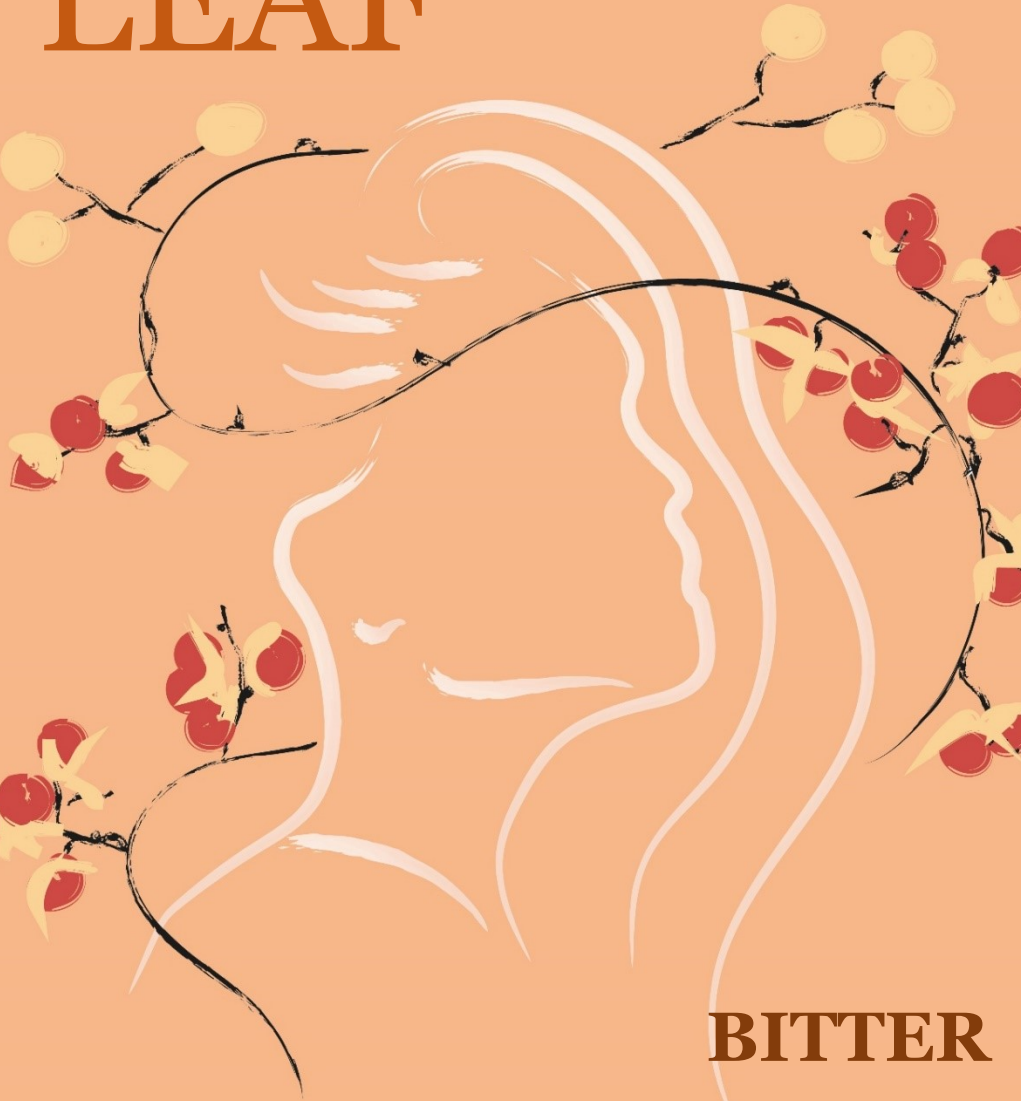


SMALL LEAF



BITTER

a collection of short stories by
the undiscovered

ISSUE TWO

BITTER



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Designed by Candice Daphne

Cover image by Sára Debreceni (@sleekandchicillustrations on Instagram)

