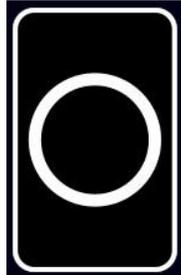


Circle Square Cross Star Wavy Lines

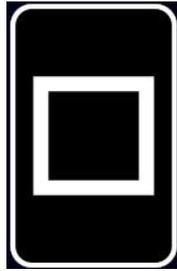


The phrase had stuck in her head when she'd first read it. She'd been on some internet forum or other, idly browsing the anodyne chat, when she'd stumbled across a thread devoted to an actor; she couldn't remember his name now, but he was British, and known for playing tough, grime-faced brutes with a hint of danger.

"Ufff", said someone in the thread, "I'd let him ruin my life"

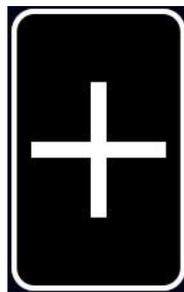
She had thought about this at the time with a slight sense of pity; it seemed a reasonably sad aspiration. But as time passed she came back to the phrase in her head and replayed it, this time the contours of the inner imagined voice shaping more and more to those of her own. Perhaps what her staid, quiet life needed was chaos and - carefully managed of course - destructive unpredictability.

She was aware of the ironic contradiction, and was quietly excited by it.



After a while, and with judicious use of candles, small pieces of paper and focussed will, someone new entered her life. Two chance meetings and an unexpected mutual friend seemed like the universe was working in her favour; and before long they were starting to spend time together more often than not.

He was, from most outward appearances, perfectly normal; indeed, he possessed the same air of faint repression and sense of propriety that she did. However under his calm, reserved expression, there flickered a hidden, second countenance; a sly, secret smile that would occasionally, almost imperceptibly break the surface. It suggested other things; unknowable things, things kept out of sight for fear of others being incapable of understanding. Whilst some may have found this disturbing, she thrilled inside at the mystery of it. Here, she thought, was the chaos she'd been looking for.



There was a blank spot in him though. Something hidden, obfuscated; a gate that seemed locked. Behind every interaction, in every physical moment together, there was a promise of something glimpsed, almost unseen but hovering on the periphery. She posed innocuous questions, gave up some of her own secrets in the hope of getting a foothold onto the ascent into what lay further within. But nothing seemed to budge; there was a vague grey fuzz where the door inwards should be.

Then one night, as they were sitting in a comfortable silence after dinner, she felt it. A firm, unmistakable *push* in the top left of her mind.

“What was that?”, she asked sharply, studying his face.

“I don’t know what you mean”, he replied; but the sly, secret look on his face that had been so intriguing before now appeared again, this time a promise rather than a hint.

And with that, everything changed. Something had opened up; a two-way transit of emotion, sensation and shared thought. Physical feeling extended and looped back and forwards between them; when apart, their thoughts became convolved and experiences melded until, at times, she couldn’t tell what was happening in front of her and what was through his eyes or skin. The secrecy that she’d felt before was replaced by an openness, almost naked in its rawness; she could see that what had seemed furtive or sly was instead him assessing whether he could expose himself in as complete a way as she’d ever imagined; a true intermingling of the purest distillation of each self.

This, she thought, was what she was looking for. Something that eclipsed all else, that gave more meaning through two than an incomplete one. This could be bigger than her own prosaic life.



Things ended, as they do. The world wasn't ready for the intensity of their pairing. The pressure of sustaining such an intimate connection started to weigh down on them and those around them; load-bearing walls started to strain, timbers that shored up the structure of their lives began to splinter and snap. Ruefully, she realised that what she had wanted was the idea of the thing rather than the thing itself; isolated in a bubble, the two of them could be the best, intertwined versions of themselves but once reality seeped in through the papered over cracks such things were never sustainable. She made things easier by abruptly cutting off all contact; the blocked number list on her phone could bear weight that the universe itself had been unable to withstand.

The visions came a few weeks later. She was sitting on the bus staring out of the window when, to her surprise, she found herself suddenly and inexplicably on fire. No small spark, no smouldering embers - just sudden conflagration surrounding her, in her hair, fumes filling her lungs, the heat almost unbearable. She opened her mouth to scream but it filled instantaneously with acrid, searing smoke, filling her lungs. Instinctively squeezing her eyes shut, she opened them to find herself still on the bus, unharmed and actually, if anything a little cold.

There was a familiarity about the intensity of the sensation. Something that felt almost like a signature, scrawled at the bottom.

Over the next few weeks, these continued. She would be looking idly at passing traffic when she would suddenly notice that all of the oncoming vehicles were filled with horribly fantastic contents; one car seemingly filled to the brim with blood that was starting to crust over at the windows, like a slowly thickening scab; another with huge suckers writhing and palpating on the glass as if huge octopi or something darker still squirmed within, a nacreous sheen coating the windscreen suggesting some sort of horrific discharge. Later that same week, as a passenger on a car journey, she watched as the building they were passing outside began to crumple and fold in horrible, non-geometric ways, suggesting a huge invisible limb was bearing down on them - as the closest building collapsed and distended, she could sense that something huge and unknowable was encroaching upon the car itself with the promise of oblivion under the weight of a bus-sized appendage. By this point the visions had become all too familiar, and if anything comfortably predictable; the only curiosity was the form each would take.

When she awoke from a nap the following week and discovered on opening her eyes that the whole world had seemingly vanished to be replaced by a deep, horrible blackness, she was almost amused at the lack of imagination; that is, until she became aware that she could still hear, and that everywhere surrounding her was a muffled clanking and thudding. Far in the distance in the blackness was a faint glow, from which she could hear the unmistakable sounds of someone shrieking over and over.

This, she thought to herself, was what happens when a part of someone is left behind after the rest of them breaks off; a bee's stinger left in the wound, a piece of the knife left lodged to fester. This is what happens when thoughts curdle and spoil. When all that is left of a seemingly inviolable connection is confusion and rage, the psychic residue is furiously poisonous.

Aware that this couldn't continue without her sanity taking a leftward turn into oblivion, and with a wish to expel the foreign body and cauterise the deep laceration, she started to shore up her mental defences. When she felt the edges of reality start to swim and squirm around her, she reached out towards the familiar presence, and *pushed back*. At first this just felt like furrowing her brow, hard - an implacable resistance meeting her strained concentration. But with practice - as many-limbed things climbed around the room, or as the moon turned the colour of a bruise in a sky with burning stars - she could feel herself making ingress. And then one day she pushed, hard; and the world briefly filled with grey flat static and a ringing acho of a drone, before returning to normal.

She felt around the edges of her mind, suddenly aware of how confidently self-aware she was of the contents of her skull. She could sense an emptiness where before there had been something else. He was gone.



A few months later, she sat at dinner with a new friend.

Something about her caught his eye, and, pausing his appraisal of his salad, he asked with a smile

“Hey, what you thinking?”

She smiled back, a sly, secret look just under the surface; and with a faint, imperceptible *push*, replied

“You’ll see”