

## ROTHKO'S RED

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## Also by Sue Hubbard

*Everything Begins with the Skin* (Enitharmon, 1994;  
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*Ghost Station* (Salt, 2004)

SUE HUBBARD  
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*For Louie and Alena*



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# ROTHKO'S RED

It's like your cunt,' he'd whispered in her ear in front of the magenta Rothko. 'All that velvety redness. I know it so well; every fold and crevice. I don't have to be an expert on art to understand these paintings.'

He had been standing behind her in front of the large canvas, his arms wrapped around her waist, his newly shaved chin on her shoulder, as she'd talked him through Abstract Expressionism. She'd liked standing like that in a public space, the bulk of him pressed against her back, their smells mingling. She had felt, what? Owned. Later when they'd gone back to the little hotel room with the low ceiling in the Marais and made love in the afternoon, the shrieks of the children in the playground of the cole Maternelle below had floated up through their window. He had brought her to Paris for her birthday and they'd sat in a small side street outside a café in the April sunlight drinking *café au lait*.

‘When I was trapped in my marriage, this is what I dreamt of,’ he’d said. ‘Sitting having breakfast in Paris with a beautiful woman.’ No one had said anything like that to her before, none of the occasional lovers who had crossed her path when she’d been living alone, trying to make ends meet, struggling to bring up Suzie. They had only been together for two months. On the journey back to London on the Eurostar she’d watched their joint reflection in the train’s dark glass whilst he’d slept, her head resting on his shoulder, trying to seal the image in her mind like those fossilised flies in amber that the Algerian trader had wanted to sell them on the steps of the Musée D’Orsay; though the amber, laid in rows on a rush mat, had probably been plastic, the flies fake. But they had looked good together. Not quite young anymore, it was true, but an attractive item. And as he’d slept, she’d been conscious of the need to file and catalogue the moment, aware of its transformation from the present into a memory.



Belle was waiting for Maggie under the clock at Grand Central station. The concourse was busy. It was snowing outside and Manhattan had become gridlocked. Commuters scurried to catch their out of town trains before the weather got worse, hurrying to their platforms beneath the crystal chandeliers across the marble halls as the large flakes of snow slowly melted on their hats and scarves. Belle was reading a book, her coat collar pulled up

against the icy February chill. The tweed cloth was covered in cats' hairs and there was a small hole in the toe of her shoe. She looked up from her reading as Maggie approached and broke into a smile.

'Hi, you must be Maggie, great to meet you.'

Maggie lent forward, relieved, and kissed her on the cheek. Belle was Adam's cousin once removed on his American mother's side. When Adam had been twelve his father had sent him to stay with Belle's family up in their cabin in the Adirondacks. Adam had often wondered if it was supposed to have been some sort of consolation prize that holiday, compensation for his mother's sudden death on that rainy night in that terrible pile up on the M4. His father had never really been able to talk about it, had retreated into the carapace of his own grief, leaving the boys to cope the best they could. He was also a believer in the redeeming power of physical activity. He had thought it was good for both young bodies and minds, especially as Adam and his younger brother, Tom, lived in Fulham. So that summer they had been packed off for a month in the States. They had fished and canoed, had made campfires down by the lake, and Adam had tried not to think about his dead mother.

During the funeral service at the crematorium, a vicar whom Adam had never met before had compared his mother's earthly life to the state of an unborn baby, explaining that a baby lived in a safe environment, blissfully unaware of what fate awaited it once it was pushed out from its warm watery cradle into the wide world. The baby, the vicar had said, was without fear for its future.

And while, in life, we might think we had an idea of what death might entail, we could not possibly conceive of the journey into the light that would follow, imagine the comfort that would engulf us, any more than the baby could imagine being born. For as with infinity, the human mind could not comprehend the mysteries that belonged only to God.

Adam had tried to listen, but had felt nothing. He was sure they were supposed to be comforting, but the vicar's words hadn't helped very much. He had bit his lip hard, hoping the pain would stop him crying. He just wanted his mother back.

That summer in the Adirondacks Adam had thought Belle a bit odd. There had been something intense about her, something of the outsider. Although only thirteen, she was already taller than him, with long shin bones and gangly arms and small new breasts that grazed the blue nylon of her baggy shapeless swimsuit. She'd been physically inept, always losing her sneakers or stepping on glass or dropping her swimming costume out of the roll of her towel as they'd gone down to bathe off the wooden jetty in the cold lake. But she had been funny. He'd liked that about her, though perhaps it had been a bid for acceptance, an apology for her clumsiness, but she'd been a great mimic and had made him laugh as they'd sat round the campfire melting marshmallows on sticks. Before that he hadn't laughed in a while. He had only ever seen her once again, years later when he'd gone to a sociology conference at New York University. They'd met in a bar in TriBeCa. She was tall and angular with big raw

hands and an equine face that made him think of Virginia Woolf. No doubt she would have liked that association as she was trying to be a writer, but without much obvious success. She'd been married for a while to one of her Latino students from the literacy class she taught once a week to make ends meet. But it hadn't worked out.