Story Contributors: Yannick Pas, Emily Antonia, Josefine Stargardt, Abigail Rose Hurd, Sukanya Menon, Soren S, Nora Baker, Milagros Lasarte, Faye-Alexandra Rose, S. E. Hartz, Katie Veitch, Emma Urbanova,

Editor's note

The stories within this anthology are a collection of perspectives on the word 'bittersweet'. What comes to mind when you hear 'bittersweet'? Perhaps a type of treat you used to eat as a child, or the sun peeking above rain clouds, that last kiss with the one who got away, or finding your soulmate in the midst of tragedy. The word has endless meanings, and you are about to step into just a few of these in a couple of pages. Peaches, stars in jars, beloved treasures and souls of compassion are just some of the things you'll encounter on this journey of short stories.

Enjoy.

Candice

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PEDALLING FOR PEACHES

By Yannick Pas





Gherardo woke at the usual hour and, as usual, it was the incessant barking of dogs that woke him. Cursing their existence, he hauled himself out of bed, slipped into his crinkled linen ensemble and headed down the dusty stone staircase and its crumbling wallpaper. Ducking under the doorway, he lowered himself cautiously down the doorsteps and trundled across to the hazy piazza and its market, where he found, to considerable alarm, that there were no peaches. He didn't quite let out a startled cry, nor fall to his knees in anguish, yet his nonetheless emotional response (sharp intake of breath, muttering of a curse word followed swiftly by a crossing of his breast and an apology to the heavens) was noticed and responded to by Giuseppe the fruit-seller, who shrugged his shoulders and released a torrent of excuses, bringing their interaction to a quick end with a simple, dismissive flick of his hand as he engaged another customer in morning pleasantries and cheerful conversation.

'May the Lord curse the wheels of your damned Subaru,' Gherardo muttered inaudibly as he turned away from the market and ambled over to Caffè di Massimo for his morning espresso. He drank

his coffee in one swift gulp, plonked the small cup back down on the counter, shouted a quick *arrivederci* at Massimo, and stepped back into the sunlight as he lit one of the thin cigars he found complemented so perfectly the remnants of the coffee taste that lingered bitterly in his mouth.

The bells of the church announced it was seven, and Gherardo shuffled over to its steps to sit down and assess what to do next. A morning without peaches was unfathomable, unthinkable. The juicy nectar contained within those delicious spheres had been the kick-start to his mornings for the last sixty-seven years, ever since Eva had first introduced him to their exotic splendour on their second date, the week after the Americans had left, grumbling away in their bone-rattling Shermans or buzzing overhead in their clumsy planes. When Eva had passed, he had sworn to continue his morning peach routine without fail as a token to her memory, and the mere taste of a peach's flesh brought forth an ocean of memories of her that swelled across his mind and brightened what would otherwise be an uneventful day riddled with tedium. Indeed, as he had grown older and his mind had begun its inevitable decline, Gherardo found it more difficult by the day to recall Eva's face, or her tender touch upon his forearm. He felt as though he lost a memory a day, as though the image of her and the life they had shared would soon dissolve from his mind altogether. The only thing that saved these moments of divine recollection was the taste of peaches in his mouth; then she was there, in the forefront of his mind; her lily-white face, dominated at its perimeter by those flowing, auburn curls that captivated all those who looked upon her. Then he could remember, and that, these days, was all he wanted from life; to remember. No, it was not possible that he would be without peaches today.

The bushy eyebrows flexed and the great toucan-like nose, having been tickled by a wandering moustache hair, wrinkled as Gherardo looked around the town square as the prospering sun slowly peeled

back the early morning's inactivity, the townspeople emerging from their shaded domains and into its ceaseless glare as they went about their daily routines. He peered through the golden rays of sunlight that had crept around the sides of the crumbling buildings and blessed the cobblestones with its amber gaze; at the morning commuters fizzing past on their bicycles; at the baker's boy sweeping dust from the pavestones outside the shop; to the top of the church as a flock of pigeons burst from the bell tower and scattered down into the valley below, dissolving into the hazy light that hugged the sun-scorched valley which rolled out gently below the cliff-top town of Santa Teresa.

