

what

A NOVEL

it's

like

in

words

ELIZA MOSS



what  
A NOVEL it's  
like  
in  
words

ELIZA MOSS

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY



NEW YORK

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this  
Henry Holt and Company ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,  
and info on new releases and other great reads,  
sign up for our newsletters.

Sign Up

Or visit us online at  
[us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup](http://us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup)

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: [us.macmillanusa.com/piracy](http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy).**

*For my parents*

*Now, to pry into roots, to finger slime,  
To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring  
Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme  
To see myself, to set the darkness echoing.*

—Seamus Heaney, “Personal Helicon”

When I was six weeks old, Mum left me in a playpen for three minutes, and returned to find a boy standing in the pen, holding me, his teeth clamped around my pink head. I don't know where the boy is now but I still have the marks on my skull.



## CHAPTER 1

THURSDAY

NOVEMBER 17, 2016

4:00 P.M.

Daylight has drained from the room, and the lights have turned on in the skyscrapers. Circles. Rectangles. Fluorescent vertebrates across the ceilings. I imagine them humming like machines that zap insects.

My cracked phone is a memento from the tube station last night, and there is another on my collarbone, below the trim of my *Mario Kart* T-shirt, like a club stamp from a night out: a bruise the size of a thumbprint.

*Count to three and then stand up.*

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three—*

I turn on the main light, and my bedroom is familiar. Desk with laptop; bed between two windows; table with a notepad by the Pixar lamp; bookshelf holding color-arranged books; wardrobe, with last night's clothes crumpled at its foot like a chalk outline from a crime scene.

THIS IS WHAT A FEMINIST LOOKS LIKE.

Ruth bought me that shirt for Pride, but now the arms are broken and the spine is snapped. Ruth and I never used to argue before him. When we broke up a year ago, she told me that my first impression was the right one. But how can I separate the first impression from the last one?



*Converse over the yellow line. White threads in the rip in his jacket. The murmur of the train.*

The quiet Monday of the pub, two years, one month, and three days ago.  
When I met him.

★ ★ ★

IT WAS OUR BIMONTHLY writers meetup, and Amy, Chris, Hugo, and I were sat in a pub in Broadway Market with splayed crisp packets and printouts on the wooden table. It was my turn to bring a chapter to discuss, but it wasn't finished. When I told the group that, they made the same noise at the same time and told me to just bring *something* for the next meeting.

Before we started, we ordered drinks and chatted. Chris remarked on how the pub had Halloween decorations up already. Hugo said that he was going to Torture Garden's annual Halloween ball in a couple of weeks. Amy immediately changed the subject by telling us about the renovations that she and her fiancé, David, were making to their Stoke Newington home.

Can you believe I've only just discovered Farrow & Ball?

I asked her what Farrow & Ball was, and she looked at me like I had ruined the story. She continued explaining the differences between décor in our early twenties and décor in our late twenties (less color) when he arrived.

A tall stranger in a bleached denim jacket with a rip in the shoulder flicked his chin in vague greeting and reclined in the chair next to mine, resting large feet in old Converse next to my Malbec. Hugo and Chris exchanged a glance, I moved my glass, and Amy continued her anecdote, with the irritation of someone who just had a fly land in their drink.

... and I've turned all the books around in the bookshelf so they match the walls, she concluded. Then, as if she hadn't been the one speaking, she asked if we could begin, *please*.

Chris kicked us off: Right. Yeah, so for *me*, Amy, the protagonist's desire for retribution was a tad reductive. You don't want her to fall into an offensive trope.

But as the group discussed Amy's novel, I was drawn to the stranger in my periphery. Downturned mouth, grayish-brown hair, deep lines framing unsymmetrical features, pen between his lips like a cigar. There was something grotesque about him. I glanced down at his arms, muscular, with a mole on his forearm like a planet.

Amy's rebuttal was a skimming stone: Chris, how exactly is it an offensive trope? A male protagonist can do anything he wants as many times as he wants, but a female protagonist has to justify why she is or isn't a trope?

