

LOSING IS AN ART

BY MIRIAM HEDDY

*The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.*

—from “One Art” by Elizabeth Bishop

I fancy men. I suppose I might as well begin with that, rather than anything else. Kate Ross, *Doctor* bloody Ross, found out. It was only a matter of time, really. Still, I've no clear idea whether it was what she was going for, pushing like that, or if it was a lucky accident for her that I cracked when I did. She might as well've been trying to find out my favourite colour for all that it matters now.

She's a sly one. I've spent months after a session with her trying to match up her questions with my answers, trying to figure out what she might've learned from it. Bodie and I have even compared notes. But she's a trick cyclist, to the tips of her unpolished fingernails, and I'm not sure I want to know what I might've said over the years. The Cow's clever, always scheduling these things after we'd been worn to shreds by Macklin, when we were bloody near the end of the line and wishing we were out there getting shot at instead of inside getting our arses kicked around. She gets you when you're low, after you've failed a couple of Macklin's tests, when you've got the idea that maybe you're not cut out for this for mob for yet another year, maybe you're getting too old for it all.

And maybe I was. Maybe this was just the proof of that, that I couldn't keep my mouth shut. Going out with a big bang. But hell, maybe it was something else, a sign that the times are changing. I'd looked around, and things were different, weren't they?

Just last week, I saw two blokes kissing on the street. Really going at it, snogging like they'd need a room any second. When I was a copper, I would've given 'em hell, threatened 'em and made them move on. Never did arrest a bloke for that on my watch, not even in the public bogs. But I wasn't in the streets protesting, either, now was I?

P'raps I should've been. Bodie always figures me for the protesting kind.

I fancy men, yeah, but women, too. I want to be clear about that. Not a queer. Not by half.

Protesting too much, more like.

All right, then. Maybe by half. Bisexual. Sounds like one of the labels in a biology text. Multicellular organism, bisexual, male. Wasn't half bad at biology. I told Bodie that once, when we were sharing school stories after we'd run out of anything interesting to talk about, and he'd sniggered and said he was a student of biology himself—the female kind.

Not my type, anyway.

Or so I used to think. Too good looking, and smug about it, besides. As well as a right idiot most of the time.

Protesting too much. Yeah, I see the irony. Wish I were like him. Wish I wasn't introspective. Bodie can look in the mirror and see his own reflection and smile at it, easy as that.

His body is what gets me. The smile is just enough to make me want to knock his teeth in. And when he whinges on, I sometimes do end up hitting him. I can't help it, and he can take it. Besides, I could've resisted anybody else. Could've resisted him if he was perfect, hard like some bloody macho man. It wouldn't be worth the trouble to hit him. Or love him. Or fuck him. *Want* to fuck him. Oh god, do I.

But no. Couldn't be that easy. I must have offended someone higher up, I've always thought, and Bodie's my penance for something. I don't even care to know what. It's enough that he watches my back better than anyone should, keeping me alive then only to make me suffer. Whilst he enjoys himself at my expense.

Hedonist. I'd bet my last pound that he somehow managed to swing it so's to get chocolates imported into Angola. Probably was best friends with every cook in the Merchant Marine, he was. Hard body? Not my partner. Yeah, he's strong all right. Got muscles to spare, and shoulders broad enough to intimidate most of the scum we run into on the streets. But he also couldn't pass up a bakery box, a pint at the local, or a good take-away. Even a bad take-away, comes to that. Yeah, my brilliant partner had to have that softness about him, the middle that says that, one day, he'll have a real tum on him.

I mock him more than I should, on that. I'm always telling him "You won't pass the physical, eating that." But he manages it anyway, if only to spite me.

It's been ten years now that he's been managing that. And this time...this last it was me who couldn't pass it. Some might say my heart wasn't in it, but ta very much to the

miracle of modern science, the old ticker's just fine. Nah, it was my head that wasn't in it. I could feel it, knew it right when we stepped inside Macklin's bloody warehouse. That sadist'll outlive us all.

