



CHASE JOYNT
& MIKE HOOLBOOM

YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE

SEX, DEATH AND TRANSITION



Foreword

Chase

This is a collection of love stories between people and generations, sourced from the intersection of one man's transition from female to male and another's near death from AIDS in the 1990s.

I met Mike Hoolboom in 2011. Our relationship was initially routed through a shared passion for movie-making and a related interest in Chris Marker. It took me almost five years to realize that we were only talking about the French filmmaker to avoid vulnerability – first within ourselves and then within each other.

Prior to our first meeting, I found Mike on the cover of NOW magazine, the most circulated guide to arts and culture in Toronto. His film *Mark* was premiering at Hot Docs, the pre-eminent documentary festival in the city. *Mark* is a devastating portrait of Mike's friend and former editor Mark Karbusicky. In the film, Mike tries desperately – and aesthetically – to recover meaning and memories after Mark's suicide. The movie is about the impossibility and necessity of telling stories, and about the potentials of image, text and community as healing.

In an interview about *Mark*, Mike admitted that he was happiest in the editing room. The public was his platform, but perhaps not his priority. That same year, I learned of many intimate and personal connections Mark shared with the trans community in Toronto. Disparate worlds, again colliding.

This book is positioned in and around many relationships that have changed or are changing. The conversation contained within is a technology of profound intimacy, one that when rendered public will find new privacy again.

Of course we didn't invent this form; it's a refashioned novel with generous attention paid to the failures of non-fiction stories.

Arrows and signs point freely to incongruities, and to pieces and people long lost to love's unending process of revision.

This is a story about sex, death and transition; it is also a project about proximity that now requires incredible distances.

The unspoken promise was that in our second lives we would become the question to every answer, jumping across borders until they finally dissolve. Man and woman. Queer and straight. In this moment, we write about love. Shopping is a form of voting, and love is a way to topple the state, or at least to budge the inner states that have held us in thrall for too long.

For so many years we wanted only to come to the end.

To finish with it all.

To close the book.

First Life

'Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something.'

– Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*

Chris Marker died today. Heart failure, the death of kings. People are already gathering at the jetty in the Orly airport, an impromptu memorial for the French filmmaker as renowned for his secrecy as his movies. Half a dozen people, give or take, leaving origami felines to keep a discreet watch over the waiting areas. How did they all know to bring black roses? The news of Marker's death is not yet public, but somehow word has reached them, though each step they take has a hitch in it, a certain tentativeness, making space for the maestro's possible reappearance.

Why do they call airport buildings 'terminals'? Orly is a medium-sized hub; bright adverts offer blown-up versions of a better life, while languid scrums of travellers invent new ways to leave their bodies. Two men hover near the viewing portals. Even through their sadness they can hardly help but notice that they are wearing versions of the same coat. Slowly, as if reluctant to break the spell of grieving, one of them offers his hand and a few words of introduction. Chase Joynt. Mike Hoolboom. Mike looks like he's spent the last month sleeping in an abandoned motocross raceway while an eighteen-wheeler rolled over him. He's a tall stick of a man, with a shock of hair that would be white if he weren't so quick with the brown food colouring. There's something hollowed out in his features, as if he's presenting the remains of an archaeological dig. Chase is a couple of decades younger. He's covered in tattoos, and has the face of someone who might be considered easy-going, though the eyes are a giveaway, soft and brown and hurting. He's spent most of his life trying to let people in, all the while shutting them out.

Chase actually met Marker years ago in what could almost be described as a bar on New York's fearsome Avenue C -

even legends need to drink. Of course Chris Marker didn't say he was Chris Marker. That would be gauche, as they say on the left. Like Chase, Marker is a code breaker, irresistibly drawn to the relationship between culture and aesthetics as a key to resistance, a key that might unlock the prisons of standard time and state control that both men can feel coursing through their bodies. As a filmmaker with only a few titles stacked beside his name, Chase is only too aware that some of cinema's roads-not-taken have been cleared away by this maestro of the personal film essay, a form that Chase tries to take in his own directions. Meeting Marker was like saying hi to a cinema dad. Home and not home.

'But how did you know it was him?' Mike asks, looking for some trace of the encounter in his companion's face.

'Film studies loves a headshot,' Chase offers. 'I told him that I was also travelling with a new name and a new identity.'

'I'll bet that piqued his interest.'

'It was as if he already knew.'

In Orly, the two men retire to a recently evacuated lounge, opening toward each other despite themselves. They can already feel the contours of something familiar between them – it lives without a name, but it's a quality that lies at the root of what they like to call their personality. It has separated them from nearly everyone they've ever cared about. Only it's not separating them now.