I kept watching him: his face didn't move; it was hard to tell if he was listening.

Amy wore a mohair jumper cinched with a belt. Her favorite shows were filmed before a studio audience, and she wrote crime fiction. Hugo wore a ponytail with a suit jacket and wrote erotic science fiction. Chris wrote about the "male experience." He had a female cat called Humphrey and commitment issues. I knew what they might say and how they might say it; when Chris would be offended and when Amy would pretend to be. But I couldn't work the stranger out. His age? His sexuality? Was he a good writer? Although, somehow, I already knew that he was.

Enola, how about you?

*Is that a coffee stain on his T-shirt?*

Amy tapped her paper with her pen. She was always impatient to hear feedback. It was one of the reasons that the others found her grating, that and the fact that they were jealous; her first book was being published next year. But, as always, her writing was brilliant and listening to her words increased my relief at not having brought my own.

It didn't feel like a trope to me. I loved how you subverted the mystery convention, I said.

*Thank you,* Amy responded, with a look to Chris.

Hugo called me diplomatic, using the third person.

No, said Amy, whippet-quick, she just got it.

When we paused for more drinks, the stranger jumped up first, like he couldn't wait to leave the table, and Amy immediately tapped my arm and

gestured to where he stood, wallet on the bar like a coin on a pool table. Why was I so *aware* of him?

Mat texted that he might bring a mate, she said.

Mat was the final member of the writing group. He wrote historical fiction, and ironed his jeans.

But then Mat got food poisoning, Amy continued. *Typical*. And this friend came anyway. I mean, he's not quite the vibe for our group, is he? He doesn't *look* like a writer.

Skimming over Amy's thinking food poisoning was "typical," I asked her what a writer looked like, and she said: Clean?

I laughed, but I wasn't in a position to judge. I felt more and more like writing was something I'd stumbled into and couldn't find my way out of, like those hikers who die in caves. I said it was weird that no one had introduced him, and Amy's coral lips puckered.

He should have introduced himself, Enola.

The stranger returned sipping a fresh pint of beer or cider. I might have imagined it but it seemed like he shuffled his chair closer to mine.

Shall we carry on, Amy said without the question mark.

*Cider. I can smell it on his thick lips.*

He wiped his mouth with his thumb, and I wondered how dirty his thumb was, or why he hadn't repaired the rip in his jacket. His face reminded me of one of those papier-mâché dummies from art classes at school.

Chris's novel was up next, and, adjusting his roll-neck, he asked for our thoughts. Before anyone else could speak, the stranger removed the pen from his mouth and said: I thought your protagonist was a cunt. Then he leaned back and watched the damage. There was a stunned silence before the group launched into platitudes: No, no, he's not a cunt, Chris. He's just nuanced! Yeah, there's only a *slight* dusting of misogyny. But Chris's protagonist was a cunt. I stifled a laugh, and the stranger grinned at me like we had robbed a bank.

And just like that I was invited in.

The difference a smile made to skin was paper being folded and unfolded. The deep lines lifted as if by fishing line and he had, at once, the warmest face I had ever seen. His eyes were green and his smile was suggestive but kind. I wanted to play with him. I wanted to look after him. I wanted to slap him. I wanted to fuck him. I snapped my head down to the stain on his gray T-shirt, but, wait—

★ ★ ★

HE CAN'T BE WEARING that gray T-shirt? This was two years ago and his stepmother, Karen, only bought it for him last Christmas. How can I be objective when my memory has him wearing a T-shirt not yet woven into significance? Anyway—

★ ★ ★

WHEN THE BELL RANG for last orders, we were ready to leave. I went to the toilet, and when I returned, he was gone, pub door swinging as though he had just passed through. I put on my coat and left feeling disappointed and then confused as to why. I didn't want to see him again, and yet I had put on lipstick in the bathroom.

