ever live again, not in the cold, black air. I raise my camera and begin shooting, the sun almost covered, the sun completely covered, the sun emerging. It’s not death at all, I think as the warmth returns, but birth. The birds begin chirping again, only noisily this time, as though it were early morning and a new day has begun, the air grows light and I feel life around me and in me.

Miraculously, the next day, my intestinal infection is gone. But three weeks later when I feel light-headed and ill, I think my *turista* is coming back.

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A lump blooms in my throat and tears scald my eyes. I rip at the dirt with my trowel, gouge and slash at the stubborn weeds, knife them to a pulp, over and over. Tell me the truth: wouldn’t you? Only when goose bumps sprout on my arms do I notice that the light has drained completely from the sky. The weeds are all gone, too, the dirt pulverised into coffee grounds. I knock the trowel and claw together to clean them, drop them into the Okanagan fruit basket unkindly shaped like a Kwakiutl bassinet, hang it over my arm and climb the steps to my door.

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Somewhere above my head and to the left hovers the cliff side town of Guanajuato, the Americans tell us. I turn in my chair, as though I could see, and try to follow the pointing finger. Once again I find myself drawn to the macabre, to begin with, to this nation that celebrates The Day of the Dead, then the avenue, misnamed though it was, and now a town famous for its museum of miraculously preserved bodies. Some of them centuries-old, they were mummified by natural gases in the soil of the village graveyard, my new guidebook tells me. As soon as the families grow forgetful or too poor to pay the annual plot fee, up pop the bodies for display in the museum.

How like my family, I think, to go poking among the dead, unearthing just for a gawk the imperfect corpses of almost-forgotten loved ones. I recall the hoots of laughter over the story about one of the great grandfathers who sat bolt upright in his coffin, due to the effects of gases percolating in his dead body. I would tell them this story, but everyone is talking loudly about Guanajuato. Everyone thinks I should go to Guanajuato. Patsy, an older woman from Florida, says she'll go with me. She never tires of the bodies. I wait for Graham to say something. This is his chance to make up for not seeing the eclipse with me. But he says nothing.

Then a smoky-voiced woman from somewhere near Los Angeles leans over to warn me, "You can't take your camera. Pictures aren't allowed." She has sensed my love for photography, has a Pentax Spotmatic herself. That's why I remember her. We spend the next hour talking cameras on their courtyard patio down in the village. She also has long legs, perfectly tanned. I remember that, too. Quite clearly.

I hate to leave my camera capped tight in my bag. I would enjoy the shrieks of delighted horror from my mother and sister back home, but there are too many guards around. I will have to rely on memory and describe to them the sights that make Patsy and I gawk and guffaw: the mounded breasts studded with nipples below the half-rotted head, or the knee-high wool socks that are the sole survivors from one

cadaver's outfit, or the penis, perfectly preserved and curled neatly against a mound of hair. We can't tell if the testicles remain. Eyeballs, it seems, are body parts that can't survive death, not even in these special soils. Lips don't do much better. But teeth and hair, what knock-outs. I want to pull my lips back with my finger tips so I can grin back at the skulls like all the Mexican kids do, but I restrain myself.

A sudden hush pulls us over to a group of Mexicans who are crossing themselves and hanging their heads before the tiniest of the glass cases. The children are less reverent, pointing and laughing and running off to look at something else. Dead is dead. They don't see extinction as the realm of the aged, a place where babies don't belong. The tiny corpse, dark as tanned leather, makes us think of real death, not the clownish cadavers around us, but of people we once knew, people we miss.

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I put the fruit basket and tools in the closet, kick off my shoes and head for the kitchen to rinse my hands. I must have known. What else has he been up to, all those times in town without me? But I am not suspicious. Not then. I am in love with the heat and the fruit and the grassy hills swollen and succulent as the belly beneath my white skirt. Mexican men whistle at my long, red hair, my skin that refuses to tan, my undulating walk as I return from the little store with four eggs cradled in a white plastic bag, the handles knotted carefully, as though I were carrying life itself. I am desirable, back then. I have no fears.

I dry my hands on one of the chequered blue towels I claimed as mine, then cross the floor to the opened doors where I stretch out on the thin mat in front of the fire place and smell the tingle of the wood floors rising through. Mrs. Logan is right. The laundry can wait. The boards are comforting because I cannot slip into sleep, and its dreams. Their hardness won't let me.

I dream too much, then, back home in this apartment. I climb a flight of stairs inside an old building: the stairs are wooden and the light around me soft, like the light that falls from the hay loft in a barn, or an old warehouse near the docks. As I climb higher the sense

of impending doom that I couldn't feel in Mexico is now overwhelming. My footsteps slow down because I don't want to reach the door at the top. I hear voices that are vaguely familiar, coming from behind the door, but even upon waking, as I always do at this point, I can't place them.

Several times I have this dream.

Yes, I must know. Graham avoids my eyes and his sudden trip out of town makes me uneasy. We've only been back a few weeks and it's his second trip away. I say *little* because nice girlfriends don't nag. But I recall that first trip, to Sacramento, and the husky-voiced woman who answered his phone.