Chase palms the smooth, pretend-vinyl surface of the moulded chair on which he is now sitting. When he looks up, there is something in Mike's drawn-tight skin that offers a question mark or two. He puts the black rose down on the seat beside him and pats it once, as if to keep it from straying. Mike aims himself toward a seat on the other side of the aisle, but that would put them shouting distance apart, so without giving it a second thought, as if he belonged there all along,

he sets himself down beside this stranger and is greeted with the first of a series of smiles. Surprise doesn't begin to describe the feeling. More than a few years ago he decided to cap the guest list to the party of his life, but he really likes this guy. Besides, almost immediately they launch into one of his cherished fan fantasies, which is to describe Chris Marker's most perfect movie, *La Jetée* (*The Jetty*). Meaning: that in place of the awkward conversation between perfect strangers (what's so perfect about them?) they don't have any trouble opening the door of their shared obsession.

Chase starts in with a summary rap that can't help but feel rehearsed: 'Orly was the setting of Marker's monumental *La Jetée*, a 1962 flick composed almost entirely of black-and-white stills. It tells the story of a Paris in ruins; it wasn't only the ruling class that had lost the knack of getting along, the remainder were driven underground by radiation fallout, locked in a desperate countdown with dwindling resources. The last man who dreams in colour is chosen for time travel – neither young nor old, he has the kind of beauty that makes the viewer long to be ordinary. After securing rescue codes from the future, he is hunted down by state scientists and shot in the departure lounge. It was a moment he had seen as a boy, or at least caught glimpses of – it was his own death he had witnessed, and he had spent his life conspiring to return to that moment.'

Another mutual surprise shared: many of the important people in their lives are those they'd never met. The nameless man in Marker's film, for instance, the one who found his end here in the airport. It's as if they were both granted a wish to choose their own ghosts, their own customized hauntings. Chase marks off his companion's razor-sharp cheekbones, holding up eyes that are so tired. 'I could look like him one day,' he thinks resolutely. There is something missing in Mike's face, and Chase

can almost touch it as he crouches over a heady cup of espresso. As Mike talks about the unnamed man in Marker's film, he might be talking about himself. Traditional readings of the film remark on the hidden shape of the subject's life as he rushes to meet an appointment with his own death, holding a mirror to his culture's self-immolation. But what keeps Marker's unnamed citizen orbiting the magnetic pull of Mike's own persona choices, what marks him as a citizen of a future Mike has already recognized as his own, is that the anonymous man died twice in the movie, once at the beginning and then again at the end.

'There's only one way a man could die after he's already been shot dead.'

'You mean?'

'He didn't live a double life. He lived twice.'

'Yes. Yes.'

As Mike purses his lips to produce a coffee orifice, Chase watches the last puzzle piece fall into place. He's seen this face before - well, not this face exactly, but faces just like it. It is the symptom of a life-saving drug cocktail that absolved a generation of HIV-positives from a certain death, though the cost was a form of fat redistribution. He struggles to find the medical term and comes up blank. Yes, as he looks across his new companion's world of skin, there's little doubt Mike is HIV-positive. Chase picks up the black rose and sniffs the odourless offering. How to say what can't be said? How to share the implicit understanding?

Chase locks eyes with his companion for a moment before finding an anonymous floor tile to absorb his attention. 'So many of my friends tested positive that I started feeling left out, like I would never be part of the union.' It is a lie, but also a truth. Mike dabs at an imaginary spot on his cheek, his face a new display room of fear and attraction. Chase puts each word down with a touch so light he might be seeding clouds. As if he were afraid to wake his listener.

Chase adds, 'I couldn't help noticing that for men and women of a certain generation, they had survived their own death.'

'Sometimes.' The word is sharp and short, spoken in a cemetery whisper.

'Sometimes,' Chase acknowledges, with a tone drop. 'I always connected them to this place, this airport in Orly.'

They wait until Mike produces the waited-for prompt. 'Why?'

'Because this is the primal scene of the second life, isn't it? I mean, for anyone who has lived and died and lived again, how can you help but think of the man in Marker's film who came here to die twice? It was a science-fiction film, a story of the future that turned out to be our future. It didn't mean that Marker lived both of our lives, but that he laid down the outline, the architectural model, for what future generations might encounter.'

Chase used the word *we*. As if they are all for one, all in this together. And yet. Mike rescans the face, with its wisps of patchy newborn hair trailing across the chin. It's the kind of hair that he recalls from adolescence, when he looked on each sign of the body's changing as a betrayal of some original, unspoken understanding.

Chase's small, precise hands fly across a sheet of paper, turning it into an origami cat that he settles next to the pair of dark flowers on the seat beside them. Whenever Marker was asked for a picture, he would send a photo of Guillaume-en-Égypte, his cat familiar. When he died, there were eight dead cats waiting in his freezer to be buried with him.

