



into
my
arms

KYLIE LADD

'a strong, intelligent, subtle and wise new voice ... being compared with Christos Tsiolkas, Malcolm Knox and Helen Garner' BOOKTOPIA

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A love story is not about those who lose their heart but about those who find that sullen inhabitant who, when it is stumbled upon, means the body can fool no one, can fool nothing—not the wisdom of sleep or the habit of social graces. It is a consuming of oneself and the past.

MICHAEL ONDAATJE, *THE ENGLISH PATIENT*

I don't believe in an interventionist God
But I know, darling, that you do
But if I did I would kneel down and ask Him
Not to intervene when it came to you
Not to touch a hair on your head
To leave you as you are
And if He felt He had to direct you
Then direct you into my arms

Into my arms, O Lord
Into my arms, O Lord
Into my arms, O Lord
Into my arms.

NICK CAVE, 'INTO MY ARMS'

September 2009

1

Skye saw the blood before she felt the pain. It surprised her, the sudden red welling near the base of her thumb, smearing the tile she was holding up to demonstrate her technique. Some technique.

‘Damn!’ she exclaimed. She would have said something stronger, except she was surrounded by a class of grade five students, all eager ears and impressionable minds.

‘Bet that hurt, miss,’ remarked a tow-headed boy at the front of the group. Louis, she thought it was. She was still learning their names. She nodded, sucking at the webbing between her thumb and forefinger, willing herself not to cry. Shit. She’d been showing the children how to use tile clippers to shape the materials for the mosaic they’d be working on together, but now all they’d remember from the lesson was her clumsiness.

‘Perhaps you should rinse it under the tap,’ ventured a serious-looking girl. Rowena. Skye knew that one. Rowena was a teacher-pleaser; she’d spent their whole first class together

last week waving her hand in the air and wearing a pained expression whenever another student got an answer wrong.

‘Good idea,’ said Skye, removing her injured hand from her mouth with as much dignity as she could muster and hoping she wouldn’t bleed on the desk. ‘The clippers slipped,’ she added. ‘They can do that, particularly when you’re using tiles with a high glaze. I was about to warn you all to be careful.’

Rowena nodded. She’d remember.

Blood was still oozing from the gash as Skye washed it at the sink in the corner of the art room. Bending forward so that her long hair screened her from the gaze of her students, she surreptitiously sucked at it again, then inspected the wound more closely. The cut was deep, almost down to the tendon. It probably needed a stitch or two, but there was no way that was going to happen. Stitches meant a trip to the principal’s office, meant admitting her carelessness and standing around awkwardly while a replacement teacher was found. Stitches begat incident reports and raised eyebrows; stitches eroded confidence and the possibility of further work when this grant had run its course. And she’d been so thrilled to get the grant, given her limited experience and that the hours could be juggled with her job at the gym.

‘Do you need any help? Is it still bleeding?’ asked Rowena, materialising at her side. She was probably anxious that the class had been left for three minutes without a teacher, thought Skye; then she saw the concern on the girl’s face and softened.

‘It hurts,’ she admitted. ‘I think it’s almost stopped, but I could use a bandage. Do you know where they’re kept?’

Rowena shook her head. ‘Not in here. There’s a first aid kit in our classroom though. Should I go and get it?’

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‘That would be great,’ said Skye, turning off the tap and wrapping a paper towel around her hand. It bloomed pink as it came in contact with her thumb, the stain spreading like a Rorschach blot.

Rowena set off, stopping only to admonish Louis for throwing crayons at another boy. He waited until she had finished and was a good five paces away before picking up another, taking careful aim and hitting her squarely in the back, between the shoulder blades. Rowena, Skye was impressed to note, didn’t even turn around.

Five minutes later Rowena hadn’t returned, and Skye was onto her third paper towel. Though she’d managed to get the class to go back to their work, she was beginning to get nervous. Should she still be teaching? Was there a blood rule, like in football? A dark-skinned boy kept glancing at her hand, dropping his eyes whenever she tried to smile back reassuringly. Yet when the door finally opened, Skye felt more annoyed than relieved. Rowena had brought another adult with her, probably a teacher. She hoped he wouldn’t talk about this in the staffroom.

