

EMILY PEGG

THE SECOND SIDE OF A MAGNET

WHEN YOU SUGGEST EUROPE TO MARCIE, the two of you are crushing orange ladybugs against her windowsill at sunset. Marcie says she can't go with everything so unfinished. She is worried about the trial. You squint, find the broken wing of a ladybug stuck under a nail, and pull it out. It is smaller than an eyelash, and it blows away before you can make a wish.

Marcie wipes the insect smudges with the side of her hand and puts her feet up on the couch cushion between you. The news is full of nothing but directionless speculation—all the cruel and true things people say about elementary school bus drivers who go missing with children and reappear two towns over, like Sheppard, who is your brother and Marcie's husband, though she's stopped wearing the ring. Your thumb hovers over the channel button, hopeful for better news, then surrenders. The television closes its one square eye.

"He could still come home," Marcie says, knowing he won't.

"Sweden?" you ask.

She shakes her head.

"Ireland? The Netherlands?"

When they got married last spring, Sheppard emailed photos of them together in the courthouse, Marcie in a pink cotton dress, him in slacks. He wasn't wearing a tie, but he'd done up all his shirt buttons. You've spoken less than two hundred words to Marcie in the year that's passed—a hello as she handed the phone to Sheppard, a happy birthday in August. Now the two of you are squished onto the couch with one way out. "Jump with me," you want to say. "We'll go crazy if we stay here and watch." But Marcie looks ready to cry, the top of her nose crunched into folds, a hangnail trapped between staggered teeth.

The fish tank whirs, and the fish orbit their habitat. Marcie watches them in the blue light. "They'll starve," she says around her thumb.

"We'll buy food tablets."

“The tank will get dirty.”

“It’s only a couple days.”

Your sister-in-law nods. The black guts of a ladybug cling to the heel of her hand, but she must not notice. You could go alone, sit on a plane by yourself, ride in taxis, one eye always on your phone, weary of the news. Then Marcie says, “I hate those fish.” You put your feet on the floor and go to the tank. Its black chord coils around your knuckles. With a sharp tug, click, you’re free. The fish lull in darkness.

“How about Germany?” you say.

Marcie straightens up.

The smell of a hundred strangers clings to you even after you scrub to the elbows in a bathroom in the Frankfurt airport. At the seamless mirrors you wipe off the remains of your makeup while a woman in blue pulls off her rings at the sink. She has artist’s hands, knuckles like half shells. She gestures to you, suds spraying off her fingertips, and you catch the tail end of frustrated muttering in German. You recognize the words *dumme Frau*—stupid woman—and realize you’re blocking the hand dryers.

Out in the hall with your bags, Marcie connects to the airport Wi-Fi. Her eyes widen, then close, and you pull her phone away. There are new photos of Sheppard in court standing humbly next to his lawyer, hands clasped in front. What’s the time difference? Nine hours. By now the trial has ended, and here’s the reminder that you missed it, knocked out with a sweet white pill on the plane, drooling onto an inflatable neck pillow. No take backs. He stood there alone. You wipe the corner of your mouth.

“He’s more handsome,” Marcie says, fingers pressed against her lips. “How is that possible?”

He looks less skinny, as his cheeks have rounded out, and his arms fill the sleeves of the dark blazer. But you can tell he hasn’t slept, and you know he’s been up counting footsteps and years he’ll lose—years of him you’ll lose too—as the minimum sentence is five. You put the phone back in Marcie’s pocket, where it’s safe. She hardly notices your hands so close to her. “He’s not more handsome,” you say. “You’re just standing further away.”

Architects built Heidelberg like a postcard. All the colourful bits pose along the water, cavity sweet. You try to tempt Marcie away from her phone, weaving through cobbles and street vendors. You stop at a souvenir stand in a nook of the market, hoping to show Marcie a whole world that knows

nothing about Sheppard, but while you thumb the refrigerator magnets, she eyes the crowd around you as if they could suddenly become a mob. You can ignore each other like this for hours.

“Food?” you suggest.

“Allergic,” she says, palming her coat pocket. Her phone demands attention, but you know it won’t do any good.

“To what?”

“All of it.”

You realize Sheppard has told you very little about his wife. You only know how they met—the 24-hour sushi place on a Wednesday night, both of them tomato red from the summer and in need of a shower. He’d popped in for something to go. She’d come in to escape the sun. She works at an office as a receptionist four days a week. The other three she spends as a landscape architect. You check her hands for signs of labour, layers of callous or broken skin, but Marcie keeps a well-manicured mask, broken only by the bloody skin she peels back from her thumb.

