

## Skin Hunger

'Touch comes before sight, before speech. It is the first language and the last, and it always tells the truth.' — Margaret Atwood, *The Blind Assassin*

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On a Sunday afternoon, Melbourne Airport bustles with a parade of weekend travellers. I sit at Gate Thirty-One, waiting to board a flight home after spending twenty-four hours with a man I know I will never see again.

Feigning a composure I do not feel, I hold myself steady as I board the plane, and throughout the flight home. It is only when I step inside my door—only when silence remains in the wake of *hey, beautiful* messages; only when I know with unequivocal certainty that I have not imagined his distance—it is only then I allow myself to fall apart.

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Like many modern-day relationships, ours began on the internet. A follower of my Instagram page, he had commented on my writing a number of times—further investigation revealed first engagement circa 2020—but married for the majority of my social media years, I was always careful not to provoke male attention and quick to deflect any that arose.

I do not profess to understand the choreography that governs the timing of things—the way a single, unremarkable exchange can rearrange the shape of a life. I could not tell you why, this particular time, I chose to respond to his comment. Whether it was the kindness in the words he offered on a decidedly vulnerable piece of writing, or whether—twelve months into my marriage separation—I had grown less vigilant at staving off the quiet creep of loneliness that wound its way into the spaces where intimacy once lived.

Either way, a university professor and academic in his field, his intelligence was an irresistible light to the moth-wings of my sapiosexual heart. We began messaging—our conversations gaining fast momentum; platonic words turned electric, laced with double entendre and less-than-subtle flirtation that felt like defibrillation to my quiescent heart.

Shared photos became shared desire; regular video calls bridged the interstate distance between us. Even through pixelated screens, the connection between us buzzed with such intense frisson that when he suggested we meet, my only response was, *when?*

Excitedly, we made plans; confirmed dates; chose a city; booked accommodation; paid for flights. Later that week, he called to finalise the details.

'By the way,' he said. 'You should know that I'm married.'

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There is a loneliness that lives in the skin—a longing for the weight of a hand; the anchoring grace of being held. Skin hunger—also known as touch deprivation—is a term used to describe the human need for physical touch. The earliest research into the consequences of touch deprivation date back to the early 20th century, when nearly ninety-nine percent of infants placed in institutional care in the United States died before reaching seven months of age.

The majority of these deaths were not caused by illness or starvation, but by sensory deprivation. Although the infants received food and medical care, the institutions—understaffed and overburdened—could not provide the basic human contact necessary for healthy development and survival. The infants who did survive were found to have high rates of physical, cognitive, behavioural, and psychological dysfunction—underscoring the vital importance of skin-to-skin contact needed for humans to thrive.

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My marriage was over long before it was over. At the time of my leaving, it had been more than five years since we had been on a date, slept in the same bed, or shared any physical intimacy or affection. These things had become relics of a past life neither of us knew how to time-travel back to; instead, we existed under the same roof as roommates-slash-business-partners-slash-parents—careful, in passing, not to touch, not to disrupt the balance of the parody we had settled into.

When I try to understand why I continued to message the professor in the wake of his admission—though deeply unsettled by both his marital status and failure to disclose it sooner—the only answer I can offer is this: the body, when starved of touch, will settle for even the hollowest sustenance to survive. By the time I learned he was married, he had already become nourishment to my famished bones. Ending it—whatever we had begun—felt like amputating a life source, and my barren limbs had only just remembered what it felt to be alive.

I want to say I had no fantasy of him leaving his marriage, but there were times I would find myself imagining a life of words, books, theatre, wine, travel—us. I did not ask about his marriage circumstances, and he did not offer them—in fact, in the months after I found out he never once spoke his wife's name, despite knowing every detail of my marriage and its eventual demise. Left to my own conjuring, I allowed myself to believe his marriage mirrored mine: that he, too, must have been starved of intimacy, connection, and touch. That he, too, knew the soul-destroying loneliness that could drive a person to overlook the immoral and unethical in search of salvation.

