

'I adored it'
Meg Mason

'Furious, dark and delicious'
Sarah Waters



The
Exhibitionist
Charlotte Mendelson

Charlotte Mendelson

*The
Exhibitionist*



MANTLE

*For Elaine, Jane,
Jean and Martha,
who know.*

'I am glad it cannot happen twice, the fever of first love'
Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca*

'He looked into the hole, and like any hole it said, Jump'
Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover*

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Part One

Friday, 9 February 2010, after lunch

1

‘Tolstoy was an idiot.’

This is how he always begins. Then, when somebody responds, laughing or demurring, Ray will say: ‘All that crap about happy families. It’s the unhappy families who’re alike. Uptight, cold . . . ugh.’ He’ll gesture merrily at the havoc: books everywhere, wizened tangerines and cold coffee, heating on full. ‘Poor bloke had never met us lot. We’re famously happy, aren’t we. Aren’t we? And totally unique.’

‘I’m not actually sure he m—’

‘And no, before you ask, I haven’t read whatever the book is, *Crime and Bloody Punishment*.’

This weekend is his chance to prove that, despite recent troubles, the Hanrahanes are still enviable; with Ray Hanrahan, like a fiery prophet, above them all. Tomorrow will be the private view for Ray’s first solo show since the mid-nineties; a miracle, given his pain and suffering, the medication-induced fog, and, whisper it, the recent critical attention for Lucia, his wife. They’re having a celebratory dinner tonight; the usual relaxed surfeit but even his brothers, even his tricky younger daughter Jess, who abandoned him, will be there. On Saturday morning, Ray and his other, devotedly loyal, daughter, Leah, will finish the preparations and then, in the evening, the show will finally open. If his guests have any sense, paintings will be bought, Ray’s unfairly occluded career will resume, and the Hanrahanes’ glory days will begin.

Please, she is thinking. Let it be bad news.

Lucia Hanrahan, the artist’s wife, is lying on the concrete floor of her own studio, listening to the telephone ring. Her strong forearms are terracotta-red; stone-chips and clay-clots press into her back. She is trying to be calm, to ready herself for an entire weekend of alert self-containment, of giving nothing away: two nights, almost two full days, of solid dishonesty. But faking it, she has recently discovered, is easier than one might think. She’s a much better liar than anybody guesses; she’s been doing it for decades.

With appalling timing, Lucia has come back to life. The thought of why makes her throat swell, her knuckles ache. Heartache is coming, it is

already here. She is beside herself, whatever that means.

She needs to focus on keeping tonight's plans straight, not obsess about whether a tiny meeting, even ten minutes, could be crowbarred in.

When will the ringing stop? It's the landline, which can only mean Marie-Claude at the gallery. No one else uses it. It should be exciting.

Lucia is not without ambition; this used to be her only secret. Protecting Ray from this, keeping him confident, unfurious, has been her life's work; he's not above estimating how successful her day has been from the plaster-dust under her nails. A phone call from the gallery will only bring upset, because she'll have to tell him all about it. He too was represented by a gallery, once.

He tends his grudge like a sacred lamp. He'd been spotted by Dolly Chastin at art school; was, for a time, one of Chastin's stars. He claims that the postcard sales from his big success at the RA Summer Show, *Screw* (1971), funded their St John's Wood renovations.

Ray thinks he introduced Lucia to Dolly Chastin. In fact, Dolly's wooing of Lucia herself began earlier than he knows, in 1977 after she'd won the Hooper Prize. Dolly took her to a bar. Lucia was living largely on dry cereal and Dolly didn't buy her dinner; Lucia got drunk quickly, kept slipping off her stool. She explained about her name, that her mother, Carmel Brophy, three years married, deliverer already of over a hundred other women's babies, had gone to the Vatican to pray for fertility and a lovely nun called Lucia, 'but with a "ch" ', had shared a bag of apricots on the steps. Soon, lo! Carmel was with child.

