

Ceramic Hand
Elly Strigner 2012

It's nearly ten o'clock on a midsummer evening (or late summer – does August count as mid-summer? It's definitely summer, anyway), and Gemma's lying on the bed staring at the ceiling. It's warm, the window and curtains are slightly open, and the last sprays of apricot in the sky are fading into inky blue. There's a candle burning on her bedside table, cupped in a giant, beige, ceramic hand. A male hand, she thinks.

She's got an early start tomorrow and she's trying to get to sleep, but her stomach is making strange swirling noises. Somebody once told her this happens when you drink lots of fluid and then lie flat. She doesn't know if this is true. Or rather, she doesn't know if he was right. She does remember lying next to him sometimes, tucked under his arm, being entertained by the soft gurgles in his stomach – that's when he'd say disapprovingly that he'd just drunk too much water, and now it was unsettling his insides. He'd say it as though she was the one making too much noise.

He often wouldn't say much else, and that unsettled her.

Maybe I just have a stomach pre-disposed to making noises, she thinks, after a sort of slosh followed by a ripple. She goes to yoga sometimes, and when they lie down at the end of the class for relaxation, she always has to tense her stomach muscles for fear that the bleeps and gurgles erupting inside her will disturb the peace.

He would often cut their conversations short, probably paranoid that his English wasn't good enough. And he didn't come over much – she usually went to see him. There weren't many objects of his lying around to remind her of his presence, not like other boyfriends, who left jumpers, plectrums or CDs or bits of paper all over the bedroom floor. There was just this silly ceramic hand, sitting smugly by her bedside, something she would never choose for herself. He gave it to her on her birthday, unwrapped, with no card.

The candlewick makes a spluttering sound, and the flame wavers - for a second a faint shadow of the hand is projected against the wall.

She can hear her mum on the phone downstairs. She can't hear what she's saying but judging by the inflection in her voice it's probably her Dad she's talking to. Mum lets out an occasional wail of protest, an operatic yawn, but the rest of the time she sounds tired, a bit bored. There was a row this evening, which is partly why Gemma's gone to bed early, to calm herself down with a flickering candle and a dimming sky. Neither of which really work, because she's thinking too much - about that phony hand, and how tasteless it is, and who would ever buy that piece of tat for somebody thinking they'd like it? This irritates her, so she blows the candle out and shoves the thing to the back of the drawer in her bedside table.

The hiss of the candle trails off. A tiny curl of smoke writes its signature through the air, and disappears.

Tomorrow, after work, I'm going to clear my room, she thinks. She smiles - I'm going to rid myself of loads of stuff. Starting with that hand.