Joan Didion says that we tell ourselves stories in order to live, and this was the story I had told myself to rationalise the decision to sleep with another woman's husband. Yet, despite fearing the scaffold of this story could collapse under the weight of its own truth, I found myself messaging him days before we were due to meet.

'I want to ask you something,' I wrote. 'In this context of your life and marriage, what is this to you? Is it sex? A mid-life crisis? A distraction from a quiet life of desperation, to quote Thoreau? A meaningless affair? Or something more?'

'Why, when I'm married, have I found myself here?' he replied. 'The truth is, I don't really know. There is nothing wrong with my marriage—it's perfectly fine. I suppose, to use the old saying, I want to have my cake and eat it too.'

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While the need for human touch is most visible in early development, it does not diminish with age. Chronic touch deprivation has been shown to elevate cortisol and disrupt heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, and immune function, while also contributing to anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. By contrast, human touch releases oxytocin—fostering trust, emotional connection, and calm. Touch reduces stress, fear, and inflammation, while supporting sleep, digestion, and immune repair.

In the 1950s, an experiment gave infant monkeys a choice between two surrogate mothers—one of wire offering food, the other covered in soft cloth that provided no nourishment. The monkeys consistently chose the cloth mother, showing a preference for physical comfort over sustenance.

Sophie Mackintosh captures this primal need in *The Water Cure*, writing:

'I know that without being touched I will die. I have known it for some time... I am not anybody's loved-most, have not been for some time. I have gone days, weeks, without

touch and when that happens I can feel my skin thinning, I have to lay my body against grass and velvet and the corner of the sofa and rub my hands and elbows and thighs against anything until they are raw.'

It is hard to explain why I chose to ignore the lurid glare of red flags before me, except to say that sometimes the deep, biological need to be touched—to be held—becomes a matter of survival.

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The professor and I meet three months after our first exchange, on an otherwise ordinary April day. After weeks of waiting—weeks of anticipation, of longing, of *these-are-all-the-things-I-want-to-do-to-you* messages—we greet each other with an awkward kiss, more nervous than expected. In the taxi to the city we are small talk and sweaty palms. I ask about his childhood, and he tells me of the beach he lived near, summers spent working for his concrete-labourer father, life as the eldest of three siblings, and I find myself endeared to the sentimentality in his voice.

We go to lunch at a small café on Degraives Laneway and order paninis and pinot noir. Seated at a cosy window table, we take little notice of anything but each other, our hands reaching across the small table, his thumb stroking mine. When I look back on our twenty-four hours together, it is this moment of warmth in the café—of getting to know one another, of feeling seen, wanted, desired—that draws me into the lonely reverie of what might have been.

I could not tell you what changed after this moment, what caused the shift that—though subtle—felt seismic enough to end the relationship only days after it had really begun. There is sometimes a truth that arrives without language, and my body would come to understand this: that though it had been touched, it had not been chosen.

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Anne Michaels writes that when no safe place exists, we make one in the arms of strangers, hoping skin will answer what language cannot. I think of this now—the way I gave my body to a stranger, not as an offering, but as a question. How our hungry skin will settle for proximity over intimacy, becoming a map of all the places we have never been met.

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Later that afternoon, when we are checked in at the hotel, we face one another, both shy to make the first move. I have spent what feels like a lifetime rehearsing this moment: the soft brush of his hand against my cheek, the gentle tuck of hair behind my ear, the slow collision of lips dissolving weeks of anticipation. But when he reaches for me, it is nothing like I have rehearsed; his kiss feeling more like an assault—fevered tongue pushing and probing, far from the romanticism in his messages where he never spoke of us having sex, only of *making love*.

Little time is wasted as we fumble out of our clothes, the professor getting straight to the point. Afterwards, as we lie there not touching, I think about all the *these-are-all-the-things-I-want-to-do-to-you* messages—about the gap between words and translation. How it was the first time I'd had sex in six years—but perhaps orgasms were overrated anyway.

We both fall into a light sleep; when we wake, he reaches for me again but it is no more like *making love* than the first time and I struggle to reconcile the idealised version of him I had created in my mind with the reality now before me. As late afternoon sunlight grows faint outside the window, I sense him becoming restless; agitated.

'I should call and check in with my family,' he says.