There is a warm flush of atoms in Mike's chest that only an hour ago was solid and impenetrable. The funeral mass, the burial of a French filmmaker – it's something that can't be managed alone, it requires company, some kind of collective seeing, like the cinema itself.

‘Sometimes I wish I could have been one of his cats.’ Mike offers it up with a note of apology.

‘I know.’

‘You mentioned that you had also...’ Mike’s hand waves in the air, conjuring unseen geometries. He wants to put away the voice that is working overtime to create boundaries and distances. There is something in this new stranger’s force field that says: you are okay here. Chase thrives on unexpected intimacies. Here, in this faraway port, there is no future he couldn’t contemplate. At least for a minute or two.

‘You said that you also had an address in the second life,’ Mike says, trying again.

‘Yes.’

‘But you don’t look positive, forgive me for saying.’

‘Nothing to forgive.’ And then something in that smooth wall of a face gives way, as if Chase has grown suddenly tired of having to hold it up for so long. The words begin to pour out in no particular order, in an unrehearsed rush.

What might Chase say to summarize multiple decades of gender transgression in a few short lines that would require very little follow-up and/or additional explanation? ‘The last time my sister was in town, she casually mentioned that she was the only one in our family who decided to keep her boobs and her birth name. Cute, eh?’

The announcement of delayed departures. The metallic clatter of motorized carts bearing the elderly across the endless real estate of the departure lounge. Mike imagines the aerial view; like Chase, he is also a filmmaker, and like Marker, he is also prolific, and he enjoys nothing more than composing shots, massaging distances, as if through a lens. The two heads leaning in close enough to touch. Newly disclosed trans meets positive, isolated realities now worth sharing. The sun casts long shadows across the oblong windows, so that everyone who passes by looks a thousand feet tall. It is the hour of

giants, and they step into it together, lonely yet curious, newly unrehearsed.

They stand up at the same time, part of the same choreography, the seventh-inning stretch. Chase has a plane to catch in less than an hour that will return him to his familiars in Chicago. As they stroll toward his gate, a thought strikes him.

Chase: 'The modern novel began a couple of centuries ago as a collection of letters. It was a hybrid form that could throw its arms around a private correspondence, and more importantly, the private life that this correspondence made possible, and then recreate it as a feature of public life. The novel was a new kind of technology, and the long hours required to absorb it would help create the very interiority it was trying to describe. It seems the only way to have a private life was to bring it into the public.' It is a lie, but also a truth.

They arrive at the faraway gate where bored excitement adrenalinizes the scrum. Joining the steadily growing queue, they realize it won't be long now. Chase glances at his fellow ghost detective and continues. The weird thing is, when Chase talks, it's as if the words are coming out of both their mouths at the same time. He is talking about the second life.

'I think we can both remember our first lives, the way we used to fall in love, the fearful list of thrills that we embraced for the first time. And then those lives stopped, and the stories that used to be the reason to get up every morning, they stopped too. I remember going to see yet another doctor, her desk crammed with script pads and samples, and her leaning across the piles to assure me: *You only live twice*.

'Today we're back from the dead, or at least, back from the lives we used to have. Only I have two bodies now, the one that gathers sensations and the other one that archives the records. Is it too terrible to admit that I prefer the record, that I find it more reassuring, even more erotic? Isn't that why

both of us have spent too many hours combing through Mr. Marker's archives?'

At last Chase is finished with his pitch, ready to pose the question that lay hovering between them since they first made contact. Or was there a glimmer that shone even before that hope arrived?

'Why don't we work on something together?' Chase asks.

'Yes.'

'You haven't heard what I'm proposing.'

'Sure, I've heard.'

'Why don't we write a book of letters, a novel, that will make the second life possible?'

'Together?'

'Call it an alternating current. I'll send you something, and you can write back when the mood strikes.'

'You mean, the way the invention of the novel made the first life possible?'

'Yeah, we'll reboot the technology in three parts: first life, transition, second life.'

Chase offers a half-smile again and then he steps back into the swarm that is beginning to shuffle toward the robot voices at the counter. The sound of routinized cheer, the scrape of plastic wheels on tile. Scanners blink, a corporate clone ensures that everyone looks like their passport picture. Mike watches his new best friend grow smaller in the crush; soon it will be his turn to leave Orly, to wave Mr. Marker and his conjuring of the second life goodbye.

With a startling suddenness that could not be separated from violence, they could hardly wait to get started.

0.1 First Date

Chase

I'm writing you now from an underheated Chinatown walk-up that feels like it could make an appearance in Mr. Marker's *Remembrance of Things to Come*. I keep thinking about the differences between keeping a diary and sending a letter. They never found Marker's diaries – maybe they were just rumours after all – but he was a prolific letter writer, as I don't need to tell you.