One look over at Bodie, just that one look, and I felt it snap in me. Blue eyes all crinkled around the edges, smilin' at me like a dare, like he does every year. *Go on, Ray, dare you—bloody double-dare you to take me.* Like a kid, he is, all of about five.

But I'm coming up to on forty, and feeling it. And I looked at him and said to myself, "Not this time." And I dared myself to mean it.

Funny things, dares. I can take Bodie's challenges or leave them. To him, I said, "Dinner after Kate."

And he nodded, never one to pass on a gratis meal. Predictable, he is. But I'm not. How could he know what was in store, if I didn't have a bloody clue?

∞ **CI5** ∞

"Penny for 'em?" He was driving us home, which was good 'cos my hands were trembling a little, thinking this'd be a fine time for the Cow to call us on the job.

Course he didn't. He'd already got the results, I imagined. One Raymond Doyle, ex-CI5...

Nah, still CI5, and probably always. The Cow'd find a use for me, wouldn't he? He's invested too much time and money to let me off yet. But maybe he wouldn't. And even if he did, I could still leave, and would. It was decided. I'd decided that, taken that dare, finally.

Still, with the results in, we wouldn't get a call. Not till tomorrow, when he called us into his office, dark look on his face, and delivered the news, making it official. Bodie had passed. I knew that already, from the big grin on his face and the way he kept looking over at me, saying, "sunshine" this and "sunshine" that, not bright enough to notice there was a bloody dark cloud hanging in the car with us.

“Thinkin’ about what to cook,” I answered, finally.

“Spaghetti,” he said, and I nodded, not paying that much attention. He could’ve asked for lobster *au gratin* and I’d’ve nodded and worried about it later. He’s thinking about his stomach, and here I was, thinking about...

What it was going to be like to tell him I threw the fight. Took a dive like some amateur.

Yeah, that too. But mostly, I was thinking about what it’d be like to kiss him, right before he bashed my head in for it. Lovely, I was thinking, and that scared me more than anything else.

∞ **CI5** ∞

We pulled in, the car protesting the way he takes the corner, the way he always scrapes us into the spot. Then he was dashing up to the door, bounding in with his key to my flat in hand, opening up the door and motioning me in, his hand on me arse.

He pinched me as he glided on into my flat. I can remember when I used to jump at that, used to get angry. Now it was lucky I knew he didn’t mean it, ’cos it was only that keeping me in my pants.

“Need any help?”

He’d already grabbed a beer and sunk down into my good armchair, and the proper answer was no, so I went with that, not feeling like arguing.

“I *think* I shall do better than spaghetti,” I said, head in the fridge so as not to have to look at him.

“Ah...make it a real celebration, eh?”

“Yeah.” I took out a beer and raised it to him. “To the end of another year.”

“And the beginning of the next one,” he answered.

I hesitated but not long enough to get his back up, and I smiled, walking over to clink bottles with him. Why the hell not? Not like there wouldn’t be another year next. It would be different, that’s all.

Protesting again, Raymond.

It took another beer and three glasses of the good stuff before that little voice was silent again and, by then, I was mellow enough to realise that I should probably enjoy the look on Bodie’s face when I told him that I was off the squad.

∞ **CI5** ∞

I was wrong.

“You *what*?”

“Didn’t pass, did I.”

“You mean you failed it? Pull the other one, mate.”

I shrugged, taking another drink. I was on four now, downed quickly, and the floor was getting farther away, but I figured it’d be closer soon enough.

Bodie laughed it off, taking it for pessimism before catching on, and then he stopped laughing and his face got hard. He looked angry as hell when I told him it was intentional, whatever that meant. Both of us know well enough that the tests aren’t about physical ability half as much as nerve, and I had the one and had lost the other. He looked bloody well furious, and I was just drunk enough to assume it was all aimed at me, but another drink later, one he poured out for both of us, and I suddenly realised he was mad at himself. Then I told him what I’d told Kate Ross, stumbling over it stupidly, my tongue tied into knots. Still don’t remember if I worked the word “bisexual” in there anywhere, but there it was.

