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Charnel House Lover

by Cassandra Atherton

When Scottish darling left me I made a man out of plasticine to love. He was easy to manipulate. I made him a painter. Not a poet. Never a poet. Poets leave. For sunrises. For the feeling of sand between their toes. For red wine and cheap pizza. Painters stick with their canvas. This time I am the canvas. Though for years I preferred to be a tabula rasa. I forgot about the PRB. I forgot about Momartre and Modigliani. I forgot because I had been with poets too long. What if I freeze to death in a bath playing Ophelia for him? What if he kills me and buries me with his paintings this time? What if he digs me up and my hair isn't long and golden? All I ever wanted was a Heathcliff to bash out the side of my coffin. Mixed ashes. Ash Wednesday. "Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust". A grainy grey cross under my thick fringe. Keeping me Catholic. Reminding me to cross my legs and wear white. But then I met Protestants. Scottish Darling corrupted me with Presbyterianism and the bundler destroyed Puritanism with postcards and *Puritans at Play*.

I won't think about it. I'll only think about the foppish hair I shaped from my first lover, the priest; the slim hips from my second lover, the violinist; the long fingers from my third, the tinker; the blue Danube eyes from my fourth, the tailor; the square teeth from my fifth and sixth, the soldier and sailor; the golden skin from my sixth, the poet; the pointy nose from my seventh, the dramaturge and the smooth penis from my eighth, the bundler. My plasticine lover is perfect.

Perhaps I should have made him a cellist instead of a painter. Mahogany, honey and smooth. Like polished floorboards. Then I could have enjoyed his calloused fingertips beating in time inside me. Callous. Calamine lotion, pink and thick. A conductor's baton. But I made him a painter because I had never made love to a painter. He will tell me he loves me on the third date. I will shape his mouth so that the words will come out naturally, poetically, confidently. There will be no silence after we make love. I won't make the same mistakes. He will go to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with me and I will try to appease the ghost of lovers past. Ebenezer. We will take the same blanket. Red and black tartan. Ingrained with wax from Carols by Candlelight. My nana told me that talcum powder will remove the wax but I can't bear to do it. It reminds me too much of the first time. The first *Midsummer Night's Dream* with the red and black tartan skirt in chiffon. With a "Don't Stop" hexagonal bracelet and coffee at La Notte. I was Titania and I craved for him to be Oberon. He was supposed to say, "Ill met my moonlight proud Titania". But how could he? He was Bottom and I was "a cankerblossom".

My plasticine man takes me to Ici. He squishes my hand as we cross the road. Butterfly-shaped pods illuminated in the shadows. The embryo, a dark oval crushed between the paper-thin membrane, reaches for me. It cries, "Plasticine children". I think of crème caramel and nectarines. I wrote a story about nectarines once. The ones that are white in the centre, not the yellow ones. So succulent that I begin to wonder if a man could be carved out of a nectarine. The spiky stone a reminder. Core. Flesh caught between the grooves in the soggy brown stone. Seed. Our plasticine children would be beautiful. His fair hair and my long charcoal eyelashes would make an incredible combination. And if it wasn't, we could always mould some new children out of plasticine to replace them. Extra children. Just in case things didn't work out. We will call them Magenta and Cobalt. I will spend hours giving them everything. For the girl: Big Brigitte Bardot pout. Oval fingernails tinged coral. Turned-up Julie

Andrew's nose. Carmen Electra's body. For the boy: Hugh Grant's thick wavy hair. Square, white teeth. Secretive Justin Timberlake smile. Nicolas Cage's fingertips.

I cut pictures from 'Who Magazine' and pour over the perfect features. Could I train my children to attract light? That white light that haloes around the beautiful people's bodies? Is there some magnet or mirror I could embed in their head? Some trick I need to learn before I create them?

I take my plasticine man to bed. His feet are cold but I can't warm them too much or he will melt. I knit him plasticine slippers. He rubs them up the back of my legs. I reach over to him and mould some higher cheekbones. He is very patient. I know he has got work to do. But he waits until I am finished. I feel him grow long and hard against my thigh. I smile as I feel his full weight on top of me. Hip bone to hip bone. A slight nestling before he urges me onto my back. He whispers long dark secrets. Tantalising lies. In this one moment I know that if he leaves me I could never make another plasticine man like him. It is a terrifying thought but I relax as his smooth penis follows his long fingers inside me. Coaxing and urging me to set he and his paint brushes free. I am ready for everything except that. I thought I had years more playing Ophelia, Juliet, Titania, Miranda. I thought he would be loyal to his creator. His mother-lover. Mother love.

