**Broken Thing**

She had a pot she liked. Copied from an ancient pot, which had lain broken for centuries, perhaps damaged for much longer than whole, and never truly restored to itself. People in ancient Alexandria had touched and held the original unbroken pot, and kept something in it. But they weren’t us. Our pot wasn’t that pot.

She cradled our pot in her hands like a priestess and said we must never break this cup (she called the pot a cup). It would be such bad luck, she said. I slouched in my chair, overpowered by the marshy stink of Nile coming off her arms and neck. We’d bought this perfume and the pot on the same terrifyingly expensive visit to the British Museum’s gift shop. They had tester bottles. One scent had been found in a salesman’s case on the Titanic, another exhumed from a pyramid.

Ayesha was my first long-term girlfriend, I didn’t have much experience. But I knew enough to handle the pot carefully. A few weeks later I saw it lying in pieces on the table.

“Did you break it?” I asked her.

She just looked at me. Tense and sharp-edged.

“The pot? I mean cup?” Silence.

Next day the pot was whole again, though with visible cracks.

“So you glued it back together?” She didn’t reply.

Ground had changed to swamp. Terrible atmosphere. I know now that this is fairly normal in relationships, and usually things turn out ok if you just wait, keep calm, don’t let fear dictate your actions, but back then I panicked easily. It felt impossible to stay inside the house. I couldn’t breathe. So I went for a walk.

The only walk in our cramped neighbourhood of small terraced houses was over a main road, past a playground and some littered grass, then along by the river. High tide concealed all the rusty skeletons of things in the mud, so for a while you might forget their existence. They were still there, though.

My gut spasmed. How come I was so much at her mercy? Because she was better at covering stuff up, not revealing her own fears and uncertainties, if she had any, and this made her seem very strong. Women didn’t understand how strong they were. They could reject you and make you feel like shit... Eventually the path ended and the river went on alone. A couple of benches marked this final giving-up place.

Although when I go down I can’t stop myself, I try to be reasonable. I sat on one of the benches and examined my assumptions. Was she angry with me? Yes. Justifiably? Not unless I’d been insensitive. Had I? No, I didn’t think so – because in fact I was ultra-sensitive to her and her moods. The tide must be on the turn, all the boats were pointing sideways. Moved by a larger force and yet not drifting freely. Tethered to their fate.

Then I thought, is it even true she broke the pot? Maybe it just fell apart. In which case, she’ll have assumed I’m the guilty one and be waiting for me to apologise. All a stupid misunderstanding, easily resolved. The river glittered, the boats swung around.

Ayesha was frowning at the mirror in our hallway. As she turned to me, her face smoothed into blankness. Although I didn’t know quite what that look of hers meant, in a way it was self-explanatory. Like a corpse in the mud.

“About the pot,” I said, “I mean the cup.”

“It really doesn’t matter, Den.” She went to the kitchen.

I followed her, propelled by some crazy determination. “You think I broke the cup.”

“No I don’t.”

“Then why are you upset?”

“It’s not even worth discussing. Anyway I’m not upset. In the least.” She ran a glass of water from the tap and drank from it “How’s your website?”

“I’ve been…”

“Good.” She pushed past me. In the corridor she turned. “Stop thinking, Den. If you think about things too much, they might come true.”

What did she mean?

That same evening I went for a drink with Chris, a good mate. The Watery Moon had recently been refurbished and live music acts introduced. Personally I’d preferred the old gloomy interior, its stained carpet and acts of violence, such as glassing – many was the night I’d spent in A&E with Chris, after one of his seemingly innocuous remarks had provoked a drinker by the bar – even the occasional murder. But that evening Chris took his pint to where jazz was being played in the former darts area. So I ended up talking to Jonah, a friend of his from work.

Jonah had small eyes and soft feminine skin. He was smoking roll-ups and drinking a type of beer made by Trappist monks. We talked deeply. He agreed that since things were innately unstable and impermanent they could often break by themselves, without human agency. “I’ve known glasses shatter when they were just standing on a table. And windows crack. Mind you, with my mum… there was always a lot of tension.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. So what’ll you do now? Move out?”

“No! It’s just that...” But the more I tried to explain, the more Jonah persisted in his obtuseness. “Yeah women, they always want you to talk about things. Talk and talk. It’s a form of madness.” He sipped his Trappist ale. I decided he wasn’t such a great fount of spiritual wisdom after all.

“Thinking about your pot,” he resumed. I felt hopeful again. “Have you got a cat?”

“No.”

“Right. Just a thought. Cats often knock things off shelves.”

News reached us in fragments and murmurs. Lost, disappeared. One of the jazz instruments, the double bass. Taken? The player had left it for five minutes, gone to the bar and on his return… Police called, search instigated. Chris joined us: “I knew something like this would happen.” He thought the pub was built on a vortex, or a crack in time and space. Below our conscious radar, malicious spirits dance. The theft merely a symptom… ramblings fairly typical of both Chris and pub conversations.