His voice got soft, then, almost breathy, “You— Why?” and when I shook my head, he answered, “Do you even know?”

“Dunno. Sorry.” Too much booze and I couldn’t really bother to find the words, so he could understand. Better that way, as I didn’t think there were any good enough. If I’d been sober, I would’ve probably said something stupid, something that would’ve ended it then and there between us. And I wanted a clean break, didn’t I?

But, the floor was swaying beneath my

trainers, distracting me. I hadn't got drunk in well over a month. Last couple of years I'd had to take the whole annual thing seriously—we both had—and we would act like a couple of athletes in training, swearing off booze and women, and cheating a bit on both.

The booze had gone straight to my head, unused to it as I was, and it felt almost too good, numbing the rougher edges, making me wonder what I was so worried about.

Then I found myself sitting on my sofa, not too worried about how I got there. And Bodie was leaning over me, tipping my head up, holding onto me chin and staring at me like he was trying to figure out who he was partnered with. Who he *had* been partnered with. And then I leaned forward just a bit, hardly thinking about it, well past the ability to plan it.

And I kissed him. Right on the mouth and hard enough to be sure he knew I meant it.

And then I passed out.

∞ **CI5** ∞

"You're a right coward, you know that, Doyle? Bloody hell."

"Wot?" I was too bleary to do much more than lift my head a bit, only then noticing that he had his hand in my hair. It pulled, and he didn't ease up when I shook my head. Instead, his fingers started to pull at my hair, and I wished I'd had the sense to cut it as I was always threatening to.

"Fucking coward. Fucking—"

I stopped listening when he started cursing. Very creative at it, he is. He knows a lot of words and they all mean the same thing. But still, sometimes it's hard to find the right one that says it all, how much you wish you could take it all back, how much you regret fucking it all up so quickly.

And it's not till the morning after that you can know that, for certain. When you're leaning over the toilet hanging on for dear life—then you know how much you've lost.

Bodie, standing above me, was still going

at it, letting loose more words than I had food or drink left to give up.

"Ta very."

He finally let go of my hair, mercilessly pulling some of it out—intentionally, I reckoned—and then he handed me a towel and a glass of water and I didn't bother to get up, wiping and spitting whilst still on my knees.

"Witless idiot."

"Yeah," I agreed with him, entirely.

"Called Cowley, you know."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Told him you and I wouldn't make it in today."

"He'll kill us both."

"Oh, but you assume he *cares* whether you come in, don't you?" Then, more gently, "He gave us the day off. Had more sense than you did."

That stung, so I said nothing, waiting for my stomach to settle before I decided if I was leaving the bog.

Bodie stomped out past me, apparently done holding my head up for me. It was another few minutes before I could stand up and make it to the living room, but there was a cuppa waiting for me and Bodie was slumped down on the sofa, legs stretched out in front of him. He sighed explosively when he saw me.

I knew I looked horrible, from my unfortunate glance in the mirror as I stood up, gripping the basin and afraid to let go for a few minutes.

And, remembering the kiss (and I *did* wish I could blame that on drinking too much, or better yet, that I'd could've been so drunk as to have forgot about it), I thought that it was highly unlikely that Bodie would reconsider a relationship with his partner in this state. Appealing, I was most definitely not.

Still, I'd brushed my teeth and hair, so it wasn't too bad. He'd seen me worse off. Course, that handy little voice that must've been my near-drowned conscience reminded me that, hair neat or not, Bodie was still angry as hell, and he hadn't ever made a move to get

me in bed in my finer moments, such as they've been.

"Sorry about that," I said, wincing because I realised that I wasn't sure what I was apologising for.

"Very nice, Ray."

Bodie, and I had to squint to get a better look without getting any nearer to him, looked horrible as well, which was some comfort. But he hadn't drunk nearly so much, had he?

The bottle sitting empty on the table, next to another half-empty one that I'd been saving for the weekend, told its own story. I picked the empty up and put it in the bin, and could feel Bodie watching me.

"Said I was sorry, didn't I?"

