

# **Novel About My Wife**

by Emily Perkins

If I could build her again using words, I would: starting at her long, painted feet and working up, shading in every cell and gap and space for breath until her pulse just couldn't help but kick back in to life. Her hip bones, her red knuckles, the soft skin of her thighs, her fine crackle of hair. (That long red hair. The shock of it spread out on the floor.) I loved her boredom, her glazed look, her dark laugh, her eyes. The way she moved around things, gliding, very near. The warmth that emanated from her skin. Everybody gives up warmth but with Ann it had a special quality, as though she was heat seeking heat, threatening to touch you in the spirit of danger, on a dare. She'd stand in the gutter, off the kerb, while she was waiting to cross the road. Buses skimmed past. She didn't flinch.

She wasn't one of those women who hate their feet, who hate their bodies, the kind who turn the sight of their ass in broad daylight into a state secret. (God, you just find yourself dying for a glimpse, you'll do anything to get it, hover outside the bathroom door, hide under a table, pull back the sheets when she's sleeping. Then because of all the mystery you end up, when you're finally feasting your eyes, thinking, 'hey, maybe she has got something to worry about.')

Ann didn't care. Her body was open for viewing. It was one of the ways she distracted you from what was inside her head.

And her feet weren't perfect: they were long and dry, with knobbly toes and a verucca on one heel which never went away because she refused to do anything but laugh about it. She liked pedicures, massage, that slightly sickening world of female self-obsession, and went in for toenail polish in dark, back-off shades. The lightning bolt scar on her right arm was a bubble-edged disaster, a memento of her youth that she kept covered up. What you couldn't take your eyes off were her legs. She had a sexy stance and walk, sort of hollow around the waist and jutting at the hips, shoulders

slumped forward. Now that I see it written down it makes her sound like a gorilla, but was more sort of slutty flapper. Bear with me.

She was a mould-maker; that was her job, to take casts of people's bodies, the parts of their bodies that were ill and needed radiating to kill cancer cells or shrink tumours. This wasn't what she'd had in mind during her sculpture major at the Slade but it brought its own satisfactions. A little plaster-dusted room at St Bartholomew's hospital very like a studio, the Hogarth diorama she could visit there each day, the walk to work under St John's Gate. She loved the historical location, the feeling it gave her of being part of something, of belonging. It was a raggle-taggle version of the past that Ann had, she picked up scraps about the Knights Templar or pilgrims, 18<sup>th</sup> century pleasure gardens, I don't know, there was no grand scheme in her mind, no connecting dots. She was not an intellectual; she had a scattershot approach to knowledge. And she needed the feeling of stone at her back, even if it was in ruins.

I can't look at Ann in terms of the bare bones. She was this kind of person, she was that. Her parents were whatever, the house she grew up in was blah – it isn't going to work. Partly because there's so much I don't know. It was Ann's mystery I fell for, her genuine mystery, not the cultivated kind so many of the English girls had. Those girls, I can give you their bare bones: Mummy and Daddy still together, decent schools, hopes of working in television, a pesky brush with the law over shoplifting, an affair with a drug dealer, a lost night waking into a frightened morning (where am I, what is that mark on the floor, I don't even have tube fare, where the fuck are my jeans) that is better left unexcavated and so she puts the bad-girl days behind her. She flounders for a bit. Drops the media dream and retrains, funded by the parents, in something useful to society (can't think what that might be), in which instance she is out of my orbit and we'll never cross paths again. Or pursues the dream with renewed

vigour, pulls contacts to get a job on the women's section of a broadsheet supplement, acquires a new edge, drops the milliners and jewellery designers that she went to school with and goes out to bands at night. Then she meets me, or someone like me, at the launch for a new short film and bang. A few movies, a Malaysian meal or two, the introduce-to-friends dinner party, three months of electric fucking, one midweek trip to a foreign city and then the writing on the wall. They're paper, those girls, and Ann was flesh.

I'd like to be inside her somehow, to strap her ribcage on over my own and see the world from behind her skin like the serial killer in a lurid film. Breathe with her breath, hear and smell with her senses, taste the inside of her mouth. Speak with her voice. A clear Perspex mask of her head, big holes gaping for eyes and mouth, sits in the corner of my office. She had a radiotherapy trainee do it, lay the cling film over her face, cover her with the cold gypsoma strips, piece by tightening piece – so she would understand how her brain tumour patients feel. Plaster has plastic memory. Ann found it magical. These aren't death masks, she'd say, they are the opposite. I borrowed her glassy head for one of my creatures, back when I was trying to please Alan Tranter, trying to go commercial. Now I want more than this transparent mould from Ann; want to make her so real that I can hold her. Hish – quiet. Shut off the radio. Close the window on the neighbours, muffle those clangouring workmen in the street below. I'm trying to hear her speak. It isn't going to be easy, for a man more used to writing about vampires than about spirit, flesh and blood. But I'd like to know what the hell else I'm meant to do. I don't know how to remember her.