I wanted to walk home, but it was raining, so I went to the bus stop. I thought about how it felt when he smiled at me, or rather, how it felt to be the person he had chosen to smile at. I tried to think of something else—my novel or what snack I might make—but it was like there was nothing to look forward to, just a novel I had no desire to write and a morning shift I had no desire to do.

A bus approached, and it wasn't my number, but people embarked, and that's when I saw him. Leaning against the glass. Rip in his jacket. Cigarette where the pen had been.

My heart started.

We pretended not to notice each other. Or I did. I wasn't sure if he was pretending. Then he looked over and said, saturnine: Hi, do you come here often? I tried to hide my smile, but he moved closer. He remarked that everyone had been pretty pissed. Do you always meet in a pub? I told him that Amy believed alcohol softened criticism. I'm not sure about that, he replied. The guy in the jumper wanted to punch me.

You did call his character a cunt.

He grinned, and I turned away—eye contact was too much.

We were quiet until he reached over his head and yanked it to one side. I didn't mean to squeal, but the crack was so loud. He looked pleased to have shocked me. I told him it would be embarrassing if he died breaking his own neck, and he said that wasn't how he was going to die. He told me that the last hours of his life would be dedicated to watching *Friends*.

Why?

I've never seen it.

You've never seen *Friends*?

Are you calling me a liar?

I couldn't tell if he was joking. It was such a stupid thing to joke about. But every word he had said so far sounded like it could mean something else.

Well, you'll have to die slowly, then. There are about seven hundred seasons.

He looked at me like I had said the right thing, and so I smiled. He smiled too. Perhaps he thought my smile was nice?

You have red wine on your teeth, he said.

*Oh god.*

I rubbed my teeth. He said that he was joking, and I lightly hit his arm—his muscle was hard beneath his jacket. He rolled his eyes to demonstrate that it didn't hurt and it felt, in that moment, like I knew him. Just then, a crack of thunder. The sky was thick with dark cloud.

He groaned. Fucking *England*.

I felt a stabbing in my breastbone. Rainstorms always made me think about camping with Dad.

He asked which bus I was getting, and when I answered, he said he was getting the same one, quipping: We're neighbors. I made a joke about borrowing sugar, and he returned one about a quick shag. My eyes drifted to his hands: long fingers, rough palms. I asked whereabouts he lived. He looked amused, like I had asked for his number.

Between Shadwell and Whitechapel. You?

Between Whitechapel and Aldgate.

Nice area, he said, eyebrows raised. What's the rent like? My stomach dropped the way it always did when I had to answer that question. It was bought when I was twenty-one, so the area wasn't as *nice* six years ago, I said.

He whistled. I got a watch for my twenty-first, but a flat would've been fine too.

I laughed to make the moment less awkward, and he asked if I had a cigarette. That was my last, he said, looking to the wet stub on the tarmac. I told him that I didn't smoke, but, on seeing his disappointment, I wished I did. Then he frowned and said: I feel like a prick, but I cannot remember your name.

There were only four of us at the pub. How could he not remember my name? But there was that look again, as if perhaps he did remember but was trying to achieve something.

It's Enola.

... as in Gay?

There was a beat while I came to understand the reference, and then he laughed. I wasn't sure if he was laughing at his joke or my slowness to register it. But it was such an incongruous sound, rising and falling like music, that I laughed along at my own expense. Then he finished with a hum and asked if I fancied a drink. The sentence dropped at the end, as if he was nervous. But he knew what he was doing. His self-deprecation was a performance, for effect—to make me laugh, to unsettle me? But still I answered: Yes, let's get a drink.

I know a place that'll be open.

Now? Oh no, I can't now.

Jeez. Pull the rug out, why don't you?

I wasn't wearing the right clothes. I hadn't shaved. I needed to speak to Ruth. The same way that I needed to call her before I wore my new school shoes with the thick heel for the first time. I explained that I was working in the morning, and he gave me this look that knew me, that sprouted from one side of his face and stripped me. Stumbling over the consonants, I said that we had the bus journey to chat. He muttered something. I asked what he said. He pretended he hadn't said anything. I thought what he'd said was that a bus journey wouldn't be sufficient for what he had in mind, but I couldn't have been sure. Then, with a nod, as if he had summoned it, the bus splashed the curb.