“Alright,” you say. It is too late in the day to do much more than eat, drink, or retire to the hotel, where booking messed up and stuck you with a double bed to share. All night in her sleep Marcie tugged the sheets off you and threw them on the floor, though she stayed to her side. “No bakery.”

Marcie adjusts her wristwatch with her trimmed nails and spends too long reading the face. “I don’t usually eat dinner until later.”

“It’s seven.”

“You can eat if you want.”

Someone clears their throat. The souvenir stand owner, stern and slim-jawed, eyes you both impatiently. He has the shoulders of a child, but his beard grows twine-coarse to his collarbones. You drop your hand from the magnets and set off, away from the bakery.

At the first court appearance you sat to the side while someone read the counts and pulled out photos. Across the aisle the little girl’s parents held each other, weeping. The wife had green hearing aids, and every so often her husband put his lips to her ear and whispered.

Sheppard hadn’t hit the girl, but her arm was blue. She wouldn’t have come along by herself, smart girl. She needed a nudge, a tug, a little extra help. When you picture Sheppard now, you picture that girl’s little forearm—a rotten thing shaped like your brother’s hand.

You cannot find an English guide pamphlet at the Heidelberg Palace. Marcie takes a French one, claiming she can read a little, but already in the courtyard she can't tell which doorway leads to the bathroom. She points to the entrance and spins the map. "Fuck it," she says, like she didn't spend the taxi ride crying into the collar of her raincoat. Her blush has soiled in fat trails. "Doesn't matter."

Marcie thinks her grandparents met here—not in front of the Ottheinrich building's rust-red facade but here in Heidelberg. Her grandfather was a tailor, and one of his suits is hanging in a bag in her closet at home. She tells you that it fits Sheppard and that sometimes he wears it on date nights. "When he first put it on, I couldn't breathe," she says, chin tilted to get a view of the facade's sculptural heroes. Someone nearby whispers, "David, Samson, Hercules . . ."

"Do you think that one's Hercules?" you ask, pointing to the statue of a man with a straight square nose, biceps and calves that'd make a mountain move, and a beast's jaw atop his head.

Marcie checks the pamphlet. "Doesn't say."

An inscription at the hero's feet describes the scene, but neither of you knows much German. Your specialties include hello, lost, and a couple of swear words because you needed something to laugh about while the plane shuddered through cotton-thick cloud coverage, low visibility, and the seat-belt light's amber warning sign. None of these words have come in handy so far, and in most cases you resort to charades to communicate with non-English-speaking locals. Marcie says she wishes she'd taken a class or bought a CD.

She decides maybe she'll stay. "I could train around for a bit. There are passes for that."

"Through Germany?"

"Maybe to Lisbon."

A couple poses near you for photos by the facade, and you step closer to Marcie to avoid the lens. "Then home?"

Marcie runs the pamphlet's crease under her fingernail. You tense, waiting for the cut. "Then home," she says. "I want to see a beach."

Inside the nearest building you drift behind a group of students in neatly steamed uniforms. Marcie touches her jacket pocket, waiting for it to buzz, but it won't of course. At best she'll catch the lawyer's report, which will say "We did what we could" or "It's the best we could hope for under the

circumstances.” That’s how it goes when you get caught with a missing fifth grader in your school bus fifty miles from her home.

“What did you think when you found out?” you ask her softly.

“I thought maybe it was a joke.” Marcie steps over to you to whisper back, close enough that your arms press together, and her coffee breath touches your hair.

“I thought I dreamed it,” you say.

A long wooden staircase runs alongside the world’s biggest wine barrel, and visitors crowd on top, looking down at the view. It feels strangely unsafe to be standing next to something so grand, as if you could be swallowed by the enormity of it.

Marcie touches her pocket again. You should put the phone in a bag or the money belt strapped tightly to your chest to give you both a break. The school group starts up the barrel’s stairs, and you itch at the belt, lean into her. Wonder scratches at the back of your teeth, begging to be let out. A thousand questions prepare to launch.

“Did they show you her photo?” you ask.