‘Miss Holt, Mr Cunningham said he should come with me,’ said Rowena. ‘He was in the classroom when I went to get the bandaids.’

The man stepped forward with his hand outstretched, then dropped it when he saw Skye’s makeshift dressing. He placed a white box on her desk.

‘Ben Cunningham,’ he said. ‘I was just doing some lesson planning. When Rowena told me she needed the first aid kit I thought I should probably have a look. Lucky it’s only a teacher who got hurt, and not one of the kids.’ He smiled to show he was joking.

Skye didn't smile back. She was too surprised, her mind racing. 'Don't I know you from somewhere?' she blurted.

'I don't think so,' he said, looking confused. 'I've only been at the school since the start of the year. You're our new artist in residence, right?'

Skye hesitated. It seemed such a serious title for what she was actually doing: working one day a week with the two grade-five classes to create a mosaic on a bare concrete flank of the tuckshop. 'Just for this term, yes.' She nodded. 'And I'm clearly off to a great start.'

Ben laughed. 'Things can only get better. If it's any consolation, my guys all seem really excited about the project. When they came back from your class last week they didn't stop talking about it.'

Skye barely heard him, so intently was she trying to figure out where she knew him from. Brown hair, brown eyes, medium build, broad smile . . . He seemed so familiar she was sure they must have met. 'You don't have a daughter who does gymnastics, do you?' she asked.

Ben looked startled. 'No kids here. 5C is enough for me.'

'Oh,' Skye mumbled, still perplexed. 'I teach at the Y, three days a week. I thought I might have known you from there. It's so hard to keep track of all the parents, though mostly it's the mums who bring the children in, of course . . .'

She was rambling, but she couldn't seem to stop. It was infuriating, recognising his face but not being able to place him. This must be how her father had felt at the end of his illness, she thought, when the words that he wanted seemed always out of reach—close but untouchable, like birds in a tree.

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‘How did it happen?’ asked Ben as he peeled back the sodden paper towel and bent over Skye’s injury to examine it. It seemed to her somehow a courtly gesture—anyone watching them might have thought he was about to turn over her hand and kiss it, maybe pledge his troth. She glanced around the art room, but 5C’s eyes were on their workbooks, their designs for the mosaic just beginning to take shape.

‘I wasn’t holding the tile clippers tightly enough,’ Skye admitted. ‘They were sharper than I’m used to.’

‘I can tell. It’s pretty nasty.’ Ben looked up, and she was struck by the velvety brown of his eyes. Eyes like Arran’s. Vegemite eyes, her father used to call them. ‘Sure you don’t want to go to hospital? I could take you after school, if you don’t want to leave your classes.’

Skye shook her head. She appreciated the offer, but she was due at the Y at four, and Hamish wouldn’t be impressed if he had to swap her shift at short notice. ‘I have to teach,’ she explained. ‘The gymnastics, like I said. It’s hard to get someone to fill in. Can’t you just put a bandaid on it?’

‘I can do better than that.’ Ben rummaged through the first aid kit and drew out something that looked like a doll-sized bow tie. ‘Presenting the butterfly bandage,’ he said with a flourish, then added, ‘St John’s Ambulance Senior First Aid certificate: workplace level two. I’ve been dying to put it into practice.’

Skye laughed. ‘You don’t get out much, do you?’

‘It was offered as part of the course last year,’ he said, pressing the edges of her cut firmly together. A few more drops of blood appeared, and he dabbed at them gently.

‘Last year?’ Skye said, not following.

‘Teacher training,’ Ben replied. He positioned one white wing of the bandage just below the cut, smoothed it down, then stretched the middle section up and over the breach in the webbing, deftly anchoring it on the other side. ‘There,’ he said with satisfaction. ‘The trick is to keep it tight. And don’t try any cartwheels for a week or two.’

