

GEOFFREY GATES

The Renaissance Builders

The book I am reading has a black cover with the words *The Renaissance Builders* embossed in metallic blue. It is the story of a Scottish writer who builds a house with an infinite number of rooms but who is driven half-mad trying to find the key to each door. It is a complex story and not really one for the beach.

I look up to see Lucy strolling towards me across the sands. She wears a red bikini and swings her hips.

“Hey!” she shouts, “Coming for a swim?”

As Lucy dives into the water, I wonder whether I could build such a place. I am a writer myself and have always fancied the idea of an underground library.

Lucy and I are on holiday together for the first time, although we are already talking about her moving in. My house is built on a narrow block of land. It has two bedrooms, one of which is my study. Lucy comes with quite a bit of stuff — she is a Fine Arts major and has hundreds of half-finished paintings. When I dive into the ocean after her, I propose the idea. I have been given an advance on my next book and I would like to put it to some artistic use.

“Lucy,” I ask, “How’d you like a labyrinth under *our house*?”

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In *The Renaissance Builders* Eric Mackinnon begins his subterranean renovations by accident while trying to determine the location of ancient gas pipes. Tapping up and down in a section of the basement, he hears a hollow sound. He tears away the wallpaper and discovers a hidden door. Prying it open, he finds a long room, dusty but otherwise in good order, and beyond that another room, also dry and sound.

There is a whole lot of stuff in the first part of the book about Eric's emotional state (he is a French lecturer in crisis-mode) but what interests me is his digging method. Having restored the first two rooms, he hires a pair of unemployed miners to tunnel out more. He shores-up his excavation site with beams from abandoned factories. It is a genuine act of recycling in a post-industrial age.

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Lucy pulls at my legs from below and resurfaces beside me, looking coy.

“What's all this about a labyrinth in our house?”

“We're going to be two little moles,” I tell her.

In the shallow water, we kiss like honeymooners. I marvel at the whiteness of her skin. I kiss the nape of her neck. I feel inspired. It is a beautiful summer's day but I am already in a dark room with a roll of plans.

Our holiday together is blissful. We swim at dawn and breakfast on pancakes at Wendle's Café when the sun comes up. In the afternoons I read *The Renaissance Builders* and makes notes for my next novel, while Lucy sleeps in the shade. In our happiness, we plan our first bunker. It will begin in the laundry. We will lift the tiles and construct the riggings for a mine-shaft where the washing machine currently stands. Lucy will empty the buckets of rock and dirt from the window above while I load-up below.

After dark, we retire to our tent and turn down the gaslight. We make camper love, quieter than the ever-circling mosquito who stares at our long naked limbs. Afterwards I lie awake. I see my underground extension, room after room of shelves from floor to ceiling. At some point I too fall asleep and dream. Amid books I find an unearthly joy. Curiously, Lucy is nowhere to be seen. Presumably she is somewhere in our labyrinth, at work on a canvas.

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A word on Lucy's paintings. They aren't what you'd imagine if you knew her, for Lucy has a gentle spirit and a lovely complexion, whereas her paintings recall arid landscapes and swirling dust-storms, or driving rain on a winter night. They are beautiful yet apocalyptic. Paint sticks out of the canvas at points like little volcanoes.

I both admire and fear Lucy's work. I know her as someone friendly enough to make acquaintances on the bus she takes to work each morning. Yet her artwork is as dark as a pit. Sometimes I wonder: Where does this come from? What experiences has Lucy had that she won't tell me about? What is she really like, deep inside?

When I ask her about her childhood, Lucy says, "It was wonderful, I feel so lucky to have had my upbringing." On previous relationships she is reticent but equally up-beat: "Oh, my boyfriends have all been great, just not as wonderful as you." She waves away the scar on her forehead and chuckles at the strange little tattoo below her bikini line.

In my worst moments I imagine other men's eyes on Lucy's tattoo.
Then the darkness is all mine.

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One evening, Lucy tells me one of her secrets. Perhaps the story is a hint at something more but I take it just as it is. She is fourteen years old, at school in her art class. Her teacher is a man in his thirties, athletic and good-looking. He has just dismissed the class but asks Lucy to stay behind.

"Keep working Lucy," he says. "I just want to watch your technique."

Blushing at this attention, Lucy paints on. It is a study of a few blocks of wood, one painted red, another green and the third blue. She has turned them at an angle and is exaggerating the perspective so that the blocks look like tall buildings, with the darkening shadow of a late summer day.

When her teacher leans over her from behind to point to a flaw in her work, his hand very lightly touches her breasts. He says her work is very sensual.

“After that he always gave me top marks, no matter what I produced. I never said anything.”

Lucy trembles ever so slightly when she shows a painting for the first time, like a talented student before a lecherous teacher.

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One evening we head to the local pub to share a Fisherman’s Basket. It is more than we can eat — two gigantic crumbed fish, four crab sticks, a dozen oysters, a plate of chips. A game of one-day cricket is playing on the big screen, but we head outside and drink our beers. The sun slowly sets. I am happy but I try very hard not to mention the latest idea I have for our underground oasis, inspired by *The Renaissance Builders*. Lucy is very patient but I know I can go on a bit about books I am reading. At home, my friends call me “Synopsis”, which is not your typical Australian nickname.

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As Eric Mackinnon’s house grows, so does his electricity bill. He takes on an extra job as an on-call translator to keep up with the running costs, so that in addition to his essay marking and other duties at the university, he must head out into the cold winter night to serve others. Most of his work comes from castles, an hour or so drive from Edinburgh. His hosts dine with European royalty and business tycoons who discuss the comings and goings of governments, the fault-lines of industry, the difficulty of acquiring decent modern art to hang on your wall that is also a good investment.

Eric grows pale as he digs deeper. On weekends, he locks himself in the first of his underground rooms while his miners grind away below. He has trouble sleeping amid the din and realises that something has to give. Eventually, he stops teaching and writes full-time. His stories are escapist fantasies set in warm climates. *The Renaissance Builders* features some of Eric’s stories, as well as the tale of his life underground and his memories of his lecturer days.

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I slow down my reading of *The Renaissance Builders* in the last days of our holiday so that I can concentrate on Lucy. She tells me more about her life, her childhood scrapes and dreams. As our love deepens, I find her more and more beautiful. At first I was attracted to her in a physical way, but now it is much more. I feel Lucy and I are onto something special. After all, we are a writer and an artist, with plans to build a labyrinth. I don't think many other couples on the beach could say that, even if they have better suntans and bigger houses.

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We are taking our last swim at the beach. Lucy is already in the water, and I have just put down *The Renaissance Builders*. I am not sure I want to read any more. On page 277, in a footnote that takes up half the page, the narrator tells the story of a young writer on holiday with his girlfriend. She wears a red bikini and swings her hips when she walks. At home she paints terrifying yet beautiful landscapes. The writer wants to build an underground extension as an escape from his dull life.

In imagining the construction of rooms, I had forgotten that a labyrinth is also a maze. Now my plans are dirt; my laundry a crater of broken tiles. In a moment, I will swim out to Lucy. I will hold her in my arms, kiss the white nape of her neck, whisper light words in her salty ears. I will speak no more about *The Renaissance Builders*. I have already buried it in the sands.