★ ★ ★

WE SAT AT THE top of the bus, and condensation covered the windows. His skin was damp with rain; the cigarette smoke faded to leave aftershave, woody, with a hint of citrus. I undid the top two buttons of my shirt.

So ... where are you from? he asked in a mock perfunctory style, like he was afraid of sounding sincere. My answer was rehearsed: I was born in the Midlands, where my mum is from, but we moved to Kenya when I was four. We were only there for a few years, though. Mum and I moved back to the Midlands when I was nine, for school. Long story short, I've been in London since uni.

So ... the Midlands, then.

He was looking at me like I had made a simple thing complicated, so I agreed to be from the Midlands. Not that it was a lie, but it wasn't the truth either. Kenya felt like home, though I'd never been back. Dad's sister, Louise, lived there now. She had visited and fallen in love with a man from the coast. But Mum didn't let me speak to her.

Poor you, he said. Why were you in Africa?

Dad worked for the foreign office.



What does he do now?

What do you mean?

You used the past tense.

I changed the subject and asked him what his novel was about. His face lifted like it had done in the pub. He said that it was a political satire, or at least it would be when it was finished. I asked what he did for work, and he told me that he was doing a bit of freelance writing. You know the drill, he said conspiratorially. But I did not know the drill. I told him how impressive it was that he was a full-time writer, and he laughed, a short, explosive sound, and told me that he had given me the highlights.

So, there are lowlights?

He leaned in and told me that there were shadows.

Very good.

And that's why Woking's Free Fish Company pay me the average bucks, Gay.

He relaxed back, and his knee grazed mine. I thought about moving my leg but that would tell him that I wasn't interested. I thought about letting my leg fully relax against his but that would tell him that I was. Tension formed in my thigh from keeping my leg *almost* touching his.

So, where do *you* day job? he asked, as if asking where I summered. I told him that I worked in a café at a hedge fund with my best friend. I thought about getting something permanent, but Ruth—

That's your friend?

*My best friend. Her family moved to Kenya the same year and left the same year too. Nobody knows me like she does.*

I nodded.

Ruth said that I'd never finish my novel if I did. So I've given myself until I'm thirty to finish it, and if that doesn't happen, then I'll look at getting something more—

Grown-up?

I nodded again.

He told me that, from someone who had turned thirty a few years ago, I shouldn't put a time limit on things. And you might even get sick of making sandwiches for posh wankers before then. How old are you? I blushed, and he rolled his eyes again: Come *on*. I replied that I was twenty-eight next month, and he hummed and said: I take it back, that *is* old, you probably should get a grown-up job.

We make quiche too, I said.

The light behind his eyes clicked on: I had surprised him. Oh, well, that's different, he said warmly, and the desire to please him bloomed like an addiction.

We sat listening to the road and the rain and the world blurring.

When there was a big rainstorm on safari, we would wait in the car until the ground was dry enough to put up the tents. The windows would steam up, and our skin would turn sticky. Mum hated camping, so she would sulk in the front seat, but Dad would start a game: *I went to the market and bought—*

All right, Enola, he said, enunciating my name like it was fictional. If this bus journey is a drink, tell me: favorite book, TV show, and food?

Erm, I'm not sure. *Ulysses*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and kiwis?

He made a face and told me that he was allergic to kiwis. I blow up like an acid attack victim.

I clamped my hand over my mouth.

And *Ulysses*? Christ. Come on ...

He asked me what my *real* favorite book was, muttering that I was honest about *Grey's Anatomy* at least. I asked him what his favorite book was, then, and without missing a beat, he said: Gary Neville's autobiography.

