

THE BOOK CLUB

EMMA CARRION MOSCHEN

THE BOOK CLUB MEETS ON Sundays to discuss how to turn human skin into parchment. Sybil suggests that we should blend it with paper pulp and press it into new sheets.

“Too diluted,” Helen pipes up. The few women that were nodding to Sybil quickly turn their agreements towards Helen. I saw her as a serene arbitrator when we used to meet on Wednesdays. She played referee when a discussion of the novel we were snacking on that week got too heated. But her voice has a different flavour on Sundays. It’s a rich merlot that reverberates in the back rooms of her bookshop, like a priest leading holy prayer.

Other women toss ideas around like we’re discussing what the brute said to his blushing virgin in the latest chapter of our mafia romance. That’s what we should be talking about, not how to bind a book made from flesh. The stench of that idea keeps me hovering at the edges of the conversation with my lips sealed tight. I glance at the door, gauging the probability of a successful escape.

“Any thoughts Alma?” I wrench my eyes away from the door. Expectant eyes looking at me in rapt attention. It should be unsettling, but there’s a warm comfort to knowing that they’re all listening. That my words matter.

“I guess you could quilt it. But I don’t know if it’s even—you’d need impossible equipment.” But if they got their hands on a strong needle and resistant thread, it would work. I shut my mouth before I can keep fuelling their satanic fire but it’s too late. Helen nods and the other women follow.

“You sew?”

“I used to, before—” I shoot a quick glance at the door. Helen catches it. “Before I came to London. Left my machine back home.”

The other women dissolve into chatter about the idea, but Helen doesn’t stop looking at me. I find that if I sneak a glance at her, she’s already boring her eyes into mine. She keeps that intensity up until the end of the meeting, when she speaks a couple of words in Latin. I don’t understand them, but Sybil says that I will in due time. The women scatter back to their lives, away from the dark corners of the backroom with scarlet stains on its concrete floor.

I reach for the door, thinking I'm out safe, but Helen places a hand on my elbow. It sends an electrifying shock down my arm.

"Come up for a tea." It isn't a question. I nod.

Helen presses a hot mug into my hands and sits across from me on her couch. Our feet touch. She takes a sip, her knowing eyes peeking from over the rim of her mug. "What do you think of the club?"

I give myself time to think by taking a long sip of my tea. "I don't quite know what to make of it."

Helen smiles. "Alma, do you actually read?" The question takes me by surprise.

"I like it."

Helen chuckles. "But do you actually enjoy it?"

"I like a good book."

"Sure, but that's not what any of us are here for, not really." She puts her tea down, freeing her hands to wave around in the air. "Lonely women come to these, Alma. They hope that some pages and a hard-cover will be able to make them some friends. Our Sundays just get rid of all that filler."

"But we're still talking about books."

Helen grins with a dangerous glint in her eye. "Books of a different kind. If we put our souls on a page, and bind those pages together—well what's the need for a club? Eternal companionship, Alma. That's what Sundays are about." I don't notice that I've leaned into her while she was speaking. She has a way with words that speaks to decades of reading. Researching. Obsessing.

"Is that even possible?" My eyes are wide as saucers.

"Will you quilt the pages?" I need to say no, but what would I do on Sundays if I didn't have this? Furnish my empty flat with empty furniture? IKEA's mock-rooms leave a bad taste in my mouth. It's something about how those hollow spaces just sit there, waiting to be filled. Our knees bump together. I lean into the feeling of her skin against mine. When was the last time I was touched? I'm nodding my head before I can register what I'm doing.

Next Sunday the women surprise me with a vintage sewing machine. It's the only thing strong enough to hold the thread Sybil wove

for me. It feels slippery between my fingers. I choose to not ask what it's made of.

The women stay with me while I quilt. Helen keeps me well watered with cups of lady grey that have an orange slice floating in them. Through their ambient chatter I learn that Vero is losing touch with her son after the divorce. That Pauline's husband is sleeping with her brother, but that she doesn't care—or at least she says she doesn't. Sybil took up smoking after her wife overdosed last July to connect with her colleagues during their breaks. The warmth of our sisterhood drowns out the wet squelch of the needle as it thrusts into layers of skin. It's like when we were kids and friendships were pre-ordained by classroom groups or bathroom clubs. It's easy.

One page, then two, then three. We'll need ten in total, one for each woman at the Sunday book club. The original plan was to wait until they were all quilted and dried, so that we would be bound together. But after Sybil catches Vero at the edge of the London bridge, looking down at the Thames, Helen decides to let her go early.

Vero writes about cheating on her husband, and how he cared so little about her in the end. She tries to justify her actions as an emotional necessity, but there's deep regret in her voice as she writes this onto the first fleshy page. We chant the Latin that Helen whispered at the end of my first Sunday meeting, *effunde se, amplexi omnia*. I still don't know what it means, but I'd rather trip over my words than be the odd one out. Don't know how I'd fill my time without our Sunday confessionals.

Pauline goes next when she starts coming home to an empty house and half-scribbled notes. I bind their pages together with thick red rope and a curved embroidery needle. The pages begin to decay as the weeks pass and I restrain the urge to gag when I catch a putrid whiff. Who am I touching? I dream about leaving when the stench follows me home. But I don't. My weeks revolve around Sundays now.

After I bind their pages, Pauline's gorgeous blonde hair turns into Vero's rich chocolate brown. Vero's blue eyes melt into Sybil's amber when she gets folded into the book. Yesterday, the bound women an-

swered in unison when I asked them a question. Each page that I add makes it harder to tell where one woman ends and the other begins.

One week, I go back for my coat, which I left on the back of the sewing chair. A wet squelch rings out in the darkness and I press my ear to the backroom door. Pained moans filter through the wood. I flee without my coat, hoping that I'll get answers next week, but they never come. None of the bound women show up. It's only me, and Helen, and the last two pages.

"Where is everyone else?" Helen grins. It lights up her whole face with a reverence that's only reserved for fanatics.

"Bound." We're up in Helen's flat today. I think of the moaning cries behind the backroom door. "It will be lovely Alma. We'll be lovely." The rejection catches in my throat. I want to be lovely. To be loved. Helen guides me into the backroom, one hand clutching mine, the other pushing the door open.

It's hard to tell who is who, when the red rope I've used to bind the book is so twisted around them. Arms poke out of a fleshy mass that throbs as one. Too many eyes follow me and Helen as we sit on the floor.

Helen goes first, writing about her suicide attempt as a teenager and how her mother disowned her at the hospital. She confesses that the bookshop is on the edge of bankruptcy, but that she keeps it open for us. Only for us.

She hands me the quill and god, I should run. I want to, don't I? This is disgusting. I am disgusting. I take the quill and write about leaving the countryside after my miscarriage, about how tiny that coffin was and how I thought the city would be better. Helen threads the large fishhook needle and lays it in my hand. She kisses my fingers and holds the book still while I bind our pages. With each twist of the needle, flashes of other lives swarm my mind. Vero's troubled childhood, Helen's attempt. Memories of my daughter slip away into the conscious *we* around me. For the first time since the funeral, I find that I can breathe. It's much easier to exist when the thinking is done for you, when the feeling is done for you. Arms cradle me. When was the last time I was hugged? The last word on my lips is

echoed by the mass around me. My Latin is crisp now as we melt into each other. I borrow the mastery of the language from Helen's years of study. *Effunde se, amplexi omnia*. Pour out the self, embrace the all.