'She called me *Lu-seea*, though. Never explained why.'

Dolly didn't praise her work, not once, but she pronounced her name correctly. Then she sent a note: *I'm fucked if I'm going to let anyone else take you on.*

Lucia did not respond. How could she have? She had already found her calling: Ray, her teacher and Dolly's client, needed her. She was devotedly dealing with all his letters, cleaning his brushes and mixing his colours, filling his sparky brain with ideas, reassuring and encouraging: the perfect assistant, honoured to be elected to serve the genius. He was, amazingly, torn with self-doubt and suffering, needing constantly to be buoyed up. He hated dealing with collectors, so she wooed them for him; making him great was their joint project. Whenever the reverberation of a new idea, the tuning-fork thrill, began in her chest, she'd squash it, loyally. His career came first. Everyone fancied him, and he had his pick; he was posher, cleverer, better, and he allowed her, Lucia Brophy, to choose his blues and browns. Of course she was wildly in love. And she had Patrick already,

pee-soaked, delicious, fatherless; soon her other two babies. Somebody had to take care of them, and she wanted to, sort of, and every moment she could snatch when they weren't staggering into washing-up tubs of acrylic, or wailing about biscuits, was required by Ray.

And he did encourage her enormously; she must not forget that, she thinks now, tense for the phone to ring again. It's getting dark; he'll be upset that she isn't home, all systems go for the dinner. But she doesn't move homeward.

'But why don't you paint a bit when you can?' he'd say. 'My golden girl, you should.' In the long years before all three children were reliably in school, Leah already Ray's little twin, Jess a roaring toddler, Patrick still holding her knees, it was beyond her. The work, in her head, was much too big to squeeze between forgotten chapter books, opticians, chicken pox, three meals for five people, scrubbing the bath; not a little scribble at the kitchen table but huge creaking joists and tautness and howling space. She'd feast on the smooth curves of her children's cheeks and temples, the minuscule quivering of a lower lip, wondering: am I awake but unconscious, or conscious but not awake? Like a good mother, she'd stroke and inhale them, whispering: 'You are entirely beautiful. I love you so much. I will stare at you all night.'

But her thoughts would drift: to art, to her dream studio, a big plywood mess far from anywhere, to child problems and the current Ray crisis. He hadn't yet decided he wanted yet another baby; once that happened, there was upset every time a buggy passed.

So she gave up completely, not even a sketch for months. Then Ray made an announcement: when the storeroom beside his studio at the Angharad Bevin Community Centre became free, he'd persuaded the landlord to let it to Lucia, to store her stuff.

She'd press against the cold whitewashed wall between them, breathing cottage-pie steam from the Pensioners' Club, the dampness from the cemetery trees close by, in, out, and try to sense how his own painting was going. She'd think: I'm so lucky. Now I have a room, I could work in here for ever.

No one could say that Ray didn't help her, wasn't loving and supportive at the start. He'd explain, kindly, that she had much to learn about the World of Art. It was just that by the time he began to regret it, it was too late.

His conviction grew that no couple can succeed in the same world; one – Lucia, obviously – must step back. He insists that, had she been more grateful, more respectful of his seniority, they could both have stayed at

Chastin's. The truth is that Dolly tolerated his delays, the increasing opacity and repetitiveness of his work ('why should I have to explain it?'), stood by him. Then, at the PV for the Hayward's Unbound, Ray was so pissed, ranting about sidelining and neophilia that, despite Lucia's increasingly desperate explanations of the power of his vision, Chastin's quietly dropped him.

Lucia had a small piece in that show: *Bloody Perseus*. 'I had to tell her who Perseus was!' he says. 'Didn't have a clue!' She can't think of it without sweating; his shouting, her pride derailed.

Then Dolly died, launching both Lucia and Ray into the backwaters. Eighteen years later, the unheard-of Marie-Claude rocked up. Obviously, Lucia has tried to persuade her to take Ray on too.