There had, Adam thought, been something a little down-at-heel about her, a little desperate. He had bought her dinner, feeling slightly overwhelmed by the details of her chaotic life and been secretly relieved when the evening was over. He had not seen her since, but they'd kept in touch, tied by their childhood summer, she extending a permanent invitation to repay the dinner if he was ever back on her side of the Pond. She always sent Christmas cards. One had mentioned that she had published a story in the *Atlantic Monthly*. He was genuinely pleased and sent a postcard congratulating her; in fact, whenever he was away, he would usually drop her a card; a Velázquez from the Prado, a Minoan figurine from Crete. While in Paris he had sent her one of the Rothkos mentioning that there was someone new in his life. Her next Christmas greeting, in her familiar looping American script, had generously included them both: 'To dear Adam and Maggie.'



It had been those words that had so hurt her. Their names linked together on the inside of the card, a tasteful photograph of a fir tree, its boughs bent with crystals of snow,

wishing them *Season's Greetings*. It had made her cry, that acknowledgement of them as a couple, an item. But it had come too late. Five days before Christmas Adam had told her he was moving out.

'Maggie, I can't do this anymore. I just can't give you what you want.'

'I don't understand. I don't know what I've done. Anyway I've never told you what I want.'

'You haven't *done* anything. It's probably selfish, but I need more space. I need to be in my own place, have time to get on with my next book. I'm sorry; really I am that it hasn't worked out between us.'

Perhaps she should have seen it coming. But she hadn't. She had thought that now they had found each other they would grow old together. How many more chances did one have of happiness on the slow slide down towards fifty? As far as she was concerned, there was nothing much wrong. Nothing that couldn't be negotiated, sorted out through talking and a bit of gentle, mutual care. But that was just the trouble. He wouldn't talk. Not about feelings anyway. She remembered how, when in bed one night as she had lain with her back against the curve of his stomach, his face buried in her hair like two spoons in a drawer, how he had mumbled something about the vicar's words being, all those years before, just a formula, how he'd never even met his mother, and that he could have been talking about anyone. When she had tried to probe, to draw him out, he'd just clammed up, saying there was no point in talking about it. When he'd told her he was leaving she had suggested *Relate*, but she

had known in her heart that he would never agree to go. 'Maggie, that's *your* solution. I don't do therapy; I don't even accept it as a paradigm.'

She hadn't meant to love him. When they'd first met that day, by chance, in the bookshop in the Festival Hall, she hadn't been particularly attracted to him. They'd both been killing time. He had been waiting for his train from Waterloo, while she, too early for her appointment with the design company for whom she did the occasional watercolour for their greeting card range, had been idly checking the racks to see if they stocked any of her designs and had accidentally knocked over a pile of books with her portfolio. He had helped her re-stack them. She had thanked him, perhaps rather too profusely, and they'd ended up going for a coffee. He had asked about her work and something in the tone of his voice, some slightly forced air of interested politeness, had made her wonder if she had sounded dismissive or rude. She had not meant to be. She knew she could appear either too opinionated or too shy. People who didn't know her thought her feisty. She alternated between feeling wary and prattling on, wanting to say something interesting or wondering if she was just sounding pretentious. She knew her unease made her self-conscious. Nevertheless, he'd asked for her number and the following week had rung her. Suddenly he was just part of her life.

'I'm not in love with him,' she'd told her friends, 'after all he doesn't know a thing about art. How could I possibly be in love with a man who doesn't know his Picabia from his Pollocks? Seriously though, it just sort of works.'

He's nice and likes Suzie; I like his sons. We have fun and I fancy him.'

And now, now after two years, after he had woven himself into the fabric of her life, he had suddenly snipped the stitches, cut and run. He seemed to have done it so easily so that now she was left feeling like a piece of old knitting, the unravelled thread all twisted and furred. She no longer knew whether the man she'd been with for two years was the real person or this cold stranger who seemed to have dropped a steel portcullis in his head leaving her stranded on the other side. She hadn't known she would miss him so much; his skin next to hers, the fur of his stomach against her spine, even his snoring. Perhaps you never recognised love for what it was until it was no longer there for the taking.