"Yeah. Want to go over which part, exactly, you consider to be your primary mistake, *mate*?"

If he thought I was going to say kissing him, he was farther gone than he looked. I ignored him, trying to figure where I'd left my watch. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Going on half past four."

"In the morning?"

He nodded, looking weary.

"You hung-over or still drunk?" Not that it bloody mattered at four AM.

"Hung-over."

"Good. You won't mind if I don't make breakfast, then."

He blanched at that, turning a greener shade of white, and I was glad of it.

But I felt sorry enough for myself to notice that, green around the gills as he was, he was still a looker. Could've kissed him again, if my head didn't feel like it was about to explode. I thought for a moment I might anyway, and let him help it along a bit.

I turned to go to the bedroom, needing a lie down for a few hours, at least, before I could make any more disastrous life-altering decisions.

"I'm not leaving the squad, you know." His voice was defiant, and I could tell without looking that his arms were crossed over his

chest, his face set. But I did look, and he was, and it was.

I stopped suddenly at the door.

Turning around, I set my tea back on the table, feeling like one big walking question mark. "Never thought you would."

"Oh. Well, I'm not then. So that's settled."

"Sounds like it."

Well, that was the end of that, then.

"What're your plans?"

Desperately wanting to go to the bedroom now, I had to think about it before I could answer. "Have none, at present. I thought Cowley might have a word or two on that."

"Right. Better wait to hear before you..."

He trailed off, then. Ten years and he had no more idea what came next than I did.

"Yeah. 's what I thought."

He wasn't going to mention the kiss. Surreal, it was, talking about the future, us not being partners, so calmly. Well, one of us was calm, anyway. I was about to be ill again, and I had a headache that would kill a lesser man. Like my partner. Not my partner. The headache was pounding harder, seeming to keep time with my pulse, and it got hard to breathe, suddenly, my chest tightening uncomfortably. But it wasn't a heart attack. Just panic.

Not like I hadn't thought about that. Thought about that too much, hadn't I? Almost made me run faster, shoot straighter. Almost kept my mouth shut in Ross's office, thinking about that.

But I'd tried to quit too many times, until suddenly, it all came together, like a light coming on, and I knew that this was the right thing, the only thing I could've done. Eventually, I would've got out, injured again. I'd believed that for a time, hadn't I, until I realised that a bullet in the heart hadn't done it. Wouldn't do it. What the hell could if that didn't? Cowley stayed in with a bullet in his leg, and he didn't have Bodie to think about, to watch over. Or maybe he did. I had wondered what was keeping the old man going all these years.

Suddenly, it was clear. Bodie was doing it to us both.

I'd tried to leave, after Coogan, after Ann, hell, it was practically an annual ritual. What a joke I was. But each time my damn fool of a partner talked me out of it, giving me reasons to stay, and he never once seemed to realise that he was the only convincing reason, and the rest was just so much chitchat. He'd been seducing me into staying for ten years, until it'd finally occurred to me that he was a prick tease. Bloody good at it, too.

"Did you mean that?" He was not looking at me, staring into his tea like it was alive.

"What?"

"Last night."

I didn't answer, my voice was barely operating and the rest not far behind. I felt like I'd left bits and pieces of myself strewn all over London, and I didn't have the energy to worry over how I was going to collect them again.

"You did mean it, then," he said, up and out of his chair and standing beside me before I could follow, and it came to me that I'd answered him with the truth, hadn't I, not even knowing the question.

"Right nutter, you are. Always did fancy myself behind a desk." Bodie's intense look had turned into a grin, the green had faded back to his normal milk-white again.

"A what? A desk?" I hadn't a clue what he was on about, as my mind was still trying to turn round the idea that I'd finally done it, broken free of him. No longer partners. Easier this way.

"Yeah. Think I could convince the old man I need a secretary?"

I noticed again that his hair was salt and pepper all over now. It made him look distinguished. An illusion, the bloody lot of it. He'd told me I was looking distinguished five years earlier, shot through with grey then, and I'd said I was just getting old. Never expected to survive long enough to be distinguished.