‘So you’re only just qualified?’ Skye asked. ‘This is your first year out?’ She would have guessed he was in his mid-twenties, like her, not fresh out of uni.

‘Yeah,’ he said, tilting his head as though admiring his work. ‘I did a few years of science before I transferred to teaching. I wanted to get into vet school.’

‘What happened?’

‘Didn’t get the marks.’ He shrugged, then reached back into the kit. ‘I’m going to put another one on, at a different angle, just to be sure.’

‘I think you’ve missed your calling,’ Skye said as he adeptly taped the second butterfly strip in place.

‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Ben grinned. ‘Primary teaching, vet science—there’s not much difference. I’m still caring for animals.’

At Skye’s laugh Rowena looked up, startled. She swore the girl would have shushed her if she’d dared.

Later, after the bell had rung and the class had filed out, Skye tidied up the art room, tucking stools under benches, returning errant pencils to a central jar. As she closed the supply cupboard she noticed a smudge of dried blood on the back of her wrist, and went to wash it off. That would be another scar to add to her collection, she thought, careful to keep the water away from her new bandage. There was the raised white line under her chin from the time she’d fallen off the beam while competing,

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and her shins and elbows bore the evidence of similar scrapes over the years. A filigree of faint purple streaks flowered around her left knee, testimony to the reconstruction she'd undergone some years ago, while a burn on the underside of her forearm was the legacy of not paying attention while cooking rice. Some boy had just dumped her and she was distracted, distraught. Funny that she couldn't even remember his name now, though she did recall how her mother had comforted her as she wept in her arms. It was before she first left home; twenty, she must have been, and Nell rocking her and stroking her hair and telling her that scars don't kill, they teach. Skye smiled at the memory, glanced up into the small paint-speckled mirror hanging above the sink and suddenly realised who Ben reminded her of.

2

Hamish felt Jess jump up from where she was lying on his feet, and knew that Skye was in the building; Skye was the only one she got up for. He always wondered how Jess knew, with the entrance to the gym along the corridor and down four stairs. Could she smell Skye, even from that distance, or was there something about the way Skye came to work—banging the door, hurrying in, invariably a few minutes late?

‘Who’s coming, girl? Who is it?’ he asked the border collie, now standing by his desk watching the door. Jess waved her tail in response but wouldn’t be drawn into turning round for a pat. Funny how Skye was her favourite, though she only saw her at the gym and on weekends. Hamish was the one Jess lived with, after all, and had done since she was six weeks old, when Skye had given her to him to mark their first anniversary. At the time he’d been annoyed and hadn’t bothered to hide it.

‘A puppy? God, Skye, I can’t look after a puppy,’ he’d protested when she thrust the squirming bundle into his arms.

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‘Yes, you can,’ she’d replied, unperturbed. ‘She can keep you company while you’re studying, and you can take her with you when you go for a run. I thought she could also have her own spot at the Y, seeing as you’re there so much—we’ll get her a basket, keep it at reception. I’m sure Ian won’t mind.’

Ian, of course, had minded, and pointed out that he was running a fitness centre, not a pet shop. Still, two months later, when he left for another position and Hamish was promoted to assistant manager, the dog had moved into his office with him and somehow become a fixture around the place.

‘See?’ Skye had said. ‘I told you it would all work out. You’re too pessimistic sometimes.’

Hamish had been tempted to tell her that next time she wanted to surprise him maybe she could just take him out for dinner, but he’d bitten his tongue. It *had* worked out. Jess spent her days at the Y with him, lay on his feet while he juggled staff rosters or studied, and was always waiting for him, thumping her tail, when he got home after his uni classes at night. She was used to having him around, and it bothered him to imagine leaving her on her own all day next year once he’d finished his degree and secured the sort of job where dogs weren’t allowed in the building, but he pushed the thought from his mind.