Why haven’t you mentioned this before—the horrible little photo, palm-sized and precious, that the officer handed you over the coffee table? She was wearing a purple polo shirt and a blue cardigan against a pale blue backdrop, and you can still picture her turned-up nose, transparent eyebrows, and missing top canines.

“She was last seen getting on Sheppard’s bus,” they said.

“Isn’t that normal?” you replied, the couch squeaking as you sat back. “It’s his job to drive kids.”

The officer cleared his throat, and that was the worst part—your final moment of not knowing. “She was last seen getting on Sheppard’s bus four blocks from the school in the middle of the day.” Kids often went that way at recess to buy technicolour slushies from the gas station, and they suspected that he was waiting.

“Waiting for her?” you asked.

The officer scratched his ear. “Waiting for any of them.”

As the kids begin to dance on the barrel’s top, more wine admirers shuffle in and stop to gape over the grandness of it all. Marcie nods, meaning yes, she saw the photo, and it feels as if you are sharing a secret.

“Wine?” she says, changing the topic. You want to know if she shook, screamed, or, like you, put the photo down like a corpse and closed her

eyes.

Waiting in line, it's hard not to imagine Sheppard here with Marcie, hand-in-hand, day drunk on Shiraz and Merlot, stealing fistfuls of each other under the barrel steps while tourists stomp overhead. You could have stayed behind to look after the fish, and they could have sent postcards that read "Wish you were here."

After seven glasses you ask, "Do you hate him?"

She scrunches her face, moves to the next table, and disappears behind the shoulders of strangers, lost in a swarm of chattering mouths. You follow the rush of bodies into the cobbled streets until you find her tugging the band of her t-strap heel. She pulls off the shoe and spreads her foot out on the concrete, and you notice that her nails are painted ladybug orange. "I think I hate him," she says when you walk up beside her. You want to say you hate him too, and you're ashamed to admit you don't. Even with an ocean between you and your brother, a tether has begun to form—a rope where you thought there was none.

A drum sounds down the road, and the crowd turns to watch, but even on your toes you can't see the player. You hear another beat, round like an O, and a percussion band soon ignites. Marcie holds her shoe in one hand while the other empties the last of her beer into the street. It floods over the soles of strangers, but no one seems to notice. An old cigarette butt washes away.

"Ow." She rubs the back of her head like she's hit it on something, but you missed the blow. Her hair knots at the crown as she scratches. "I've had too much," she says, patting her stomach. It puckers under the satin of her dress, bloated with wine and beer.

"Your hair," you say as you reach for it. Someone knocks into your back, and you step towards her. You could work out the tangles. You could put your fingers in the knots and pull them out.

The drumline approaches, and you and Marcie are swept along with the tide. Yellow and black costumes march towards you in parade formation from the crest of the road's hill, and the young boy leading the pack holds a long mallet or flute. He twirls it baton-like in his hands, knocking the yellow feather on his hat with each rotation.

You begin, "Do you think Sheppard . . ."

Marcie shakes her head and says something you can't hear under the beating chorus. Can't she picture Sheppard here in the middle of a parade,

the city's street lamps like deadbeat stars? He'd climb a lamppost for a better view and call down reports of who to watch for or who is handing out candy or flyers. He'd have stopped you both at four glasses, maybe three, and kept you from getting crushed in the mass of people. Sheppard has an eye for such things.

You want to ask if she knew—if she ever smelled the need in him across the dinner table, innocently eating his carrots, and pretended not to notice. Did he kiss her goodbye the morning before he left? Did she know as soon as the doorbell rang that he was gone? Or are you at fault? Does she hate you for knowing him longer and not knowing him at all? Are you a monster for missing him?

Those standing closer to the parade back up as a neon float approaches, and their synchronized steps push Marcie into you, knees against knees. She puts her hand over your lips. "No Sheppard," she says. Then one of her hips sinks low, unsupported and short, and she shifts on her toes to keep balance. You watch her watch you. This must be the longest she's looked at you on this side of the Atlantic, eyes wine-warm and open even with her scowl. You wonder if she sees Sheppard's face in yours. Surely you search for him in her negative space—his hands on her hips, his chin in the crescent of her neck. He is almost here. You almost feel him.

Then she is kissing you hard, like she'll chew through to bone. Instinct pushes you back by the collar, gravity shifts, and your spine straightens against a brick wall. The crowd startles alive in violent racket, and Marcie grips your wrists like locks. Isn't this what you wanted: to get to know your brother's wife?