"A what?"

"Secretary. Typing, you know. Still can't worth a damn."

"Maybe he'll share Betty," I said, not really thinking, and he grinned, loopily, like he'd thought of a joke.

"Between the three of us? She'll not be pleased. The old girl hasn't got the energy anymore, has she? Besides, I was thinking of something a little more..." His hands finished his sentence rather crudely, his grin gone wider.

"Missed the women's movement, did you?" The jibe slipped out, easily, as easily as I knew that he'd caught me again, not letting go, not even when I thought I'd finally worked free. And strangely, I wasn't as angry as I thought I'd be. Like after Ann, when I'd walked away. Like a kid, I was, running away from home and never getting past the corner.

"Must've been having a kip. Why, what did I miss?"

"You're a right bastard, you know that?" and I laughed, then, because he was looking at me so brilliantly, and because I was catching on. A bit slow, but there, finally.

"Handsome bastard, you mean."

"Know what I mean, don't I?" Not really knowing anything at all other than we'd gone from newly estranged to mates again, and I was hoping we might make it all the way to lovers without one of us fucking it up by saying the wrong thing.

Like a giant rubber band, I was, and he held the other end tight, not looking a bit worried about how hard I snapped when I came back. He was used to it, after ten years. Takes the sting out.

"Yeah. Big desk, chair, secretary. The old man's been grooming me as his replacement for years now, you know."

"Has he?" I said, not at all sure that he hadn't been. I hadn't given it much thought, one way or the other. I liked to think the old man'd live forever.

"Yeah. Handpicked me, didn't he. And if he can't find you a proper job..."

I winced, suddenly thinking about what kind of work ex-coppers get. Security in an office building, consultant to some Bond Street business. I knew I couldn't stay on with the mob, at any rate. It'd be impossible, running into Bodie every day, or worse still, not running into him at all. Not partners. Not anything, really. Mates? Beer and a match on weekends? Maybe that. But it wouldn't be enough.

"...you could always volunteer to be my secretary."

"You what?"

"Always could type better'n me. I hear men can do that kind of work, clerical, now. Something called the women's movement, you said? Yeah." Nodding, he looked at me tip to toe, like he was appraising a suspect. No, a bird.

"Sod off." He was serious. Serious about me, at any rate. Hadn't got very far this time, had I? The ill feeling came back as I realised that I was never going to be rid of him. Even now, he was spinning tales of me as his office mate, running his coffee machine, and I was standing there, listening. He was clearly insane, and what the hell did that make me?

"Always wanted to try that."

"What?"

"What?"

"What've you always wanted to try?" I repeated. God, but he was gorgeous. His lower lip was jutted out, wet, and he was looking at me like he was suddenly seeing someone he didn't recognize.

"Sodding off." Then, speaking slowly like he was talking to an idiot, he clarified, "Sod-om-y. Y'know." And he shrugged, which was the end of me.

I laughed, and it sounded to my ears a bit hysterical, but maybe it was just lust. Fucking hell. And I was worried about kissing him. "C'mon, mate. You're not queer." And I had the good sense, coming two beats too late, to wonder what the hell might make me want to convince him out of it. If he wanted to be queer,

let him.

"Wasn't the Controller of CeeAyeBloody Five until a minute ago."

My mouth was still hanging open, when he kissed me, which gave me the advantage of not having to figure out how the hell to respond to that, not thinking right off to point out that he was *still* not the bloody Controller.

"You let Cowley hear you saying that and he'll have your head," I said when I could speak again.

"You worry about screwing your own head on straight and let me worry about keeping mine, sunshine."

"I—"

I didn't get farther, because his hand clamped over my mouth, his body suddenly pressing mine up against the wall harder than I would've liked. His voice, when he spoke again, had taken a sudden turn from sweet to dangerous. And I was a fool because it was exciting, the hangover fading and the buzz in my head seeming to move down a bit, then down farther still.

"People change, don't they, Ray?"

I nodded.