Lucia used to visualize a future point when everything would be easy. Ray says she's a shark, a ligger, a user, yet she loves him, has loved him so entirely. She always expects him to say he's met someone else.

If Marie-Claude did take on Ray, Lucia would surrender, if necessary. Oh, even that word: surrender.

Is this what it's like to be a man?

2

The phone has stopped. Lucia, still on her back, breathes through her nostrils: linseed, cold clay, solder. She keeps her head still, moves only her eyes in the frame of her skull to see the mess which used to excite her: wire everywhere, curled on hooks, thick with beeswax. There are nails, the rustier the better, in coffee and mustard tins lined up against the narrow window, so cluttered with cannibalized maquettes that it barely sheds light, when daylight – where it strikes, what it changes – is the point. Balsa and hazel poking out of a pub fire-bucket; bamboos in a Laphroaig canister; deconstructed beach mats and Venetian blinds continually crashing to the ground; matchboxes by the score. Lined pebbles and sea-urchin fossils, for holding up to see their angles in sunlight; knuckly plane-tree twigs, bones and cones. Cheap teabags, caustic soda, pans full of solidified wax, crunchy lung-destroying nubs of florists' foam, as much plywood as she can fit in; the single hotplate, stolen in 1974 when she was young and ferocious and so, so hungry.

No wonder she can't start anything new. She needs to earn, not stare out of the window imagining what, if she could coax a person here, silently, breathing quickly, they could do to each other.

Rain bursts against the window. Fool. You should be working.

Usually fear is the poke she needs. She is fifty-four, almost dead, and has wasted her life faffing, fretting, obsessively wondering what, say, a huge commission could do for her. What it would do to her marriage. Her current piece, another group but more birdy, more arrowy, which she wants to call *And Then They Came* but Ray will say she's straining for profundity, remains soggy and unrecoverable. She can only think of him, her husband; how much he'll hate it, if it's good.

So instead she dreams of filthy acts against blond-oak cupboards, in an office above Westminster Tube station. She can't leave her phone alone. Her mind has gone beyond the reach of caffeine. And, like a spider, flinging silken threads over the chasm of debt, she's also trying to think of something big, buyable, but ideally mediocre, to keep them all afloat. Her kiln failed again this morning: its lying thermostat and dodgy door humiliating, at this stage in her career. Tina Erzinger keeps banging on about her magnificent new Sorensen Deluxe CZ200, but Tina can work as

she wants: no children, no husband, only pure dedication to her art.

Artists need wives; everyone tells Ray this, or no ties at all. She thinks of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, selfishly rootless, or that gorgeous bastard Modigliani, sleeping in his studio, mallet beside his humble cot so he could work upon waking. Other artist heroes – Lee, Isa – knew that women with children cannot do this. Long grainy nights of colic and nappies after the bedlam of art school, sinking stunned onto the floor bundled in blankets, sleep broken by nightmares, wet sheets or, when Patrick became free range, her own terror. It wasn't drugs; he was even scared of Calpol. He'd say he was out with his mates, her silent boy: really? And, when he would talk, or at least endure her chat, her carefully light arm, there was always Ray, furious that she was claiming him for her own.

She should stop worrying about Patrick and hurry home before the phone rings again.

But Lucia's children are in trouble. She has to bribe her adult son with all-day breakfasts to assess his mental state, as if coaxing a deer. Her elder daughter Leah, who hates her, barely leaves the house; the younger, Jess, barely comes home. The fluffy heads she used to press her mouth to on the bus, who'd trot around galleries while they played 'Art or Fart?', are lost. Yet she still can't leave them for long, or whatever careful tranquillity has built up will start to crack. And the worry, the ache, follows her here.

She thinks of peers, competitors, their children launched, leaving them to months of solitude and focus. She's twenty years behind, has wasted so much time, lost so many ideas.

