

Kathleen Hull

The Methods

I am driving into the brown mountains when a voice comes over the radio: *You have a friend in the diamond industry*. How even to describe the wonder and terror of those words? I pull over near a shuttered roadside fruit stand, a few frozen apples scattered in the gravel, and try to calm myself. It's just a commercial for a jewelry store in the city. It's impersonal. But my mind has already flooded like a wound. The images I see aren't ugly, but that's the problem. Method Two was to get away. So far I am not succeeding.

I take a detour to distract myself and arrive at the hotel later than I intended, the sun already setting behind the hunched backs of the mountains. The mountain village has a European theme, with half-timbered buildings, German street names, French cafés. After unpacking, I choose a table on the second level of one of these and look out across the main square. In a lit-up shop, two crinkled tourists haggle over the price of a wooden music box, and the streets give a general impression of cobblestones and narrowness. It is hard not to immediately imagine a Diamond District down the block, craftsmen moving in and out of their dark shops, whispering in Yiddish to their apprentices and sons. Somewhere across town, Rubens is painting *The Descent from the Cross*, while the guilds raise steins in the guildhalls, and the old mayor surveys his porcelain vases and thinks about raising taxes.

I realize that I don't know what I'm doing here. Turning to my left and looking up into the mountains, I think about how easy it would be to disappear, to step off the trail tomorrow and not return.

Method One, which didn't work, was to acquire knowledge. Learn about a thing and you will no longer be afraid of it, someone said: or maybe this is a maxim I invented. At any rate, I recently spent a great deal of time learning about diamonds, committing the information to memory with a kind of defiant stubbornness. At first it was actually a relief. I wasn't thinking anymore about the last letter I sent, wondering if Paul had torn the envelope or used a letter opener, wondering if he had even bothered reading it at all. The note was not a desperate one, just a goodbye. I am a proud person and wouldn't have begged him to come back.

Within a few weeks, I was changed. My only topics of conversation were the heyday of diamond trading in Renaissance

Antwerp, the fate of various celebrated diamonds (the Florentine, alas, is still lost), the development of the Tolkowsky formula in 1919, which allows the stones to be polished in such a way that both their inner and outer brilliance is maximized. I admit it was a strange coping mechanism, but I also told myself I had the right to adjust to the rough world in whatever way made sense to me.

My brother, however, became concerned. He insisted I take his car into the mountains and spend a weekend away. I didn't want Marty to worry, so I agreed.

"You need to get away from all of this," he said. "As far away from Antwerp as you can." But now it seems like Antwerp is following me.

As if in confirmation, an ad interrupts the café's Spotify playlist: *You have a friend in the diamond industry*. I close my eyes and try to think of the Tolkowsky formula, but instead I see the pictures I saw by accident online: the beautiful clothes they were both wearing, the Dutch gallery at the art museum, the oval stone on the hairless finger of Paul's new fiancée. He had left me only five months before. He had also never written back, not even to offer a goodbye of his own. Without him, I would have to fit myself, tortuously, into a smaller, sadder version of the world.

It occurs to me that I no longer want to exist very much anymore. This is Method Three. I think about it long into the evening, as the sky goes flush with the gray-purple darkness of high elevations, the stars bright enough to be reflected in my undrunk cup of coffee. I think, too, of the long history of rings, of how power is always concentrated in the hands of those who give them. From *Beowulf: their beloved lord, the great ring-giver*. What if I could take this power back? Something about this idea stirs the latent spunkiness in me: I must have something to do, something to fight for. Method Four.

The next morning I consider calling my friend in the diamond industry and spending all my savings on a real stone, but instead I find a jewelry store in town and choose a silver band engraved with twisting vines. It costs a little more than 50 dollars: a thing of some value, at least.

"This is one of our Eco-Bands," says the white-haired though youngish woman who runs the shop. "Made from recycled silver. Fifteen percent of the proceeds go to offset your carbon footprint."

A lonely person, I remember, has a carbon footprint too.

Later that day, on the hike, I take the ring from my backpack and stand with it on the shore of a cold gray lake. I turn it over in my palm and study the vine design, then dip my fingers in the narrow cold of the water and flick it away. Assuming my fingers

are strong enough, propel it far enough, the band of recycled silver will be in the mountain lake forever. It will be there for the rest of my life, no matter what happens to me. Freed of it, I watch the water flatten out, and listen to the voices of the other hikers on the trail, the thin mountain wind stirring in everything a desire to change, if only by getting warm.

Kathleen Hull's fiction and criticism have appeared on the websites of *First Things* and *Fairy Tale Review*, and she has work forthcoming in *Literary Matters* and *The Hopkins Review*. She lives in Baltimore.