"Hello?"

My heart began pounding, my palms sweating. "Is Graham there?" I tried to sound unconcerned, but I know I squawked like an old parrot. He came to the phone, and again my voice screeched, "Who was that? A colleague?"

But I had fed him the answer, so he said, simply, "Yes."

A few days later, I ask, laughingly, if he has ever had an affair. Ha, ha.

"Of course not!" he replies, looking hurt. "Why would you ask that?"

Why indeed? This is the man who burned nasties by my side, whose drips of urine at that very moment are speckled against the back of the toilet seat and whose snores filled the room all night. I feel so ridiculously unsophisticated and horribly suspicious that suddenly the tables turn and *I* become the monster, *I* am the one who has done something wrong. So I don't ask again.

This time he has been on a weekend trip to Los Angeles.

"Sure work a lot of weekends," I say, in way of a greeting. Safe enough. Again, all it requires is a "yes" or "no" answer.

"Yes," he replies and kisses me quickly on the lips.

He has left for work in a rush this morning. His unopened suitcase sits at the foot of the bed. I convince myself that this one time I can set feminism aside and do his unpacking and laundering for him. After all, he's been working hard while I have the day off. But I am not fooling myself when I snap open the twin latches like I am dismantling a bomb: slowly, eyes squinting, heart thumping.

I find dirty socks and underwear, crumpled shirts and creased pants. I must check the pockets for bills and Kleenexes that will explode like dandelion seeds of lint all over the dark clothes. I pull out ticket stubs, match books, a couple of unsent postcards — to me I guess since I never got any — and in his jacket pocket an envelope of photographs. Quickly, I fan the prints for a peek at the usual touristy shots, sunny weather, bright colors, and stuff them back into the envelope.

I stack my findings neatly on the nightstand, somewhat relieved at finding nothing and chagrined because now I must actually *do* his laundry. I head down to the basement with a bundle of whites and stuff them into the washer. Then I head back to gather up his pants and jacket for the dry cleaner's on the corner. I feel unsettled. Did I hope to find something? No. Then what? I can't put my finger on it until I am almost at the dry cleaner's. By then my mind is in such a whirl I give the lady the wrong phone number and have to turn back from the door to have her change it. Receipt in hand I almost run back to the apartment because something is wrong. He doesn't even *have* a camera.

I run up the first flight of steps, a sinking feeling of dread at the pit of my stomach. I slow down and trudge, step by step, pausing at the landing to steady my heart. I know now that I have climbed this route many times before, and that the voices I hear at the end are his and that woman's on the phone. My hands are shaking as I unlock the door and make my way, unsteadily, to the bedroom. I spread the tickets and the photographs before me.

They don't match. These shots were taken in Mexico.

I sink into the closest chair and begin studying the pictures, one-by-one. Some are identical to mine in setting, not in angle or exposure. None are of vases or pyramids or the eclipse, though. And some are new to me: donkeys, market stalls, old men in sombreros.

Smiling dimly, I try to take satisfaction in the crooked horizons, the thumb crowding a face, the out-of-focus shot of a cobbled street. I flip them over. Each one is stamped with *Kodak* and last week's date. I had mine developed the day after we returned.

What happened to rage, I wonder? The seeing of red, the calling of names, the urge to use knives in particularly painful ways and

places? I smash nothing, scream nothing. His body remains intact. But ever so carefully, I get up and go to work dividing my things from his things, packing up the jars, the tubes, those *Tums*. Slowly, quietly, I begin to shrink. I cry, yes, but I still can't quite believe it — despite my earlier suspicions — and I go back to the pictures, to be sure. But there it is, the final proof, a picture of him, smiling handsomely, and in the far corner, almost out of the picture, my feet and my bag, unmistakably my feet in my favourite sandals, and my straw bag.

Of course I didn't take these pictures. She did.

And that's why I did it. I couldn't stand the thought that I'd become the kind of woman men cheat on, and that people might feel sorry for me or despise me for my stupidity. So, in a manner of speaking, I had him surgically removed.

Okay, okay, there was also that sense of revenge, that metallic taste of *fuck you* staining my tongue like blood. Because I could have been talked out of it. Right up until the last moment before the nurse wheeled me away and I lost consciousness, I kept watching for his face to appear around the curtains. Maybe he would beg me to forgive him, or promise me it could all be worked out, or call after me, "Don't do it!"

Well, he didn't.

"Ye couldn't afford it, anyway," Mrs. Logan reminds me from time to time. And who knew that antibiotics could knock out The Pill in two swallows? One day, she says, I'll be laughing at all this.

For now, I tilt my chin so I can look through the panes of glass to the rows of pots bursting with oranges and reds, incongruous combinations on my northern balcony, I know, but penance for my lean belly, so flat against the oak floor that the hip bones pinch my skin, reminding me of Mexican cadavers, of that place where babies don't belong.

I'm hoping Mrs. Logan'll get rid of the T-shirt for me. Burn it. Toss it out. It has a blazing sun on the chest, in memory of that spectacular eclipse. If only we could be extinguished, then restored, just like that.