The phone has fallen quiet. She watches her chest rise, and her mind drifts away from perpetual worry to other skin, other breath. Instant, raging desire: her hands burn with it, her heart stings. She'd never before realized that lust makes one's body hurt.

Stop it, she thinks. Not that.

But by now she is lost in the second night they kissed, absurdly recent, when they'd been saying goodbye by the Tube and she'd whispered:

'What happens if we fall in love?'

'Then we fall in love.'

And so she'd walked into disaster.

3

Jess is cutting it fine.

She's told her family again and again she'll be on the first possible train south after Friday lessons, yet everyone's still outraged. Her elder sister Leah refuses to believe she can't leave earlier; her father takes it personally, particularly because Martyn, her boyfriend, asked the Head for the afternoon off, so he could be on the twelve o'clock sharp.

Martyn's been pressing her to take the same train: five and a half solid hours of chat about their shared colleagues, their life.

'You know it's History Club,' she said. 'I can't let them down.'

'What about Ray, though? He'll be so delighted, why not spend more time with him?'

She stared at Martyn: his amazing unawareness. 'I'll be on the four o'clock, I'll race there from the station. It's fine.'

'You don't even seem excited.'

'I . . . I'm just nervous,' she said. 'It's complicated. Don't forget Dad hasn't done this, shown his work, for most of my life.'

'So?'

'So it might be a disaster. No, it really might. They have completely overhyped it, he and Leah. All those guests, I don't know. It's a bit hostage-to-fortune, how much they're counting on it to turn things round for him.'

'Rubbish,' said Martyn. 'It's going to be fantastic.'

Men always fall in love with Ray Hanrahan; he makes them laugh at his daring, his rudeness, and they swoon into his arms. When she and Leah are being united and brave, they carefully tease him about the devotion of the postman, their old headmaster's postcards, heterosexual middle-aged men who pay what Ray calls homo-age. Adoring fans are always with him; 'like', Ray says, 'herpes'. Sometimes he's amazingly generous, even as he mocks them. In return they praise his cooking and Paisley, his cat; denigrate his rivals; attribute every success of younger artists to his influence. Tonight there'll be several, criticizing the Auerbach show (Auerbach has never been friendly enough to Ray), agreeing that the latest batch of art-school graduates is talentless. Plus, for extra stress, months ago Ray bonded with some curator from Texas over bratwurst, and invited

him to stay, in the house, for the exhibition. Eric Nakamura has artists in LA, Nice, Shanghai; now his sights are set on Ray, allegedly.

Leah is convinced this will be Ray's rebirth.

'But what if he doesn't take him on?' Jess said to Martyn. 'If this man's any good, it's not . . . likely. Dad's not even represented at the moment. God, wait until he sees the house. And the work might not sell, or . . . It's going to be grim. You haven't seen Dad at h—'

'This guy would be lucky to have him. It's Ray Hanrahan! You wait,' he told her, with the confidence of the wrong. 'You moan about going to London, seeing the family. But the minute you arrive, you'll relax. How could you not? And the exhibition will be a sell-out. It's bad we can't travel together, though. What will you do? Won't you be sad?'

'I'll be fine,' Jess said. 'Don't worry.' Often she pretends not to understand him, unfocuses her eyes. Mental Teflon: it buys her a few moments of peace.

If he's missed his train, she's sunk. But it's safe; he's already texted excitedly from past Peterborough. Martyn loves her. He wants her with him, all the time. She catches sight of her reflection and sees a sad, withered girl; the more she frets, the worse she looks, which will put him off. This should be helpful, but the more she withdraws, the tighter his grip.

She's torn at a new cuticle; blood is welling around the nail. She sucks it clean, presses it against the skirt she spent nearly an hour choosing this morning. Ray will hate it; he'll guess she wears it for teaching. What adult woman worries about what her father will think?