'Rino!' Gherardo shouted at the Mantovani boy who had come hopping round the corner of the post office at the far end of the piazza. 'Come here and earn yourself a buck!' Rino looked at the old man puffing on his cigar and scrunched his face up.

'No way, *vecchio!* Get stuffed!'

This worked Gherardo up somewhat, who began cursing the lack of respect shown by the younger generation towards their elders.

'But Rino, don't you want to know how the great King Alberto travelled all the way from the North to slay a beastly dragon down in the valley below us?' Rino looked at the old man as if he had been prematurely released from some ghastly mental institute.

'Dragon? What on Earth are you talking about, you nutty old prune? Dragons don't exist!'

'Ahhh, but they *did!* In these very hills that hold us, my boy.' Rino had by now grown somewhat intrigued by the shouty old bugger and his now feverish eyes, and had begun approaching Gherardo, his little toy mule held by his side.

'What's this about dragons then, *vecchio,*' demanded the boy with an inquisitive gaze. This was a boy of eight years, who looked at Gherardo with dark eyes that bore the same forlorn look as those of his mother who worked as a typist for the mayor. His curly hair

lay vaguely combed to one side, and his clothes hugged tightly to a body so frail he resembled a strand of uncooked linguine with limbs.

‘Ah,’ said Gherardo mischievously, ‘there’s a catch.’ Rino threw his arms in the air and turned away from the old man, rolling his eyes, and made as though he were about to walk away.

‘Rino, my boy. Come here, come here.’ Gherardo motioned for him to take a seat next to him on the church steps. ‘Now, I intend to tell you every tale there is about these fine hills, tales about all manner of beasts that had to be slain in order for our people to flourish. But first, I need to ask a favour of you, my boy.’ Rino looked at him questioningly. Gherardo continued: ‘Now, you have a bicycle, do you not?’

‘Eh?’ Rino replied, looking utterly perplexed by the question. Gherardo wrinkled his thick moustache.

‘A Bicycle! A seat on two wheels! Come on now, boy, don’t play the fool with me!’ ‘Yes, Signor, I have a bicycle. My father used to ride it to carry supplies to the Americans.’

‘Ah good. That’s good,’ Gherardo said. Visibly pleased, he savoured a hefty puff of his cigar.

‘You want to borrow it?’ Rino asked, looking the old man up and down as if it would be a ridiculous notion to consider. Gherardo burst into a husky laugh, coughing a few times and slapping his knee.

‘Ah-ha-ha, borrow it indeed! No, my boy, I simply ask that you go and retrieve it from wherever you have it stored, and then cycle over to the next village and collect for me some peaches from the market there. That little toad Giuseppe hasn’t got any today, you see.’

‘But that’s like an hour away!’ Rino cried in protest. Gherardo nodded vehemently. ‘Yes, yes. An hour there, an hour back. What of it? You’re a spritely young man with fire in his legs still. I’m a mere old – what was it you said? – a mere old prune.’

‘A *nutty* old prune,’ Rino corrected him, with a glint of mischief

in his eye.

‘Ah, yes. A nutty old prune. So...how about it, boy?’

‘You want me to cycle two hours for you, in this terrible heat, back up this terrible hill, just to get you some peaches? Why can’t you just wait until tomorrow and see if Giuseppe has some then?’

‘I’m afraid that cannot be done, my boy. You see, it is absolutely imperative that I have some peaches today.’

‘Imperative?’

‘Yes, imperative.’

‘What’s imperative?’

‘That I get some blasted peaches is what’s imperative!’

‘No! what does it mean?’

‘It means go and get me some damn peaches and cease your questioning!’ Gherardo half-roared at the boy, who spooked a group of nearby pigeons as he got up to leave, rather taken aback by the old man’s sudden outburst. Gherardo sighed, ashamed that he had scared the boy.

‘Excuse me, Rino. My temper shortens by the year it seems. All I mean is that eating peaches has been a tradition of mine for the last forty-seven years. Not a day has gone by where I have not had a peach at some point during it, and I do not wish to break from tradition today.’ Rino sat back down and looked at the old man, whose eyes had developed a sombre look about them as his thoughts returned once more to his dear Eva. The town and all its citizens knew about the love that old grump Gherardo had had for his wife, the most beautiful woman in the hills. It was one of those stories that form the personality of a small town like Santa Teresa, a legend that passes down the years; the legend of the old man who tragically lost his wife and secluded himself thereafter from the world, ostensibly unable to recall her without the aid of peaches. Rino knew the story, and a twinge of sympathy plucked the strings of his heart into a lingering tremolo.