'Of course,' I reply. 'Do what you need to do.'

'I'll go down to the lobby. I'll try not to be too long.'

'It's fine—take as long as you need,' I say, starkly aware of how incongruous our mutual politeness feels after the intimacy we've just shared.

He dresses and goes downstairs to call his family, and I freshen for dinner—tidy my hair and makeup, and slip into the black dress that cost almost an entire week's wages, bought just for this occasion. He is gone for some time, and when he returns, he does not comment on my dress or how I look but appears distant; disconnected. We finish getting ready in silence—the shift in his demeanour palpable as we move around the small room like strangers.

The night is brisk as we wander to the Gin Palace for drinks, then on to Elio's Place for dinner. The professor talks over dinner, but it is his reticence that speaks loudest; the careful way he skirts around his personal life, ensuring I am kept at adequate distance. I do not understand the wall he has constructed, only that I am instinctually aware he does not want this, or me—at least, not in the way he perhaps thought he might. Though I do not recall the exact segue into the conversation, toward the end of dinner I offer to get my own room

once we are back at the hotel if that would make him more comfortable—an idea he dismisses, though his words lack conviction.

Later that night, after going through the routine motions of sex again—whether out of obligation or pity, I am not sure—he switches off the light without saying goodnight, and we are foreign lands separated by an uncrossable ocean. I do not know if it is because I am repulsive to him—if the soft weight and stretched skin of my mid-forties, childbearing body is too ruined, too undesirable—or if it is his own inner conflict or guilt that has consumed him. But what I do know is this: I am here with someone who does not want to be here with me, and the realisation is a collapsed lung that leaves me unable to breathe as I turn and face the wall, struggling to surface for air beneath the undercurrent of his silence.

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The next morning, over coffee, he scrolls through Instagram on his phone, speaking only to comment on the latest sideshow antics of Trump. Attempting to connect one last time, I ask how he is feeling about us—this—even though I already feel too fragile to carry the weight of his answer.

'It's a little weird,' he replies, and it is impossible not to miss the escape routes and exit signs mapped clearly in his eyes.

'It's okay if you don't want to do this again,' I say, and he steps one foot out the door I just opened, his perfunctory kiss goodbye the sound of it closing behind him.

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It is early evening when my plane lands. A steady rain falls, and I am comforted by the meditation of wipers moving back and forth across my windscreen as I drive home. I walk inside, place my suitcase down and check my phone. There is no message from the professor. I do not bother to undress, but crawl into bed and fall asleep to rain on corrugated iron smothering the sound of my tears.

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Days later, I receive a message from him. *How are you?*, he asks, and I want to write an essay of the ways he has hurt me; to demand explanations and answers to the questions that

have left me reeling in rejection, abandonment, humiliation and shame. Instead I keep it simple: *This isn't going to work for me*, I write. It is twenty-four hours before he replies. *Sorry you feel this way*, he says, and wishes me the best. I delete his messages, his photos, his existence from my life, and cry myself to sleep once more.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread social distancing led to significant, worldwide touch deprivation. A study published in *Royal Society Open Science* found that this absence of interpersonal touch activated stress pathways in the body, increasing feelings of loneliness and anxiety. The research highlighted how deeply touch is tied to our nervous system, emotional wellbeing and sense of safety and connection.

But what I have come to understand is that touch is not synonymous with connection. It is not enough to be held; we need to feel held *by* someone. Charles Eisenstein reaches the heart of this when he says, 'To be truly seen and heard, to be truly known, is a deep human need. Our hunger for it is so omnipresent, so much a part of our experience of life, that we no more know what it is we are missing than a fish knows it is wet.'

In the aftermath of the professor, I now recognise that touch without connection is a form of self-abandonment; a betrayal of self that leaves us lonelier than solitude ever could, in the way it reflects not only what we lack but what, deep within, we know we deserve. Skin hunger may drive our hands toward flesh, but what we truly seek is the connection that regulates our nervous system, holds us firm in belonging, and tells us we are enough. And no amount of skin can substitute for the absence of this connection—of knowing that, beyond being touched, we have been chosen.

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