For an intelligent man, he was so disconnected from his feelings. She'd tried to pinpoint when it had started, the shift, the slow, imperceptible withdrawal that only now she could begin to chart. Perhaps it had been when he'd agreed to help set up a new course at Newcastle. He'd get up at first light, leaving her sleeping, to catch the earliest possible train and then not phone all week, caught up with his own agenda in the department.

'Maggie, why all the fuss? You know I'll be back at the weekend. What is there to say? You know where I am. You know what I am doing. Honestly, you really don't understand the pressure of academic life. You'll still be there when I'm back on Friday, but my paper has to be in.'

She had begun to feel pushed to the margins of his life, as if she was simply filling in the gaps between more

important events like that Styrofoam packaging used to send fragile objects through the post. All she wanted was to matter. Was that too much? It had seemed so. Perhaps intellectual intelligence was the last refuge of the emotionally damaged. Work appeared to be the only place where he felt really in control. It was a known quantity. She remembered that night just before he had moved in, how in her cold dark kitchen he'd lifted her skirt and, pushing her hips hard up against the edge of the cold steel draining board, had entered her with an urgent insistence and then, quite suddenly, burst into tears. He had said it was for all the wasted years with Joanna; for his inability to resist her histrionics and emotional blackmail. Perhaps that was the moment Maggie had started to care. Vulnerability was, after all, erotic. She had held his face close in the dark and tried to comfort him, wondering, as they had stood in the puddle of shed clothes, if this was the first time that he'd wept since he'd been a child; if his tears, as his mouth had reached, wet and hungry for hers, were really those of a young boy for his dead mother.

Maybe that was the key to his leaving, maybe excessive childhood suffering had made him cruel because it had left him unduly self-protective, unable to empathise with what she had come to feel for him; this unromantic, daily sort of love.

They had gone to the cinema the night he'd got back from Newcastle. She had known there was something wrong when she had tried to slip her hand into his and he'd withdrawn it. That small movement had felt like a blow in the chest.

'Why did you do that?'

'Do what?'

'Move your hand.'

'I didn't. You're imagining it. I was just getting comfortable.'

She had, for sometime now, had the feeling that things were out of kilter, that there was something she should know about that she couldn't even name. The next evening she had cooked *spaghetti vongole*, a favourite of his, laid the table with candles, placing each fork and napkin with great precision as if by making everything perfect she could safeguard herself in some way. As they had sat working their way through a bottle of Rioja she had known she had to ask him.

'Adam, are you going to leave me?'

It had been then that he admitted it, that something had changed, that he just didn't feel the same anymore. 'I'm sorry Maggie.' It was as though he had been waiting for her to force his confession.

He'd gone straight upstairs and thrown his things into a holdall. 'I'll pick the rest up some other time. There's not much. Just a few books.' But she'd known he would never come to get them.

She hadn't wanted to cry or to make a fuss, to mirror Joanna's manipulative behaviour, but the tears had come anyway, silent, unbidden, streaming down her face as she had stood on the doorstep watching him load the car in the icy evening air. All along the street, lights from newly decorated Christmas trees blinked in the brightly lit windows.

'Now you are going I can say what I've never dared to say before,' she'd said looking him straight in the face, 'that I learnt to love you.'

After that she had turned quickly into the house, not waiting to watch him get in the car and drive away, shutting the door against his loss and the winter dark.



Belle's apartment was above a Chinese restaurant on the Lower East Side, a tiny oriental island in the once largely Jewish neighbourhood. Whilst some of the old sweat shops and tenement buildings with their heavy iron fire escapes had been taken over by young artists, or turned into Tarot reading or tattoo parlours, there was nothing hip about The Lotus Garden with its murky interior, its cheap red lanterns and lurid gilt frames containing day-glo Chinese dragons. The stairway leading from the side door up to Belle's apartment smelt of cats and boiled washing. The visit had been a sudden decision. When the Christmas card with the snow-laden pine branches had arrived, Maggie had, on the spur of the moment, phoned Belle. She needed to get away, put some distance between the sense of rejection and confusion Adam's leaving had stirred in her, and Belle had seemed genuinely pleased.

'Come any time. Anytime you like, Maggie, I'd be delighted to meet you. I can't believe we have never met before. I've nothing planned, no commitments. I'm so sorry about Adam. He's an idiot. He never struck me as very in touch with himself. That summer we spent

together as children, he never once mentioned his mother and he'd only lost her three months before. To me that didn't seem quite normal. But I just assumed it was his English stiff upper lip. And honestly he hadn't seemed to have changed that much last time I saw him. Maybe that hurt just went very deep. I don't know. But men! Seems they're just as useless both sides of the Atlantic. There certainly aren't any here worth having!