A long time after the accident, as though she was experiencing déjà vu, Ann swore that she had dreamt about it – being on the derailed train – before it happened. I couldn't tell if this was true or whether she was trying, after the event, to turn what was really a disturbing memory into a premonition of some kind – into something with meaning. Why she would do that was a mystery, but by that stage I didn't know why she would do or say a lot of things. 'It was dark,' she said, as though seeing a warning film playing in her head, 'but emergency fluorescents flickered, lighting the passengers in odd blues and yellows. There was the toasty smell of smoke or burning hair. Most people stayed calm. We followed the instructions that came over the tannoy system.' When she spoke she still sounded like herself. She'd kept her careful, covered-over accent.

'All of us walking forwards over the rails towards the next stop felt, some people said at the hospital later, a weird feeling of achievement, camaraderie, the pleasure of an ordeal survived. You knew that it was better to be down there, in the hot dark mess of it all, than being one of the thousands of passengers whose journey was delayed. All above your head were men and women with nothing to show for it. You could imagine them, taking the spiralling stairs up from Covent Garden, late for meetings and lunch dates, travellers bound for Heathrow banging suitcases hundreds of steps, no money for taxis, losing their holidays, no way now of catching their aeroplanes out.' Ann's eyes were glassy. She was on holiday from herself; she didn't need an aeroplane.

When she was thrown from her seat to the other side of the underground train, hitting her head on the yellow metal pole, Ann's first thought was for the baby. The lights went out and a sharp object jabbed her in the temple (it was the corner of another woman's briefcase) and she realised she wasn't being attacked but that

something had gone wrong. 'This is it! This is it!' shouted a female voice and she thought, don't be so stupid, of course it's not. Then through the darkness she smelled smoke and quickly felt it stinging her eyes, robbing her, for the moment, of her remaining vision, and she wondered if perhaps the hysterical woman was right. Ann was three months pregnant with our baby, that astonishing baby, and I assumed she had left work early so as to miss rush hour: she'd been feeling sick, headachey and exhausted, but because she didn't yet show nobody knew to give up a seat for her on a crowded train. Londoners do give up seats on trains, despite what other people think of us. I made a habit of it after the morning when Ann phoned me from work, her voice bumpy like she was saying the words aloud for the first time, which she was. She had been pregnant before, but not to me; not to anybody she would tell.

And there she had been in her carriage, sitting on the worn tartan cover of the bench seat, where a billion tired, impatient, resigned people had sat before, coming home early, so I thought, because she was in need of comfort, in need of rest. Earlier at Farringdon station, waiting for the train to arrive, she watched two immigration officers approach a couple of men who were speaking to each other in some kind of Arabic. One of the men started to walk away and an officer followed him, stepping around and into his path so he couldn't go forward. For a few seconds they performed a ludicrous dance, until the man took a wallet from his jacket and shoved it into the immigration officer's face. 'I really resent this,' he said in a loud, accented voice, gesturing so that everyone near him on the platform turned to look. 'Papers, he wants, here they are.' The officer made a point of looking methodically through the wallet, his face expressionless. 'All in order?' the foreign man asked as he shoved the wallet back inside his suit jacket. 'Good. I'm so pleased.' His friend came towards him and

took his elbow. They walked off down the platform arm in arm, the questioned man shaking his head in silence.

While this was happening a train had pulled up, and passengers had got on and off, and it had driven off again. Ann had not moved. The other immigration officer tried to stare her down, and she knew it was rude to stop and gawp, but she also felt it was her duty. It shouldn't be normal, she said to me later, shaking her head just as she had demonstrated the questioned man's gesture. It isn't right. Then the officials left the platform. More travellers arrived and waited. It was too crowded to see what had happened to the other two men. Ann got onto the next train. This was the one that, deep underground in a lightless tunnel, bucked its tracks and derailed.

There was screaming at first, panicking and total darkness, the 'this is it' woman and others like her. A man flicked his lighter – a sudden, oddly Christmassy glow, the tips of his fingers translucent pink, the O of his face in orange. 'Put it out!' shouted a half-carriageful of voices. It was nearly twenty minutes before the passengers were allowed to move. People made indescribable noises, Ann said, words of outrage and fear, banging on immobile windows, worrying that the air was running out or whether there were chemicals in it. But what were you doing, I asked her, while all of this was going on? 'I started by not wanting to breathe too much, because of the baby, so I didn't want to talk or join in.' As she described the scene she sat with elbows on her knees, her head in her hands, flicking quick glances at me through her fingers, and I understood that this was how she had been on the train. 'By the time I did want to join in it was too late, we were moving.'