I am an hour early for a date that is not a date. It is not a date because she is, admittedly, unavailable. But it is a date because we want it to be, non-admittedly. I'm always early for everything. If I added up the 'early time' I spend walking in loops around my destination, I would gain multiple days of living. Tonight, my destination is in Tribeca, and my early walking affords opportunities to obsessively fidget with the collar of my leather jacket in any reflecting surface.

As I approach the restaurant, I can see that she is sitting in the window. The jury is out as to who I'd rather be in this scene: the one waiting at the table or the one who gets to walk in on time and casually say hello. I know it's a date because she looks stunning, she's not on her phone and she's already ordered a drink. As soon as I sit down, we start talking about the weather – nothing says nerves quite like 'Can you believe the day we are having?'

First dates are excellent vehicles for my best-self storytelling. I can slide polished anecdotes – which often tidily wrap up cumbersome histories – into the landscape of getting-to-know-you conversations with ease. But something about this is different – I have the kind of adrenaline in my throat that makes me want to barf or scream. Why is it that new crushes make me question all the skills I've spent my whole

life refining? Of course it's not all crushes, just the ones that make me want to forget all of my old stories and start rewriting. When her face lifts to meet mine, I wonder: do you want to step into this second life with me?

Mike

The dizzying hope of your meet-up makes me want to jump into her body and say yes to you. How well I remember sitting at the window of Tank Noodle waiting on a computer date, though my not-yet-beloved's uploaded face was obscured with arty lighting so it was hard to tell what they looked like exactly. Everyone who stepped into the joint could be the one, and as each crossed the threshold I began to imagine our life together, or at least the opening lines, the first touch. The door hadn't been greased for a spell, so there was a distinct clamour of metal on metal that announced the arrival of each new hopeful.

Alex arrived fashionably late on a set of crutches – it was a biking accident, she said, though ten minutes later it was a bad fall in a quarry north of the city. She had a face that could walk through fire without showing the marks; she was stoned and effervescent and it became clear, after the noodles arrived, that she had never eaten Vietnamese soup and wasn't going to begin now. Eating was optional. We walked back to her apartment where she chain-smoked heaters (*Are you sure you don't want a hit?*) and all the words I ever knew flew south for the winter. She told me about the three guys she was seeing, the most menacing of which she called Boston, who was some kind of biker enforcer, and if he ever found out about the other two... I nodded sympathetically. I sat on the couch sympathetically. I fixed her drinks and emptied the ashtrays and changed records and then I told her I loved her and she laughed and then I laughed too and then she showed me to the door and I never saw her again.

0.2 Ease

Chase

I once walked in on my parents having sex, which was a remarkable feat as I'd only ever seen them kiss a handful of times. I was eight, it was Mother's Day, and I had gone downstairs early to make coffee. I'm not sure how I did that exactly, but after a successful brew, I tiptoed up the carpeted stairs to their bedroom and carefully opened the lever handle with my elbow, hoping to surprise them with my two cups of joe. Rounding the corner toward the bed, I saw them on top of each other, not really moving, and making little to no sound. Startled – but also as if I had rehearsed for this moment my entire life – I turned around quietly and pulled the door closed again behind my back. My next step? To set the coffee cups down on the floor, take a deep breath, knock on the door, pick up the cups and enter the room again. Of course, after the knock, they had taken up positions on opposite sides of the bed, probably never to have sex again.

A few years later, a friend told me about a public-access radio program called *Sunday Night Sex Show* with Sue Johanson wherein people would call to ask for sex advice. The show was awkwardly timed, six to eight p.m., which was earlier than my bedtime, and I was not one to go to bed before I had to. Successfully faking a stomachache one night, I huddled into bed eager for a secret listen. Unfortunately, the cord of my earphones wasn't long enough to allow me to remain settled on my pillow, so I had to spin around and put my head where my feet would be normally. Halfway through the show, my mom walked into my room to check on me. Startled by her entrance, I jolted up, pulling the headphones cleanly out of the stereo jack. 'AND THEN YOU CAN EASE THE PENIS INTO THE VAGINA,' replied Sue to a curious caller. 'My stomach is feeling better!' I said.

Mike

I think you're telling me: the first life is driven by the thing I never saw and that I can't help seeing over and over again. The radio voices of strangers allow me to restage the primal scene with my mother, not in the world of touch - that belongs to me alone - but as a shared description. If I've successfully come between you and Dad, then let's wait here together, while the national broadcast flows over the both of us and Sue Johanson takes us home one more time. Who needs penis in vagina when I can have your words in my mouth? Here in the second life, we have abandoned the project of making children and are dedicated to asking this question instead: what else could we make together?