"Nice, though, if they tell their partners first, innit?"

I waited, then nodded again, getting more excited, getting randy as hell and, not able to speak, I pushed my hips forward, and he responded, thrusting against me so that I gasped behind his hand.

"This has been a bloody terrible day. And tomorrow's..."

He didn't have to remind me of what tomorrow was going to be like. I'd be damned lucky if the Cow didn't throw me out on my ear for sabotaging me own tests. Already, I could hear him going on about the wasted time, what was I thinking, and there was what I'd confessed, in a moment of sheer and now unimaginable suicidal impulse. And all that was before he started in on Bodie, wanting to know why he didn't know what the hell I was up to. Partners are supposed to communicate,

or so he'd remind us. And maybe we needed reminding of that.

"Tomorrow we'll worry about tomorrow."

I would've agreed, but instead I licked the palm of his hand, trying to convey some of what I was feeling with my eyes.

He blinked at me, then smiled, taking his hand off me, finally, and letting me have another go at kissing him. This time, I really worked at paying attention, trying to sublimate the oddness of kissing someone I'd spent too much time with. Should've been like kissing my sister.

It wasn't, though. His mouth was wet, tasting slightly of scotch. He smelled familiar, of perspiration and the newest leather jacket he'd bought after finally retiring the blue one I'd liked so much. He got us into the bedroom and onto the bed with the kind of slick speed that had always made me a bit envious, watching him put the moves on more than one woman over the years.

But he didn't give me time to think, continuing on his merry way to getting my clothes off, me working to get his clothes off, meanwhile. Polonecks, still and always, and the chinless wonder was lucky he still had his head on when I was finished with him. As it was, his hair was standing on end, his cheeks pink, and his eyebrows were raised so he looked surprised and half-amused.

Not wanting to be the subject of any more of his comments, clerical or otherwise, I shut his mouth, sticking my tongue in it for good measure.

He met me half-way, out of habit, I suppose. And I had to fight, giving him an elbow to get out from under him. Maybe he *had* been in training to be controller for CI5 all these years, and maybe not, but bollocks if he had much knowledge of use here.

I got on top of him, letting my weight settle on him, pinning him down and keeping him there for a moment. If he was apt to change his mind, this was when to do it. First time I had a bloke on top of me, I nearly did the same.

It's an odd feeling, that, giving up control.

He grinned up at me, which made me more than a bit nervous. See, he didn't seem to realise yet that he wasn't in control of this. Nor was I, come to that. Out of our hands. I never used to believe in much of what I'd been taught, but you get a bit older and tell enough women their husbands have gone and died—you watch your mates die, one after the other, and you fall in love with your bleeding idiot of a partner when that's the last reasonable thing to do. It's either become an atheist, or get down on your knees.

Which I was, straddling Bodie and pinning his hands above his head. He licked his lips, his mouth quirking up a bit, and I nearly laughed at the expression on his face, realising what I must look like above him, naked as a new-born, hair awry, not to mention the sheer nonsense of it, the impossibility of it.

Men just don't fuck their partners after ten years.

Not without coming fast and hard, anyway.

Never was too self-conscious about being starkers, nor about sex, but this was Bodie, and it was one thing to double up on a bed with a mate, each of you getting your end away with some bird. Quite another to be engaged with wrestling your naked partner to the bed, hard as we both were, intent on each other, but more than that, lost in our own pleasures.

We hardly made it all the way to sodomy, what with him bucking up under me, looking like a fair fallen angel, all classic good looks, eyelashes fluttering, his mouth open. I kissed him again, licking across his mouth, pressing into him to find his tongue again. I kissed his nose, too, finding it almost too hard to bear, the wonder of it, doing something like that and not getting thrown across the room for it.

I shifted down him a bit so I could reach down and touch myself and him too, grabbing hold of us both and pulling up hard, the way I liked it. He moaned and didn't open his eyes, which was good because I could hardly have

lasted if he'd looked at me then.