Skye burst through the door, her gym bag over one shoulder. ‘Sorry I’m late,’ she said, bending down to fondle Jess’s ears. The dog arched her back ecstatically at the attention. Skye straightened up and glanced at the clock over Hamish’s desk. ‘Actually, I’m not that late,’ she amended. ‘Not for me, anyway.’

‘Not for you,’ Hamish agreed, standing up from his desk and coming around to kiss her. ‘You’re not changed yet though.’

‘Too hard at school,’ she said, setting her bag down and pushing Jess away as the dog took the opportunity to lick her face. ‘My class took forever packing up, so I didn’t have a chance. Hey, talking about school, the weirdest thing happened to me today—’

‘What have you done to your hand?’ Hamish cut her off, noticing the white bandage against Jess’s dark fur. ‘Are you OK?’

‘Just an accident in class.’ Skye held it out to show him. ‘I told the school what to order before I started, but then forgot that that meant everything would be new and sharp, not like my stuff at home. The tile clippers got me. I’ll have to wear them down somehow before I hand them out to the kids, or else they’ll all be missing digits before we’ve got anything on the wall.’

She wanted him to laugh with her, Hamish knew, but there wasn’t anything to laugh about. Any sort of cut was serious. ‘How are you going to teach?’ he asked. ‘You won’t be able to do anything with your hand like that. You should have rung me—I could have called in Vanessa or Louise to take your class.’ He sighed. ‘Technically, you shouldn’t even be spotting with your hand like that. And what about helping them with their back walkovers, or whatever it is they’re up to?’

Skye pulled her hand away and reached down to snatch her bag back up from the floor. ‘Stop making such a fuss!’ she snapped. ‘This is just like you—always worrying. It’ll be better in another week or so, and until then I’m perfectly capable of doing a back walkover with one hand.’

She went to leave but Hamish jumped in front of her.

‘OK, OK, I’m sorry,’ he said, though he wasn’t really. Skye couldn’t do a handstand with that injury, for fear of opening up the cut again; couldn’t use the vault or the bars, help a student

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with her dismount. He had no idea why he was apologising; for some reason, with Skye he was always the one who said sorry first. 'Where are you going?'

'To get changed,' Skye snapped. 'I'm late, remember?'

Jess sat on the floor between them, anxiously glancing from one to the other.

Hamish tried again. 'What were you going to tell me earlier, about what happened at school?'

'It doesn't matter.' Skye bent down to rub Jess's head. 'See you later, girl. Be good.' She left, he noticed, without a word or even a glance at him.

For the next half hour Hamish stared diligently at the spreadsheet in front of him. He needed to sort out the rosters for next term. Louise had told him she could no longer work Tuesdays, and it looked as if there were going to be enough enrolments for a new boys intermediate class. Maybe Dan could teach it, he mused, though he'd have to drop one of his spin classes. Hamish didn't think that would bother him; Dan had recently complained that one of the middle-aged women in his Thursday night group seemed to be getting a little . . . attached. That was the word he'd used. Hanging around to talk to Dan after class; showing up early with a faceful of make-up, despite the fact that she would sweat it off within the first ten minutes. The benefits or drawbacks of being a gym instructor, depending on your point of view. Similar things had happened to Hamish when he'd started at the centre as a personal trainer. He didn't miss those days. He was happier behind a desk.

Usually he was anyway, but today something wasn't right. He fiddled some more with the spreadsheet, then pushed the mouse aside. He couldn't concentrate. Jess dozed at his feet,

the computer hummed softly; he should have been able to finish the roster in five minutes, but all he could think about was Skye. Skye angry at him for being concerned about her injury, Skye stalking out of his office without looking back. Oh, it was nothing, he knew. They argued all the time, and things were always fine afterwards—that was just Skye. Still, it unsettled him. He didn't like conflict. Hamish stared down at his desk. This, he reminded himself, was why they weren't living together. With his final exams looming he didn't need any distractions, and there was no doubt that Skye was just that: a wonderful, impetuous distraction. Besides, he reasoned, it was good that she'd moved back home to live with her mother. They'd needed each other since Charlie had died—both Nell and Skye were still grieving. Give it another six months; with any luck, by that time she'd be feeling better and he'd have a real job, away from the gym. Things would be easier when they could spend time together without the pressures of his course, when he no longer had to be her boss. Skye could maybe drop some of her sessions at the Y, spend more time on her art; he'd work regular hours and leave behind this eternal grinding loop of uni, gym and study. They'd walk Jess together in the evenings. Hamish smiled. After a decade of coming to work in shorts and t-shirts, he was even looking forward to wearing a suit.