Just past the mosque, I reached for the red button in a way that caused my collar to hover below his nose. He cleared his throat to let me know that he had noticed. Then, in the knowledge that our stop was next, we allowed our knees to touch until the bus juddered and we disembarked, him first and me behind.

★ ★ ★

WE STOOD WITH THE rain ricocheting around us. He was tall, and my eyes reached the triangle of his collarbone. I lifted my chin and met his gaze. I felt a pulse between my legs and a less pleasant sensation in my stomach.

Well, this is me, I said in the tone the cliché demanded. This is me too, he replied in the same way. I gestured to my right. He to his left. Opposite directions, then. My trainers were soaked and rain was dripping off his nose, but neither of us moved. I didn't know what he was thinking, but then he inhaled and said: Well, goodbye then.

*Oh god. Is he just waiting for me to leave?*

I quickly said goodbye and walked away. I got three paces before hearing his voice, building like a sneeze: Maybe we could have our own writing club soon or just that drink...? I turned back and he was grinning. But, he added, I already know your pretend favorite book and you already know how to murder me and make it look like an accident, so I suggest skipping to date three.

He handed me his phone. I took it, and the warmth of it felt like my hand in his pocket. I typed my number under where he had already typed "Enola, the" and waited for him to drop call me. But he didn't.

Okay, I said. Bye.

Bye.

I went to leave but then stopped and asked him if he knew that Chris had based his protagonist on himself. He grinned like I had given him a compliment. I mean, it was fucking obvious. Besides, they *were* a bunch of cunts, weren't they? I opened my mouth but expelled only air as he walked away, clutching his jacket to his chin.

A shop alarm cut through the night, or, wait—

★ ★ ★

MY BUZZER IS GOING! Someone's downstairs! It can't be, can it? It's only ten past four. I'm not dressed. It's the afternoon, and I'm still wearing the pajama T-shirt he gave me. I reach the receiver, and the noise stops. Wrong number. *Thank god.* I lean against the door and pick us back up like a book.

★ ★ ★

BY THE TIME I got home, the wind was howling through the gaps in the windows. I opened my laptop and picked at the words on the page. I imagined Amy, Chris, and Hugo typing manically while I alternated between making a vase red or blue, deciding that it was just a vase. I put a pen to my lips the way that he had held one to his. Apparently only two percent of the population has green eyes. When would he text? *Would* he text? Did I even want him to text? His face confused me. It was like his teeth were too big for his mouth. And he didn't even seem nice. And I couldn't date a smoker. And what was that kiwi thing? Fuck. Why did I tell him my favorite show was *Grey's Anatomy*? I liked the show, but it wasn't my favorite. I didn't know what my favorite show was. Ruth would have said something that no one had heard of yet but that everyone was about to. I should have told him that my favorite show was something political or funny or—

★ ★ ★

Shit! A knock sounds behind my head. Could it be Ruth? No, of course not. She's in Bath. She has a key. And we're not speaking. Was I lucid enough to have locked the door last night? Then a familiar voice:

“Enola, it's me, are you in?”

*Fuck.*

## CHAPTER 2

I found him on the sofa by the windows: the Nairobi sunset sliced him in half like a magician's trick. He put down *Ulysses* and stood to greet me. His skin was warm like he had been lying in the garden.

You're reading *Ulysses* again?

Honey, you know it's my favorite book.

I told him that I was going to make risotto, and he made a sharp sibilant sound. I hit his arm, and he drew me closer. He smelled like the house, comforting and warm. Come on, he said, I'll make the risotto. He led me to the kitchen, where he pulled out the chopping board that Ruth got us as a wedding present with *Enola & Ruth* scorched into the wood. My dad was on his way over with a pack of Tusker and we were going to watch the sun set from the porch. *You must always take time for a sundowner.*

He pulled a kiwi from the shopping and started eating it.

There was a knock at the door.

Are you going to get that?

Then the sound of a train like a wave.

Enola, are you going to get that?

The dusty warm air.

Enola!

*It's getting closer.*

I looked back at him, but his face was bloodied and swollen.