

Chad Taylor / FIRE IN THE HOLE (1995)

It goes like this: Emma plays violin. Emma practices at the upstairs window, scales and descends. Always on time with her rent. Runs. Thumps across the floor – the ceiling – to answer the phone. Talks for hours and hours. She collects the mail wearing cut-off jeans and trainers, black trainers with their tongues hanging out. But when she has recitals she stumbles down the steps in medium heels. And ties her hair; scrapes it back from her forehead for the walk to university, to music school. The violin's tapering case, worn leather beneath the slender arm of her one black jacket, velvet pinched at the waist, smooth buttons. Bach, she plays, mostly. Partitas. Partita in E. And she looks young then, when she plays it. Which she is.

So Emma says, come up and hear me play, be a guest to my recital. In my one black jacket, my velvet jacket.

My heart is in my mouth. Behind my smile and my teeth and my cap and my filling and my bridge and underneath my tongue, wet with saliva.

Sometimes Emma runs a long way and comes back sweating. Returns wet and happy as if she could start all over again.

I have this thing, right? I have this thing if you will just, if you will just put your arms in the sleeves. They're tight, these sleeves; the lining is threadbare. They were once the sleeves I think of a skinny young man, a geeky adolescent dressed under protest, but now these sleeves they are transformed because they are too short for your thin white wrists and you look so good with that inch of skin exposed, you look gamine and clean to the touch. You look as if you are fifteen feet tall. I don't know that in metres. Five metres I think. I know it's ridiculous.

You have bones in your hands like a bird's.

You're good Emma I like you you're good. I like holding your face in my hands. You have the face of a sweet child. Clapsed in my hands as I kiss your eyes. Like this. There and there. Like that. I like it when you gulp wine, bang glasses on the kitchen table, toss your head, listen, drink some more, rest your cheek in your hand,

laugh at my jokes, giggle and top up my glass, draw back the sheets, hike up your pants in the crack between your cheeks.

I have this thing, right? The jacket buttoned over your wet skin. Each onyx pebble twisted through its sewn slit. Black plastic, is it? Alright, black plastic. Just button it, will you? The three buttons. Below the navel; slightly above the navel; slightly beneath your breasts. Fingers sticking. And now: press the jacket flat on your stomach, your stomach smooth after running, smooth with food and sleep and cups of tea. You want some more toast? I'll make some more toast. Marmalade. Jam. Melted butter.

You know with the long skirt... the long skirt is kind of tight, too tight I think. Do you put it on after the jacket or before? Okay then take the jacket off. Now: the skirt, and then the jacket again. Good. The skirt is good, like an old skirt, Victorian, restrictive. Like a nun's skirt. Lycra, is it? Well they didn't have lycra then.

Turn and let me see the jacket and the way it curves. It has straight shoulders pinching slightly at the top of the sleeves and it has extended lapels like bat's wings. The lapels come down narrow and pinch again at the three buttons and then spread apart, split into a V with rounded corners. The waist is darted, three darts, pretty diamonds snicked to draw the back panel impressed to the curve of your spine.

I have this thing, right? The noise of your medium heels down the concrete steps as I am sleeping first thing, and I dream of the cold air sneaking in the gap between your skin and the threadbare lining and you have nothing on beneath the jacket and it is tight and in summer the fabric is cooled by the dead cool breeze of a new morning, petite half-moons of sweat in the armpits: salt and velvet. And I have this other thing about you in the black top, when it shines and feels like something poured from a bottle, something about to dry.

You have the heels there, beneath the end of the bed. If you extend your foot like that you can slip them on. As you do. Pulling back your hair in strands, my nails combing the strands into lines maybe an eighth of an inch wide. In metric? Millimetres. Merely.

I like to watch you walk the room, one foot placed before the other. This is to

the sound of recorded music, a silver disc in a ghetto-blaster. But the first time was with the violin, when you offered to play. I have this thing, right? I am sleeping and I dream it again. You say: come on up, your medium heels clicking on the cement steps and my fingers tracing the handrail painted white many times to conceal its rust. You do not turn around, you don't offer anything to drink. The imperfect hostess. You are too young for manners, for saying good evening and talking about the weather, Emma. Please pass the wine, Emma, please pass it across the bed – a drop runs down the neck to touch your fingers – and I will tell you what happens. Again and again.

This is the bit that goes under your chin, Emma says. This part is to be cradled loosely in your hands, held by the points of your fingers. Here you wind the strings tightly. And this is where you draw the bow. This is a song about love, mostly. This is a love song. Bach: Partita in E. Do you love that music? I love that music. And her smile spreads like a spilt drink: pretty soon it is over everything.

I have this thing, right? When you play, your back straightens. You breathe in and your chest swells and your breasts press against the lapels and at that moment I reach for you, reach deep into the velvet for as much of you as can be gently pressed with one stretched palm. The music stops. This jacket is second-hand, Emma. Think of all the people who have sweated in it before now. And at the very thought you unbutton it and let it fall and it slips from your front and your shoulder and your right arm and the bow hangs silent from the tight cuff and you turn on the balls of your feet and your spine is long and bare and I am in your mouth and the jacket snags on your left hand and cloaks the violin, its felt-smoothness muffling the wood.

You sit knock-kneed to piss, did you know that?

Listen: I didn't consider it straight away, when I saw you. I saw you many times but the thing that made me change, made me decide was your *sound*. Voices muffled on the telephone. Television too loud. Feet shifting on the shower basin. Your cunt's soft, sucking kiss.

You say you were shaking but I was the one shaking. I feel old. I tremble. My thoughts are disordered by sexual union. The fucking shakes up my brain. And my

mind wanders, always. Afterwards. After bending flesh in my hands, feeling your back muscles flex and twist and arch and roll and the taste of your dark sweet dive. Thumbs hooked in the lip of your skirt. And bare feet and you sweat and you concentrate concentrate on making your muscles happy and then that's it, freedom, the bolt unloosed, the apple split. Audience applause. And the stink of skin close, of sweat and makeup licked away. And we are free after that, school's out, and you lie beneath with your hair spread on the pillow like a blonde lily and we can talk, then. We talk about anything.

I don't want to go but I will go.

As much of you as I can press beneath one stretched palm, it is not very much. You are thin and our memories are tiny. The noise of your feet. The chime of the receiver placed back on the hook. The breath through your nostrils as you sleep, your head in the sheets.

This is a song about love, mostly. This is a song for the tone-deaf and the clumsy and the awkward who sing in spite of it. This is a song which is rich and bright and warm in a dark place. Not a pale or sophisticated song, not complex. This is a song for fire in the belly. You might say. If you talked like that. If you needed to say anything at all. Whereas mostly it was left unsaid. Mostly it was just movement and saltwater and the taste of lipstick twelve hours old. But I fill it with words regardless. With disregard.

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First thing, I dream of the gap between your skin and the threadbare lining and you have nothing on beneath the jacket and it is tight against your body and in summer the velvet is cold, cold with the memory of sweat.

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Author's note: FIRE IN THE HOLE was originally published as part of the short story collection THE MAN WHO WASN'T FEELING HIMSELF (1995).

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