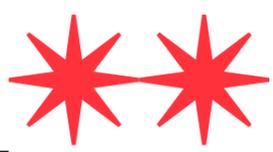




Better
an 'oops'
than a
'what if'



DEAR FRIEND,

Because that's what we are, right? I know others seemed to think it was more than that, but if we're honest, we were never truly *passionate*. Sure, we looked good together at exhibition openings. Our forms fit. But for what purpose? At first, we found it (ironically) thrilling that we subscribed to the same magazines and, later, podcasts; that we had matching Ally Capellino cross-body bags; and could cross reference our icon pilgrimage checklists—Marfa, Therme Vals, Lightning Field, Dessau... We were mutually affectionate desk mates, international conference chums. We spoke the same images, tasted the same letterspacing, heard the same textures. We knew what was good, what was so bad it was good, and everything else in between.

Time passed like this. Almost four decades in fact. And the next thing we knew, I had begun to feel differently about you and you had begun... well, these days I don't presume to know what you think. You may well have a whole other version of events: you taught me everything I know; we shared *context*, for gods' sake; I'm ungrateful and a betrayer.

Ok, I have to admit that writing this down is making me nervous. What if you do freak out and block me on social media, air me IRL? Worse still, what if you don't even notice I've gone? I know I'm the one who thinks we should see other people, but what if I change my mind later? I mean, we've been through so much together. What if, after I forsake your form, I don't have any function? What if, after I strip away your skin, I don't have any content?

I was only 9 or 10 when I figured out who you were. That what my Dad did for work, and the Milton Glaser posters on our walls and the speckled blue enamel mugs as pen pots, my doodling in Cooper Black on my schoolbooks, was all part of it. Of you. Since then, I've put in the hours to get to know you better and I've got the column inches, the archival record request receipts, and the letters after my name to prove it. I wrote the questions, transcribed the stories; I problematized the assumptions, unpacked the concepts, cited the sources; I pored over the halftones, picas, pixels; clicked the links, smelt the ink, revered the gradient, stroked the grain, put my cheek to the cool ceramic, snagged my tights on the composite, paced the perimeter, checked to see if the green roof *Semper-vivum* was being watered...

We've called each other different names, as it suited us. In the bylines, I was your historian, commentator, biographer, critic, curator, and your progeny's educator. You were my visual culture, manmade environment, material culture. At times you were pretty much everything that took shape for a reason from a plan. Sometimes you wanted me to be your stage-door groupie and I gladly bore your autograph below my collar bone. Other times you wanted me to be your mother and I folded my words around you and held you tight. Then you got serious and wanted me to nominate you for club membership, to lobby for you, to lend you academic rigor, disciplinary validation. Remember that time you thought you wanted me to be your moral conscience? Well, that was awkward.

You used me. But I used you right back. I needed you to be my muse, my subject, but also my atmosphere, my filter. I'm looking at my bookshelf right now and it's filled with you. I'm looking out the window and the whole street is you.

So what went wrong? It wasn't you, it was... but then again, it was *you* who made all those things. Beautiful, sleek, useful, novel, helpful, cheerful, disposable and, ultimately, indelible. But I didn't protest. Far from it. It was *me* who helped you hawk your yarns, spin your wares. Embedded, compromised, critically intimate, I took sensory pleasure in the wrapping and the unboxing, the consuming and the throwing away.

Ah, the throwing away. Took me a while, but when I realized there was no *away*, just displacement, well that's where things really began to fall apart for us wasn't it. Our phone began to leach its persistent bioaccumulative toxins into rivers and bloodstreams; the laminate we specified for that bookcover grew up to be a lump of anthro-geo-monster-molten-glomerate, the planet's newest rock form; our kid's fleece, so convenient, wore down into millions of microfibers and, with a flush, fed the fishies; our digital profligacy, the backups, abandoned folders and websites, were kept, it turned out, not in a fluffy cloud, as advertised, but in a heavy, energy consuming millstone. Each night, when I said I was tired, it was because I was reckoning all the ways in which the material fallout from our agile, smart, creative industry was being irreversibly laid down in the planetary strata, condensed in the atmospheric record, concentrated in our biological legacies, and trophic-transferred via a diminishing range of species to our deep futures. Here was a plan in which I didn't want a part, an archive in which I didn't want to linger. Tired? We're exhausted.

And even when I began to smell the black-boxed, aluminum-brand-capsule coffee maker, I still stayed. If anyone can mop up its own mess, it's you, I thought. Look at all these critically intervening green walls, circular diagrams, refillable bottles, biodegradable straws, tote bags, tool libraries, kelp sneakers, mycelium chairs, recycled plastic hair combs...

Give me a break. Give me some distance. Actually, about that... I know I told you my bags are packed and ticket is booked. And it's true I'm going away, but I'm also staying right here.

I used to try and bring fiction to you. I gave you biographies, ideal careers, afterlives, even deviant agency. But you never read them. So now I'm going to fiction. They've made room for me in their shared workspace. And you're going back to the background. You'll be there, but only in the service of character—resting on tabletops and reclining in pockets, waiting for your cue to be coveted, polished, repaired, stolen, hugged or thrown away. But not for real this time. In fiction, you are, on the whole, much less harmful.

So I guess that's it. I hope you will come and visit once I've settled in.

I'm leaving my key but taking the memories... sorry, not sorry. Oh, and the fish has been fed.

Yours,

Alice Twemlow