Ten minutes later, the roster still uncompleted, Hamish found himself in the spectators' gallery above the main gym, trying to catch a glimpse of Skye. He was responsible for her class, he'd told himself on the way up the stairs, Jess padding beside him; he needed to check she could still teach with her injured hand. But who was he kidding? All he really wanted was a wave or a nod from her, something to smooth things over between

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them so he could get back to work. Jess settled herself on the floor, lowering her head to her paws with an air of resignation.

It took him a minute to spot her amid the blur of tracksuits and leotards. She was demonstrating a routine on the mat next to one of the beams: leg swing mount, moving into a snap turn. She paused to make sure the class was paying attention, executed a meticulous arabesque, then concluded the sequence with a switch leap. Two of the students clapped, and with a grin and a flourish Skye sank effortlessly into the splits.

She was a natural performer. He'd admired that in her from the moment they met. As the staff coordinator when she was first employed, Hamish had been asked to sit in on a few of her classes to make sure she was as capable as her references suggested. Most new teachers would have been nervous in such a situation, aware they were on probation, but Skye had seemed to relish the extra attention. He remembered watching her with the senior girls as she took them step by step through a complicated manoeuvre on the bars. Her legs were strong and shapely from years of training; her ash-blonde ponytail danced; her hands moved fluidly from one position to the next: up, over, grip, regrip, spin, dismount. And all the time she smiled. Not in that false, lip-glossed competition way, but with genuine enjoyment, because she was good and she knew it, because they were watching and she could make her slender, supple body do whatever she chose.

Hamish knew the feeling, knew it well, though he had never exulted in it the way Skye did. He'd been in high school when he first realised he could succeed at any sport he turned his hand to. With his long legs and lean frame, athletics came easily to him, but so too did rugby, swimming, basketball . . . He was

pretty good at his schoolwork, but after a while no one seemed to care about that, not even his teachers. They just wanted to talk about the try he'd scored, or the new record he'd set, and whether he thought the first eighteen might finally have a chance of beating arch rivals Scotch College. By the time he was in year twelve, he was captain of five different teams and almost too busy to study. It made sense to apply for a degree in physical education. The entrance score was low, and it was what he was best at. Everyone had always told him so.

Four years later he wished he hadn't listened to them. Working at the gym had been fun for a while, but then started to bore him. He took a year off to travel, and when he got back worked as a personal trainer. The money was good, but even that palled after a while. He didn't much care about his clients' pinch-test results; he'd never cared about his own. He wanted to do something with his brain, he realised, not just his body. Moving into management helped for a bit, and then one day a middle-aged man Hamish was preparing for a marathon mentioned that he was a futures trader. As they ran together his client explained the industry and what he did all day; maybe Hamish should look into it, he suggested. He could study part time while he worked at the gym. The idea appealed, and then stuck fast. A future was what Hamish needed, after all. He'd been good at maths at school, he reasoned, at least on those rare occasions when he wasn't training or competing, and this had the advantage of longevity. Fitness was a young person's game, and he was in his thirties now. Recently, whenever he filled in for an absent instructor his lower back ached afterwards; his knees had begun to seize up in cold weather. None of that would matter in an office. Flesh was weak. He needed a plan B.

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Maybe Skye's art could be that for her, Hamish thought as he moved to the front of the spectators' gallery, hoping she'd spot him. After all, it was another form of exhibitionism; she would still be on display. Nell seemed to think Skye had some talent, and as a painter herself she should probably know. Hamish had no idea. All the same, he'd encouraged her with it, because she couldn't teach gym forever.

