



## Over the Skin

By Carole Bulewski

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At first he would arrive late. It wasn't something he was doing deliberately, but there was always one thing or another preventing him from being in time. Of course he could have left earlier. This was London after all, and he knew full well that you cannot rely on public transport in this city – to be in time for a meeting, you need to set off long in advance. But the notion of time meant strictly nothing to him. He was always late, whatever the purpose of his journey. And because no one had ever complained about it, he'd never felt the need to change his ways.

Like everybody else, she hadn't complained, and would never do so – he was fairly certain of it. The very first time he had come to her place she had seemed relieved to see him at the front door. She wasn't any different from the other girls in that respect. Except that she was different, really. He had played music with other women in the past, and had even been attracted to some of them – mostly singers, a few piano or violin players too – but he had never taught any of them how to play the drums. Was that the reason this bizarre thing had happened during the first lesson?

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She was always in time, and often she would even arrive half an hour early – she hated being late. It was all about control with her: control over her emotions, over the words she was writing and over the ones she was speaking, even the way she was posing for photos – a mixture of coldness and exasperation. One day she had found an advert for drums lessons on the Internet, and she had thought it would be a good idea to learn. Maybe it would make her a little bit less stuck-up. The advert specified that the lessons could be given at home and she had thought it would be great to give her noisy, unbearable neighbours, a taste of their own medicine.

Following the advice of that guy who was going to be her teacher – they had exchanged a few emails – she had bought a drum kit and, before the first lesson, she had tried to make sense of this impressive piece of equipment – in vain. She was unable to coordinate her movements on the different drums, and the result of her efforts had been complete incoherence. It would all make sense eventually, but it wouldn't come naturally. She never reacted instinctively to the situations she was confronted to, and it would take her time to work this one out. She had discussed the problem via email with her soon-to-be professor, and he had told her that it was normal, that everything would one day make sense, and that she would end up playing without even thinking about what she was doing.

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And then they'd had their first lesson, and this weird thing had happened.

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She had opened the door quite violently – he was a good half-hour late after all – and there he was, uncertain of what to do next. They had looked at each other without saying a word. And then the moment had passed, and they had remained silent. She had invited him in, without saying a single word, and he had followed her to the living room, where the red drum kit was awaiting them – she had been immediately attracted by this warm colour, back at the music shop where she had bought the drum kit, probably because it was so remote from her true, glacial temperament. He had taken two brown sticks from his bag and had given them to her. She had taken them without even a "thank you" and had just stood there, observing him while he was getting started on the drum kit. He had first adjusted the stool – he wasn't much taller than her – and then he had started screwing and unscrewing all the different tom-toms, hitting them on different places and thus producing many different sounds – she didn't even know that you could produce so many different sounds from the same tom-tom. She had left him there and had gone to the kitchen to make him a cup of tea, which she had then given him without a word. He had smiled, which she had translated into a "thank you" – but his lips had not moved – and she had sat on an armchair, waiting for him to finish the tuning. A few moments later, happy with his work, he had turned to her, inviting her to come and sit on

the stool so that the lesson could finally start. At first he had guided her hand, firmly but without hurting her, showing her how to hold the stick and how to hit the different elements in a harmonious way. Sometimes he would ask her to get up from the stool so that he could sit and show her a simple rhythm, which she would then try to reproduce. This first lesson had lasted for about an hour, during which they had not exchanged one single word. And then he had left, without discussing with her when they would have their next lesson. She hadn't worried about it. She knew that they would send each other a couple of emails and that all which had not been said at the end of this first lesson would be explained then.

And so for a couple of months they had carried on meeting up regularly for these silent lessons – silent in as much as words were concerned. She was a quick learner, and, between lessons, she would practice frantically. Every new rhythm that she mastered would bring a smile on his face – which would never fail to make her deliriously happy.

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He had never really wondered about this silence between them. This had never happened to him before, but he wasn't in the least bothered about it. He thought that women were always talking a bit too much anyway; this one was just balancing the others out; not a bad thing after all. There was no need to speak, most of the time.

One day he invited her – by email – to come and see him play. This would help her understand how to put his recommendations into practice, he thought.

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She had gone to the gig all by herself. A broad smile had illuminated their faces when they had first noticed each other in the dark room. After a brief but warm hug they had moved to the bar. He had ordered two whiskeys, and this simple thing – hearing his voice for the first time – had made her happy for a brief moment. They had stood there without talking, listening to the support band. At the end of this first gig he had vanished, before re-appearing on stage a few minutes later. She had observed him attentively while he was playing, and had felt proud of being his pupil. She had left at the end of the

gig, while he was still on stage. Above all, she feared that they would start talking.

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The next lesson would be the last one. He taught her the subtle art of percussions; the way to hit the skin of the tom-tom with the top two-thirds of the hand, and the different places where to hit the drum. Their hands met, they felt a few chills down their spine, they exchanged a few looks and then, all of a sudden, they started talking. They spoke about mundane, stupid, uninteresting things.

When he left that evening, after a soft kiss on her chick, she already knew that she wouldn't contact him anymore, and that he wouldn't try to see her again.