'So what's this weekend going to be like?' asked her friend Astrid Pringle at lunch. They were buying biscuits for yet another engagement party; Dalziel's teachers are very marital, often with each other. 'Give me detail.'

'Martyn is jazzed.'

'I bet.'

'But, for me, it'll be more: "Hello, are you all still mad? OK, bye." '

'Could it be fine?'

'No. Also, I was thinking of telling my mum about me and Martyn. Our . . . well, my . . . worries.'

'As in your obsessive ruminating about how to chuck him?'

'No! Shhh. Come on, it's not straightf—'

'Yes it is. And you must.'

'But I've told no one else. And I'll cry.'

'You know my views,' replied Astrid.

But she doesn't truly understand. Astrid is desirable; she teaches Spanish. Whereas Jess can't leave Martyn because no one else will want her ever again. It's simply a fact.

She's already been in almost every shop on the station forecourt, but there are always reasons to visit a chemist. The London train makes her nervous; Pepto-Bismol. Can you drink on top of that? Or some sedative to take the edge off: cough medicine, antihistamines?

Maybe it's just a shopping urge, the quick fix she yields to more and more often. She wants something all the time: a fillip, a tonic, a way to break up lunch in a pub with Martyn, or before a long evening at home, even though Martyn says there's nothing wrong with their relationship.

'It's as good as anyone gets. Why don't you say you love me as often as you used to? Want to know the problem with you?' he'd asked Jess this morning.

'Not rea—'

'The problem with you is that you're an Angry Young Woman. Which isn't actually a thing.'

He says that the wear on their love is normal, easily removed, like panel-beating. He claims she's always the one who starts their rows. 'You can't resist lighting the fuse. Actually, these days it's always lit.'

He's got this from Jess's father. Ray has nicknames for her: Bolsh, for bolshy. Moo, for cow. Piece, for nasty piece of work. He claims they're affectionate but forgets that she asks him to stop. He used to say she'd inherited his fire.

So she tried to stay small and quiet with boyfriends, to avoid becoming him. When she first brought Martyn back to London, and Leah asked: 'Is he strong enough to take care of you when Dad dies?' and her mother said, 'Do you not want to be single for a bit?', her father called him Martina or 'that short-arse', then asked loudly: 'Who'd have her? Must be a glutton for punishment. Fiver says she'll scare him off by the end of the month.'

But Martyn persisted. She knew she was lucky, even if thirty felt young to feel old; or was that stupid? When she was growing up, they were forbidden sleepovers 'in case you're needed'. She never brought friends home after school. So Martyn is right. She is fortunate that he wants to stick around.

They've announced the platform, the luggage racks will be filling up but now, when it's almost too late, she steps through the door of the big Boots at the back of the station. She's simply browsing, roaming aimlessly up Vitamins and down through Bath and Body. The station smells fummy, as if the train is idling close by. Through Face, past Cold and Cough, and she's

barely set foot in Women and Family Planning when a voice behind her says, 'Oh, Jessica', and she turns to look into the beady face of Sally Ormand, Chemistry: the Head's Cardinal Richelieu; Martyn's chief fan.

Steadily, as if caught stealing honey by a bear, Jess withdraws her hand. Sally Ormand has definitely seen where she was reaching; her little mouth is pursed, thoughtfully.

'I . . .' Jess begins.

'Am I interrupting?'

'Course not. I'm late, in fact; going to London to see my—'

'Ah yes.' Sally Ormand smiles. 'Martyn told me. I've heard so much about your wonderful father. Hush now,' she says, gesturing at the shelf. 'Your secret is one hundred per cent safe with me.'

4

If Lucia had gone when she'd promised, Marie-Claude might have given up, left her alone. But selfish Lucia is still here. Her hand rests on her breastbone; her breathing slows, but she wants more.

Please, she thinks: it's you I want.

And then, inconveniently, she has her vision.