Not that you could tell Skye that, of course. The only time he'd dared suggest such a possibility—that one day her limbs might fail her or arthritis set in—she'd been immediately offended. The trouble was that she thought she was unique, immune; imagined she'd always be able to do exactly what she pleased. Hamish found himself thinking about the first time they'd slept together, just a few weeks after those probation classes. She'd certainly done as she liked then; she knew what she wanted and how to achieve it. He'd been well aware of the attraction between them, and had been planning to ask her out. If he'd considered seduction at all, it was in terms of dinner, crisp sheets, candlelight . . . And then, after one of her evening classes, Skye hauled him into the storage area for the mats, had his shorts down and her hand round his cock before he could even be sure the door was shut. He hadn't completely enjoyed it, to be honest, though the smell of foam still turned him on. Skye's students had left and the gym was emptying, but the rhythmic thump of a step class continued next door, and with it the fear that at any moment someone might burst in and catch him screwing his staff. Skye, of course, hadn't been bothered. She'd taken charge, despite the seven-year age gap between them, despite the step class and the unlocked door and her sports bra that he couldn't undo. Later, when he knew her better, Hamish

realised that the risk was part of the appeal. Unlike him, Skye got a kick out of taking chances, and probably wouldn't have minded being caught. Perhaps, he wondered, she might even have enjoyed it, felt as if she was back in front of the judges, legs splayed, toes pointed.

'Are you hiding out from the boss or perverting on the students?'

It was Vanessa, one of the other instructors, who'd sneaked up behind him while he was lost in thought.

Hamish moved closer to the guard rail to hide his erection. 'Neither,' he protested. There were plenty of opportunities for voyeurism in his job, but the level ten girls below, all flat chests and hipbones, did nothing for him.

'Just as well,' cautioned Vanessa, then peered down into the gym herself, where Skye was coaching her class through a sequence of flip-flops. She observed for a moment, then said, 'I know who you're watching. She's a good teacher, isn't she? They all love her.'

'You're a good teacher too,' Hamish responded automatically. And Vanessa was, he thought, but Skye was better. It wasn't just about showing off; she was passionate about the things she taught, and that made up for her lack of formal qualifications.

'I bet you say that to all the girls.' Vanessa laughed, standing a little too close to him. She wasn't wearing very much, he noticed, just a crop top and a tiny pair of shorts.

'Did you need me?' he asked, returning his gaze to the bars and mats.

'Yeah,' she said. 'I want to swap a class next week if I can. Wednesday, at five, the mixed junior development group. I've got an appointment I can't get out of.'

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She expected him to ask her about it, he could tell, but he couldn't be bothered. All the instructors were casuals, and they were always swapping classes. He'd lost interest in their reasons years ago. 'I'll see what I can do,' he replied. 'Can you think of anyone who could take your place?'

'Dan might,' Vanessa said. 'He told me he wanted to do more gym stuff . . . or what about your girlfriend?'

'Skye doesn't have the time now she's got her arts job as well. That's her preparation day.'

'Oh, I forgot about that,' said Vanessa. 'So she's not here as often, then. Do you get lonely in that office of yours?'

Hamish snorted. 'Not much chance of that. There are always people like you coming in to disturb me.' Then he softened, and added, 'I'll ask Dan about that class, if you like.'

'You're a sweetheart. I owe you.' She blew him a kiss and turned to go, but tripped over Jess stretched out on the floor. The dog's aggrieved yelp made the gymnasts look up, and Skye, spotting Hamish, smiled and waved. Then she held up one finger, as if instructing him to watch, and moved fluidly into a back walkover. A one-handed back walkover, Hamish noted wryly. Not many people could pull those off. He was torn between admiration and annoyance. She couldn't be told; she always had to prove her point. Beside him, Vanessa rolled her eyes and bent to apologise to Jess.