She groans, you unlatch, and both of you heave for breath. She drops her shoe at your feet, and her cheeks, colourless and pale, puff in and out. "Your shoe," you say, but she can't hear you. Then she pulls off the other with a sharp tug and throws it into the middle of the parade, her arm forming a balletic arc in the swing. Her feet turtle in the chill, and you try to remember if she brought other shoes or if those were gifts from Sheppard. Either way, the parade opens its mouth and swallows.

Marcie's phone chimes a battery warning when you reach the lobby of the hotel. Your teeth feel slick, and your lips are dried out, but the wine has started its exit, slinking away, its work done. Marcie puts her hand on your shoulder, still unstable. "Room?" she asks, meaning do you remember

which room is yours, and do you have the key?

The key is lost in your coat pockets, as you have collected too many pieces of the day: tickets from the castle, drink vouchers, bus stubs, receipts, pamphlets, the corner of a colourful flyer that spoke to you, the plastic label from a water bottle, a ruby-coloured cork. “Here,” you say as you mould Marcie’s palms into a cup and pile the mementos inside. You eventually find it, and when you get to the room she dumps your haul onto the desk before throwing herself onto the bed. “I should have warned you that I hog blankets. Charge my phone?”

You take the weight of it in your palm, bobbing it up and down. A couple clicks and you’ll have Wi-Fi again, but she’s already closed her eyes, ready for sleep. The soles of her feet, black and brown and scratched at the heels, hang off the end of the bed. You nudge them, and she curls towards the centre. You could suggest she change—she’s packed pyjamas after all—but her chest pitches slow breaths, so you turn on the television and shut off the lights.

You oscillate between channels until something sticks: a German nature show with inconsistent subtitles. Scientists point over the lip of a tropical leaf to a small, dime-sized toad. Someone has a net. As they lower it over the frog, the bed quakes—not the soft warbles of a crack, but the sharp gasps of a shatter, as if all the pieces of Marcie have pulled apart at a molecular level. The television burbles over her, but not loud enough; guests next door must hear the sobs and imagine terrible things, none as terrible as the truth. Her fists grip the back of your blouse, her knuckles dig into your spine like round thorns, and her fingers burrow into your ribs. You set down her phone and debate turning over. Instead, you turn the television up, crawl under the covers without uprooting her hands, and let her beat into your back. At first her fist seems soft, unsure—almost like a knock on the door. Then it becomes harder and harder, and your ribs wonder why. You let her howl under the blanket, and your skin blooms dark as she punches, spreading the rot.

Your spine complains in the morning’s early hours, hunched over your duffel for clothes. You caught a look at the bruise in the mirror, the violet rash of Marcie’s anger, but she doesn’t say anything—not even now, with your back naked towards her, when you know she must see. It cannot be difficult to recognize your fist in someone else’s skin. When you turn, she still has on last night’s dress. The cream satin has greyed under the folds of her

arms, and she looks tired and bloated with misery.

You flatten your shirt collar and hook the button of your jeans, all the while letting her watch, even when you wince bending over to tug the fly. This tells her no, you won't say a thing. This too will be your secret.

"I'm going to the botanical garden," she says as she yanks her phone from its chord and scrolls. "I need some time."

"We can do that," you say and shiver into the cool sleeves of your coat.

She moves away from the sight of you, back angled to silhouette in the window. "No, I need some time to myself."

Shouldn't you argue? You consider this on your way out, but you leave her in the room curled over the ghost of Sheppard or at least the memory of him.

Outside, wind dries the city. There is no rain, but you pull up your hood to block the breeze. You have twelve hours until your flight. By the time you return for your bags, Marcie will be gone. She will refund or forfeit her plane ticket, find a beach or a town that suits her, and not return for months. You will fly back to the house—their house—and plug in the fish tank. You will crush the ladybugs and vacuum the floors. When the neighbours wonder where Marcie has gone, she will agree to let you stay there. You can live inside your brother's old life and wear it like skin. You can spend your days under the curse of your biology, gorge yourself on warning signs, and box them away.

You dig yourself into street cobbles until three, find a bakery, and swallow cream cheese icing by the mouthful. You buy a refrigerator magnet, a postcard, and a stamp. You write less than a paragraph to Sheppard—barely a sentence, not much more than a word—and let Marcie pass you the secret as she leaves in silence. It fits in the palm of your hand.