It is fully formed; brief, sufficient. It seems to be made of what looks like quartz, the texture of a red ice lolly with the flavour sucked out; inherently red but somehow frosted, glaucous, although not wetly glistening, nor, she thinks, eyes open now, steaming with dry ice. No. It is huge, monumental, its shape essentially a bevelled block, like her beloved vertebrae (Ray says she's repetitive, that everyone does bones) heavily grooved, like old-fashioned radiators, a sperm whale's plankton-filtering grille. It has a hint of life, like a giant brain or liver and its rounded upper edge resembles the lip of the terracotta-tiled step of the mansion block where, four months ago, her world atomized.

She should sketch it, but Ray—

And the phone begins to ring again: three times, four. Then the answerphone clicks on.

She waits, throat dry, fingers damp. The machine was Ray's present when she moved into the studio: a shocker now, a tombstone encrusted with dust and paint, yellow fingerprints on the 7 and 2. The red light is flashing; he's upset if you ignore it.

What if it's doom, with a French accent? Marie-Claire is inexorable. She knows that Lucia avoids the telephone, and does not care. She never says hello or goodbye, wears loads of eyeliner and always Converse Hi-Tops and, when Lucia says she's her gallerist, people have started to look impressed. Lucia adores her, as an erring priest adores God the Father. They have never discussed certain issues but Lucia knows that Marie-Claude knows everything, including why she usually dodges her calls.

A long whirr; a click. Then she hears Marie-Claude, sounding odd: 'Call me immediately. And sit down. I have news, very urgent. We must talk.'

Lucia sits, but only to quell the fizzing in her chest. She tells herself it'll be a Customs problem with the piece heading to Cologne, or the mystery buyer for *Rabbits* has decided casting is too expensive.

Or what if Marie-Claude wants to discuss the idea Lucia recklessly mentioned last year: a series of strangeness. She'd envisaged a fast-moving sliding slice of Perspex and was ruminating about ways to install it. Marie-Claude may be old-school but it's such a young gallery, fixated on provenance; of course they'd want something fresh but cheap to make and store. Could Lucia deal with Ray's derision; his misery, if the idea proved to be good? Or, worse, the risk that she's overlapped with one of the subjects he has annexed: mothers, sons, sex, nature, time?

It's like playing Jenga: any threat to his self-esteem, a tiny wobble and the whole thing comes crashing onto your knuckles. Sometimes he cries, and what woman can resist a crying man? They're so bad at it; it takes so much.

What if Marie-Claude is the bearer of good news?

There have been some difficult moments: the fall-out from the Hooper prize, when Ray was officially still only her teacher; the talk in Dusseldorf and then the Nova Scotia lectures; the awkwardness with Basel, where he still swears she was only offered the Statements show because she flirted. The group show at the Whitechapel, one of her proudest moments, was followed by a fortnight of recriminations. The trips she's sabotaged, the collectors, friends she has dodged, for the sake of peace. At the Roche Court private view, all she could see was his distraught face; he wouldn't even come to Münster, and so her hotel phone bill was over three hundred pounds.

Münster: the year after the most horrible year of her life. Ray still insists that he did what he did because she wouldn't turn it down.

Their rows do not vary in temperature; all that differs is the spark. His gloves are never on. He says whatever he likes: that her protectiveness of Patrick is basically grooming; that Leah agrees she's a career vampire; that she's ruined Jess's life by turning her against her loving father. Lucia's always sucked in to defending herself, trying to reason, apologizing, vowing to change, but it's always weak and unsuccessful, like a worm holding up a little sign.

He's very hot on keeping things private, which is why Lucia's told no one about Sukie Blackstock, or their other troubles. Also, she didn't want her friends to think less of him. He still wrote her love notes, bought presents, made her laugh into the night.

Rushing now to pack her bag, she allows herself to notice fleetingly the excitement in Marie-Claude's voice. If only she could press a button and pause Marie-Claude for the weekend: not a work drama, not now.