

If

by Katie Burchett

‘Stop! Rox!’

I hit the pavement with a thud. My stomach churning, I clamber to my feet and turn to see Lucy creased with laughter behind me. Tears of hysteria are streaming down her cheeks, making her mascara run in thin black lines.

‘Didn’t you see the steps?’ she splutters, wiping her eyes.

Steps? What steps? I turn around expecting to see the familiar kebab shop outside Oceana, but am instead met with a street I don’t even recognise, complete with a short, unforgiving flight of steps just ahead. God, I must be drunker than I thought. As I turn to slur this to Lucy, my vision begins to blur and I’m struck with the peculiar sensation that I’m not really there at all. Instead, I’m floating, looking down on the street, the steps, and Lucy scrambling to gather the strewn contents of my handbag together. The sensation only lasts a second before I snap back to the present and the concerned face of my friend.

‘Roxy?’

‘Sorry, I just – I didn’t know where I was for a second.’

‘Yeah, tequila does that.’ She grins and takes me by the hand. ‘Come on, the girls are waiting for us. Steph’s gone off with Jake so I think the others are a bit pissed off.’

‘What? Steph?’ She can’t have meant Steph, we haven’t spoken to Steph for years. The last time I can remember speaking to Steph was just after we came back from Spain in 2008. Questions are coming to me too quickly to articulate, but as soon as that post-A level holiday enters my head, it triggers something, stopping me in my tracks. The world is spinning but I try to focus as hard as I can on my surroundings. The bright neon lights, the passing stag-do lads

dressed up as the Spice Girls, wedge-clad girls clattering along, weighed down with novelty cocktail decorations. Suddenly I realise. This *is* Spain. This is Spain in 2008.

Lucy is staring at me, perplexed. As I go to explain, the feeling happens again, faster, like a huge Hoover nozzle has clamped around me and sucked me up and away. My head is starting to throb from the base of my skull, making it feel heavy and swollen. I survey the scene below for longer this time until I'm rattled back down to earth – a vacuumed hairclip shaken out of the tubing.

'...you wanna go back to the hotel?' Lucy's voice fades back into my consciousness as I return to real time. Her words echo like they're coming over a tannoy and I still don't feel fully present, even with my feet firmly back on the ground. Maybe she was right about the tequila. Maybe I've got alcohol poisoning. As she talks to me, her face momentarily changes. She's suddenly looking down on me, long hair falling around her face, which is red and puffy. The mascara streaks are still there, but because she's crying. Sobbing. She morphs back within seconds and I'm wrenched violently from the present again, flung into the air, forced to look down at the action on the street; Lucy with her arm protectively around me, clumsily waving her free hand to try and flag a taxi. The image below comes in and out of focus as the Spanish cobbled stones mutate into dirty, grey tarmac and back again. Suddenly, a wave of hot, sharp pain washes over my entire body. It spreads from the back of my head like a drop of ink into water, tendrils of dark blue agony weaving their way into every nerve and every muscle, staining the tips of my fingers and toes. It pulses there then travels back, so acute that it clamps itself like a vice around all rational thought. *It's okay, you're just drunk*, I tell myself. It's becoming difficult to breathe and my chest tightens with each intake of air. Images whizz and blend in front of me. Lucy now, 2008 Lucy, Steph and Jake, Oceana, the kebab shop. The best thing to do, the only thing I can do, is wait to be calm and still before trying to breathe again. Wait. Take a breath. Wait longer this time. Take another breath. Wait again. Wait for calm.

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'Stop! Rox!'

I fling my hand out a millisecond too late. Roxy stumbles off the kerb and right into the path of the approaching car. There's a sickening crunch and the screeching of brakes and I realise that the screaming I can hear is coming from me as I run towards her, crumpled in the road. The sight that meets me nearly destroys me, but I manage to tear my jacket off to hold to her head, split open from the impact. I watch the blood spread like a drop of ink into water, tendrils of deep red spreading along the ground, clinging to her shoulders, her elbows, her legs, her knees, her hands, her feet and fingertips. I press the wound as hard as I can, pleading with someone, anyone, to help us. I'm vaguely aware of the driver of the car dropping to his knees opposite me. As I apply pressure Roxy suddenly gasps, the breath rattling in her chest. Her eyes snap open, disorientated, searching my face.

'Why are we in Spain?' She says it so quietly I barely catch it and think I must've misheard. I wait for her to speak again but her eyes flutter shut.

I watch her, waiting for her chest to rise again. It finally does. Hours seem to pass before the next breath. Blue lights flash and paramedics run towards us but I can't tear my eyes away, and I don't until her chest falls for the last time.

I lock eyes with the driver, unspoken sentences floating between us.

If he hadn't been going so fast. If we hadn't been drinking. If I'd seen him sooner.

If.