How could a double bass just vanish? Nobody had seen it go. The player looked as if his legs had walked off by themselves. Someone announced “We’re going to search the streets.” No point, I thought. And yet, what did I know? The double bass might be lurking in some alley or cul de sac, poking from a wheelie bin. It might have formed a new constellation in the night sky. For all I knew.

A bloke continued loudly and sorrowfully telling the story of his marriage break-up. “While I was asleep, they were fucking…” How traumatic, I thought. But least she didn’t just withdraw from him and go quiet.

When we first got together, love energy flowed between us like music. I didn’t mind Ayesha’s untidiness. I loved how she walked around our bedroom naked, with the curtains open, not caring about the opposite houses. She connected me with the world, with life. Encouraged me to go self-employed, paid the rent and the bills. Sometimes after she’d left for work I would tinkling laughter like elves in an enchanted forest. Downstairs if I was upstairs, or vice versa. I hadn’t heard it recently though.

Back home, I found the stairs too hard to climb and fell on the sofa. It caught and held me in a light grasp, but with all the strength of its hidden springs, its coffee-stained fabric. Destined to move on its little wheels yet content to stay still. Unlike the lounge, which kept coming and going in sick transit. From this whirligig, something emerged – the pot, high up next to some books.

Warily I approached the bookcase and took it down. Reverently I held it in both hands. Warm love flowed into me and I belched. The pot was decorated with Egyptian scenes: a river at low tide, a marshy landscape. A heron like one I often saw standing hunched and motionless, watching a rivulet in the mud. For a moment I had the feeling I could disappear into that ancient yet so familiar world…

And then I dropped it. Smash on the tiled hearth.

No doubt or confusion this time. I’d broken the pot. Me.

Destroyed beyond any chance of repair. Shards and slivers.

In my dreams that night, curled foetally on the sofa, the pot kept breaking and then becoming mysteriously whole, only to break again. Woken by a gasp, I heard Ayesha sweeping up the fragments with dustpan and brush. I kept my eyes closed against morning reality.

Over the following days we had some conversations. Not about the pot though. She didn’t mention the pot at all. Not even to tell me I was an idiot, laughingly or in anger. So we were talking but not talking. I felt more hopeful when we were apart. Then I could dwell on memories of nakedness and elfin laughter. Or further back – her serious gaze at the computer screen in those days when she had no idea I was watching her, or that I existed.

At the British Museum (“We never do anything cultural, Den. The whole of London’s on our doorstep, we’re missing all these opportunities. Well I’ll go by myself if you won’t come. No get off me. I’m serious…­­”) we’d seen an exhibition. They’d found a sphinx, other statues and some ancient buildings all hidden in murky water near the harbour in Alexandria, where Cleopatra was Queen. The Sphinx has the haunches of a lion, the wings of a great bird and the face of a woman. She poses difficult riddles. If you can’t answer them, she eats you.

I went for a walk and slumped on a bench near the playground. A badly placed bench, since a concrete wall now obscured most of the river from view. Maybe they put the bench here before they built the wall. The wall itself was quite boring to look at.

A woman came and sat down next to me, her hands thrust into her coat pockets. I caught a whiff of Nile before I saw who it was. The smell of loss.

She let the sun fall on her face. “It’s really quite nice out here.” She took a breath.

“You’re leaving, aren’t you?” I said, before she could say it, and she faintly smiled. Then I understood for the first time that I – or more accurately it, the situation including me – just wasn’t right for her. The rented house and the clumsy beta male. We’d somehow quenched her. She used to be so alive.

I thought I might as well apologise. “I’m sorry I broke the pot.”

“Never mind, that really doesn’t matter.” She kissed my cheek. “You’ll work it out.”

After she’d gone I stood and leaned against the wall, my arms on a rail. How fast and far beyond me she’d already moved. And yet her future was clearer to me than my own. Easy to predict, for instance, that she’d marry someone else. I thought for her wedding present I’d get her another pot from the British Museum. Or go diving near the harbour of Alexandria, to retrieve some similar priceless object from an underwater palace. That would be a romantic gesture.

Then I noticed a large object afloat in the middle of the river, being carried along fast. It was the double bass.

From a distance it seemed whole and undamaged, although obviously not in its ideal environment. Remembering its owner’s stricken bereaved face I knew I should do something, but instead I gazed listlessly after the vanishing instrument.

One day, I thought, I’ll ask her to explain what happened between us. When I’m ready to. Of course her version of events is probably quite different from mine. Anyone who’s ever been with anyone knows you remember things differently from how the other person remembers them, or you remember different things.

(1,994 words)