Her apartment consisted of three interlocking rooms: a living room with an old floral sofa covered in cats' hairs, Belle's bedroom, and a room with an old wardrobe, its bursting doors tied together with string, a cat litter tray full of chalky cat turds, and a broken filing cabinet. In the kitchen the table was barely visible under the piles of old newspapers, the bits of photocopying and the latest batch of unmarked student assignments. At the very end was a tiny bathroom. It had lost most of its tiles and from the hairline crack in the sink, which ran from tap to tap, water seeped slowly onto the floor.

'Hope you don't mind cats. I used to have mice,' Belle said taking off her heavy tweed coat and slinging it on the nearest chair.

'Not at all,' Maggie answered, handing her the flowers she'd bought at the airport florist. She hoped there weren't also cockroaches.



When Belle wasn't teaching she spent most of her days at her chaotic kitchen table, surrounded by piles of wash-

ing up, correcting and sending out stories to various literary magazines. She'd won a couple of prizes in contests and was waiting for her luck to change. But this week she had to teach most days. She taught a literacy class out in a small college in Brooklyn. Maggie admired her gritty tenacity for she hated the journey, and hated the students who were mostly not interested in learning at all.

'I also hate, Maggie, that last term I slept with the guy who teaches Math. After a few weeks he told me he needed to get away and have some time to think things through; that he wasn't sure he was over his last relationship and thought he was still in love with his previous girlfriend. I feel awkward being around him now, but I have to go, I need the money.'



As she came out of the subway on 68th Street Maggie turned up her coat collar and walked towards 70th Street. The sky was heavy with snow. It was much colder here than in London, the sort of cold that got into your bones, weather straight down from Canada and off the Great Lakes with no Gulf Stream to warm it up, she thought, as she walked west towards Central Park. She had always wanted to visit the Frick with its Rembrandts and El Grecos. She particularly wanted to see Vermeer's *Officer and Laughing Girl*. She'd do the smaller galleries in SoHo and Chelsea on Monday and Tuesday and leave MoMA until her last day. The Frick was more like a stately home than a museum with its elegant, serene rooms built in the

European style by the industrialist Henry Clay Frick, in 1914. A luxurious, appropriate home for a successful industrialist and paterfamilias, it was a museum not only to art, but also to an ordered successful life. She particularly liked the enclosed courtyard garden with its marble fountain. Sitting there among the ferns listening to the trickle of water was like stepping into a Henry James' novel. She felt sad being there alone. All her recent trips abroad had been with Adam. She had got used to taking him round galleries, educating him about art. He had, for a while, at least, been a willing pupil. But now she had to find a new centre, make sense of this renewed single status. What was it that all those self-help manuals always talked about—loving yourself? Was that the key? She'd never thought that she would ever have to face being on her own again. Not at this age; she'd expected they would turn grey together.



When she climbed the cat-scented stairs to Belle's apartment, she found her with her arms plunged in the kitchen sink trying to make half-hearted inroads into the piles of washing-up. A wet pyramid of crockery, saucepans and glass was balanced on the draining board. As Belle went to fetch a cloth for Maggie to help her dry, the whole edifice slipped and a tumbler smashed onto the floor. 'Shit, goddam shit!' Belle exploded angrily, bending to pick up the broken glass and cutting her finger, which began to bleed profusely all over the floor. As Maggie

handed Belle a cloth to staunch the cut, she noticed her face was streaked with smudged mascara and that her mouth was set in a tight little pucker. She'd been crying.

'The son of a bitch didn't even tell me,' Belle said shoving her bleeding finger angrily under the cold tap so that the blood swirled among the debris of coffee grouts and unwashed cups. 'I only learnt by chance. If I hadn't gotten to work there again this term, if I'd applied for another job, I might never've found out that he's getting married. Married! And he never even told me, the jerk. So I stood there in the staff room and threw a cup of coffee at him. Got him right in the groin. That caused a bit of a stir, I can tell you,' she sniffed.

'Belle come and sit down. How's the finger? Let me have a look. Do you need a bandage?'

'No, it's fine,' she said parking herself on the only free stool not covered by papers and wrapping the discoloured dishcloth in a wad around her damaged finger.

'Had you been with him long?'

'No, I wasn't with him at all, that's the point,' she said, brushing a strand of faded hair from her long damp face. Maggie noticed, for the first time, there were streaks of grey in it. 'He slept with me a couple of times and then made the excuse that he wasn't over his previous relationship and needed time to think. Think. Ugh! And now he's getting married. He didn't take long to think about that, did he?' and she started to cry again, hot, angry tears. 'At least I ruined his new trousers though. A direct hit right where it showed.'

'Was that a good idea?'