Of the two hundred and ninety six passengers that clambered through the darkness towards the light of King's Cross station, twenty-eight suffered serious cuts and bruises and seven were later admitted to hospital. (She had made it to the Evening

Standard late edition, along with an archive photograph of a derailed train, on-the-street interviews with dazed survivors, and the politics of outrage: 2.39 PM – THE WAKING NIGHTMARE.) Ann had been sitting at the back of the train, and had to make her way forward through all of the carriages and out the emergency doors at the side of the driver's cabin. She could hear nothing behind her yet had the feeling that someone was there, in the darkness, just waiting for her to move on. The dark space at her back had a presence, she told me, an occupied quality. It was the darkness that stopped her from turning and looking to see. When she finally left the train she inhaled deeply with relief, but dust quickly entered her mouth and throat, thrust in like a cobweb mitten. Decades of it had been thrown up by the impact, soft felt-like layers of human hair and skin cells, so thick that all around her people choked on it. A man just ahead wheezed asthmatically. Ann fumbled in her handbag for her inhaler and passed it up to him. This, she thought later, must have been when she lost her phone. She didn't hear it fall: the tunnel was full of the echoing voice of the driver, issuing instructions through a loud hailer, and the smaller human sounds of muttering and griping, complaints about the state of the railways, the state of the country, the state of the world. Somebody mentioned Al Qaeda and somebody else snapped at him to shut up. There were the sounds of pushing and skidding feet – two men were actually fighting down there, Ann laughed, swearing at each other fuck you, no fuck you, scuffling over whether or not they were victims of a terrorist attack. A third man boomed at them to break it up, in the voice of schoolyard authority, and the aggression died down.

It was hot and dizzy in the tunnel. Some people cried out that they could see sparks and flames; others shouted at them to just keep moving. Somehow Ann was now in the middle of the shuffling crowd, being jostled and pushed into the slower,

cautious people in front of her. Although she wanted to be out, to push ahead, climb over people towards the open air, Ann thought she might faint or be sick, so she stepped aside and bent over for a minute, by the hot dark wall, to try and get oxygen into her head. People bumped her as they passed. It seemed to go on a long time, this moment – doubled over in the dark, covered with soot and dust, preventing herself from clutching at passing arms. Then a man's voice came towards her, trying to stay low and calm, comforting his crying child. 'Can I help?' Ann asked, pulled out of herself. 'He's done something to his wrist,' the man said. 'Can you carry anything?' Ann took his bags and the man lifted his boy into his arms.

Later at St Mary's Ann waited with the man while his son's wrist was put in a splint. He lent her his mobile phone and she called me. There had been fire engines, she told me when I arrived, when I finally found her waiting for an ultrasound scan in the obstetrics department. She still had soot smeared on her face and hands, and blood – somebody else's – in small brown spots on her blouse. People had sat around at the station and later the hospital A&E centre dazed, bleeding, getting bandaged. The man with the boy had gone home. She still had his mobile phone. She was going to wait for him to ring, if he remembered that she'd borrowed it. Let's turn it off now, I said, looking at the picture by the sonographer's door: a mobile phone with a red diagonal line through it.

We could see the baby's heartbeat. Ann and I laughed at the same time – I had the huge ballooning sensation of being given something undeserved – blood rushed to my face in a hot, sweet tingle. The baby was a transparent pulsing bean in an unreadable sea of grey whorls. I squeezed Ann's hand. There were tears in her eyes; she looked suddenly much younger. When I kissed the side of her face I could smell

the sweat and dust, and I had to resist an uncharacteristic urge to wrap my arms tightly round her, to cling to her in gratitude and relief.

‘Hang on,’ the sonographer said. ‘What’s that? You’ve got something there.’ ‘What is it?’ Ann gripped my hand hard. The woman pushed the monitor deeper into Ann’s belly. Now we could see it, a thick mass of tissue, enormous next to the embryo, ten or fifteen times its size. ‘Don’t cry,’ the sonographer said to Ann, as though she were a silly little girl. ‘It’s just a fibroid. Baby’s fine.’ ‘But that thing’s so big,’ Ann said, her voice off-balance. ‘Look at it.’ Her smudged face was tight and worried. It was hard to comprehend that the murky image on the screen was showing us the inside of Ann. ‘It’s nothing,’ the woman said, wiping the transparent jelly from Ann’s stomach with a paper towel. ‘It can’t hurt you.’

Together Ann and I drove round to return the mobile phone to the father from the train. He lived in West Hampstead, a part of London we never went to, and we got lost on the way and narrowly avoided a navigation fight. Our laughter, as we turned into street after street of bigger and bigger houses, was thin with envy. Ann brushed invisible creases out of her sleeves and reapplied her lipstick in the glove box mirror. Outside the tall, wide house – the wrought iron gate, the polished railings, the sheeny windows bouncing light – we sat silently, bracing ourselves for strangers. On their doorstep Ann squeezed my arm and nodded at the pile of champagne bottles in the recycling bin. When Simon, this man who’d shared the intense hours of the derailment with Ann, came to the door I smiled tersely and gripped his hand, which was, I noted gratefully, neither clammy nor vice-like. We stepped into his house.