I leave the bedroom and check my email. Neither Scottish darling nor the bundler's names appear in the bold new messages. I hear my plasticine man put on his trousers and leave. He will be going down the road to Art Attack for some more lime paint. Always lime, never Alannah pink and lime. Why does he need more lime this time? I sneak into the studio. He has made an odd looking plasticine doll house. It is green. Amphibian. I wonder what it would be like to be triphibian. Or Ambidextrous. I should make my children ambidextrous. I didn't give my plasticine lover thumbs for moulding the finer details. The chairs and tables have rounded corners. It is all aesthetically unpleasing. I take his stool and pick up each piece of furniture. I sharpen the corners and run my fingernails in wood-like patterns across their surface. This will please him. This will earn me another day. His lime is stuck under my wedding ring. The one I keep on a chain for later. I think that perhaps I have kept my plasticine lover on this same chain and I am ashamed. Am I more needy than I imagined? I want my Fridays back with the bundler. Is that being unfaithful? If I moulded another bundler out of plasticine could it ever be the same? His smell. His rough touches. Could I learn from a plasticine bundler what I learnt from the man?

I go back to bed. I would ring the bundler's answering service and listen to his voice in the dark if he had ever given me his number. If I taped his voice maybe I could piece together a sentence like, "I made a mistake leaving you. Come back". Or, "Hello, this is the bundler. Come back". Or just "Come back". And would it be weak to go back? Would my passivity reach an all time high if I did? Would I take a basket of nectarines and meet him in his office on Friday? And what if, in the end, he preferred limes?

None of this matters. I don't have his number. I always knew he was going away. He's one of those –philes. An Americanophile. If I was a –phile I think I would be an icecreamophile. Maybe if I made a bed up in the freezer I could mould my next lover from English Toffee and Bacio. A big lolly mouth. One of those fake tasting banana lollies. Yellow. Yellow is the happiest colour in the world when you are sad. And everyone else is yellow when you are sad. Lime doesn't seem so bad after all. It's more neutral. Pungent. Post-trauma serenity. Severity. I dream I see the bundler's back as he walks through the gate lounge and into the

long tunnel. I can't attract his attention. Scottish darling appears from behind a rubbish bin and laughs. A big, booming laugh that causes my tears to become stone and I wish I had a pin from Oedipus to finish it all. To wander in darkness. Teiresius. Cassandra. Or foolish Pandora.

When my plasticine man returns he shakes me gently. Tiny tremor. And asks me the unforgivable. He asks me to create a female in his image. A lover for him to replace me. Frankenstein's dilemma. He wants her made from lime plasticine. He has drawn a clumsy picture. Part of me is pleased he came to me. First. Premiere. Blue Ribbon. I will create my own abandonment. I will kiss goodbye my fictional, good looking, plasticine children. This time there is no bundler or Scottish darling to fall back on. This time it is just me. And a big double bed. Could I float like 'Bedknobs and Broomsticks' if I pushed it out of the window? Plummet. Punnet of strawberries. Pun it.

Plasticine lover says that once I make his new lover, his bride, he will spend one last moment with me. I can choose the moment. Initially I think it will be slow, smouldering sex. Arms and legs entwined. My lips on his collar bone marking him. Leaving my mark. But how long will it last? Teeth marks in pink plasticine. Serrations. Sensations. I have a better idea.

I search the cupboards for Mark I, II, III, IV and IV plasticine lover. I keep them in a rainbow-striped drawstring bag. I take the legs from my first attempt; slim and long. I take the arms from the third attempt; bony and smooth. The stomach and hips from the second and the eyeballs and nose from the fifth. I have to mould the rest myself. As I rip body parts from my imperfect lovers I leave behind a pile of endless torsos. Organs spilling from sockets. I won't ever need them again. I take the useless body parts. The remains. And I mould pink lamp shades and banana lounges for my plasticine lover's doll house.

I mix up a bowl of lime plasticine. I add lime essence and lime cordial for the rich, glossy green I know he wants. I gently roll the body parts in lime. I have to make the torso, vagina and head because I have only created man. It is harder than I expect. I copy the features from his crude drawing. And it is only when I finish that I realise she is the antithesis of me. I make a serpent out of the remaining lime mixture. Rubbing it between my palms. Long phallus. Twisting. In another bowl I mix a slippery red mixture and mould a shiny red apple. I give her both the serpent and the apple and tell her to be careful. She pays no attention. She is kissing my plasticene lover. He sits her down on a stool and tells her he will be a moment. Not a long time to wait when they have the rest of their lives to be in hiding together.

For my last moment I take a nectarines from the fruit bowl. I puncture the skin with my incisors and hand it to him. We sit on the bed and share a nectarine. It is our last moment. I keep the stone for the children I will never have. She asks him sotto voce why her skin is green. They leave. For an eternity. Like those twisty infinity symbols on a charm bracelet I was once given. By a man who left me for a skinny girl.

In his studio is one last painting of me surrounded by the parts of my lovers. A pair of familiar lips kiss my ear. Long fingers claw at my buttons. Hair flops in my eyes. Hips grind against my lap. Blue Danube eyes and a pointy nose peer and smell me from the corners of the canvas. Golden skin flutters down from the foreground to sprinkle itself on my eyelashes. A smooth penis remains in the centre. Perfect body parts. The collector and the collected.