Then I gave up, my whole body trembling with lust and exhaustion. Failing those bloody tests was harder than passing them, truth be told. That and confessing my sins and predilections toward blokes and I still hadn't had any sleep. Sodomy would have to wait, then, I thought, knowing this was a beginning, even without our discussing it.

Drawing down on him, lying full-length against him, I settled in for some easy frottage. Both of us were sweating pretty freely now, the glide was easy, long pushes and pulls against his soft and hard body. We moved well together, after years of practice. Felt like a dance, it did, going faster, then slowing down, easing up, then giving in and rutting like a raw virgin when he finally opened his eyes and looked at me.

I pushed up on my arms a bit, our lower halves still sealed against one another, and at first it was like he was looking past me, through me, and I recognised that look, glazed over and dilated. Probably looked like that myself. But then he focused on me, his brows drawing close, his face getting that "I'm concentrating on a difficult problem" look. Most of his difficult problems involved crosswords and finding another excuse to get in a bird's knickers.

"Next time..."

I waited, but he didn't say anything, and then I realised it was because I'd pressed back down again, not really meaning to, but the flesh was weak and hard and I was too far gone to resist the pull of his fair familiar body.

"Next time—you try—this..."

I sighed and moaned a little, trying to split my attention between the heady scent of precome in the air, the way he looked, even fish-faced with concentrating, and the fact that, whatever he was trying to say might be important.

"Next time, Ray, I'll bloody well kill you myself," he said it, finally, ending on a gasp as I couldn't help myself.

His voice, when he threatened, gets this

edge to it, you see, goes lower until it comes from somewhere dark inside him. Trapped between that and the softness and hardness and too many other sensations, I collapsed over him before I could finish coming, not even bothering to hold myself up.

Felt like I was dead weight, then, barely aware of the warm wet pulses of him coming against my stomach. We were both panting hard, his breathing loud in my ear, his cheek pressed against mine, both of us needing a shave.

Looking back, I think he meant it, though I hadn't been sure of it then—either of the threat or the "love you" that came later and was that much harder for either of us to say aloud, the heat of the moment past us.

So when Bodie finally took over as Controller, that smug grin of his nearly compelled me to flatten him in front of a mob of new recruits, and wouldn't *that* have been a sight for them. It wasn't that I minded the concept of his being the boss, or the practice of it. And it took a lot of practice before he got the hang of not losing his temper and letting fly with a great deal of profound insightful criticism of the newest blokes. If I hadn't been laughing my arse off, it would have been a bit sexy, the way his ears'd pink up with the effort to keep from biting off his own tongue in a fury. But we got that sorted out soon enough, and he found his place without too much effort on my part. The bloke had always been trainable, if you knew the tricks.

And I found myself behind a desk as well, although it took too long before Cowley, still with his hand in it, or Bodie could agree on how best to use my skills. They finally settled on a sort of an interagency diplomatic post, and Bodie and I had a bit of a giggle over the irony of that one. Murphy, one of the few of the old mob still hanging in there until retirement instead of moving on to other posts in other agencies, those that survived, was now stuck with training the new recruits in interrogation and technology. Last month, just

as I was settling into the job and figuring out how to use the newest computer system, he brought me a flag from the U.N. and attached it to my office door as a not very funny joke. I've left it there, having not found anything better to hang up beside my name.

No, what finally threw me, adaptable as I am, was that I've finally realised that there was simply nowhere I could go that Bodie wouldn't haul me back. Even in death I found he wouldn't let me pass, so I should've known it a bit earlier.

I guess I'm too stubborn for my own good.

Could hardly even lose myself without his finding me again, even from the edge, even gone well past it. Easy, that was. Made it easy, didn't I. Always had to be close enough to watch his back, or he mine, and losing the partnership turned out to be well beyond even my talents.

Losing was an art, I had discovered. And losing Bodie took more of me than I had to give. And I'd given up my dreams of being an artist years before. I didn't have it in me to keep trying only to fail in the end. Or worse yet, to succeed. ∞

One Art

*The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.
Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.
Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.
I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.
I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.
- Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.*

—Elizabeth Bishop