‘So, if I go and get you some peaches, you’ll tell me all the stories about these hills? And all about dragons and monsters and the likes?’

Gherardo’s eyes lit up. ‘Indeed, I will! I shall tell tales until sundown if you fetch me my peaches, until your mother storms over here with that vicious brush of hers and beats me half to death like she would some bothersome beetle!’

‘Two *lire*,’ Rino stated firmly, raising his bony chin to the sky in obstinacy. ‘Heh?’ Gherardo didn’t quite understand.

‘I want two *lire* to cycle over to the next town and get your peaches. Two *lire*, on top of those stories you promised me.’

Gherardo was about to break into another thunderous tirade but stopped himself short and extinguished his rage with a lengthy sigh of resignation, rubbing his brow with thumb and forefinger. ‘Ok, *ragazzo*, you can have your two *lire*. And your stories. Just get me my peaches.’

Rino jumped up and began to depart to collect his bicycle, but Gherardo stopped him by grabbing onto his arm. He motioned for Rino to come closer so that he could whisper something to the boy. He put his mouth to the boy’s ear.

‘And Rino. Beware the goblins that dwell in the ravine.’

The boy moved backwards, a look of horror across his face. Gherardo wheezed and chortled, slapping his knee vigorously. Rino rolled his eyes and started walking away again. ‘See you in two hours, Rino!’

‘Yes, *vecchio*, two hours!’ Rino shouted back at him. ‘Two hours, and two *lire*!’ Gherardo laughed gleefully, admiration filling his eyes. The boy had some nerve on him, some cheek, but he was a good boy and would go far, he thought.

He shifted himself on the church’s step until he faced the sun, which had moved higher in the sky and burned upon the tawny landscape and the terracotta roofs without mercy. The piazza was now host to the bustling activity of mid-morning as the citizens found no

option than to revolt against this most troublesome star and prepared themselves for the gathering of lunch items, zipping in and out of the stores like bees to a hive. Gherardo wrinkled his nose and waved a fly from his face as he ground his cigar into the floor with his heel. A loud *tring! tring!* emanated across the piazza as Rino whizzed along the cobblestones, dodging horrified pedestrians who shook their fists at the boy as he tore through town, his head bent down over the handlebars. He shouted over to Gherardo on the steps.

‘See you soon, *vecchio!* And make sure you have my cash and stories ready!’ Gherardo waved at the boy and laughed, and soon Rino had disappeared from sight as he reached the cliffside road that wound down into the stifling heat of the valley.

Gherardo slumped back against the step and held his face to the sun. He would have to set his mind now to creating stories engaging and magical enough to impress the kid he had sent down into the valley to fetch his peaches. But that didn’t matter; he had time on his hands.

*

Rino pedalled and pedalled until the sweat streamed down his forehead; past tooting delivery trucks and crawling tractors; past crystalline streams that glistened in the sun; beside the ochre fields littered with dozing cattle turned lazy in the heat; along shady olive groves where workers rested against the bark with cap-covered eyes.

That old fool, he thought to himself as his legs worked laboriously with metronomic precision, his breath bursting out of his chest in a series of pants. *All he does all day is groan and grump and make the piazza look untidy. Why doesn't he just move on with his life and find a new Eva?*

As he glanced across the parched fields around him, his thoughts turned to the grandfather he had never known, the grandfather killed

a fortnight after the war had ended by an American bomb that had gone for a wander.

‘How could this happen!?’ Rino’s grandmother had pleaded tearfully, he had been told, her sorrowful eyes staring like obsidian discs.

‘Americans,’ the police captain had said with a shrug. It *had* been a freak accident; a nervous, acne-flecked American fighter pilot with a twitchy finger. The bomb had dropped during a casual flyover, screeching over the rooftops of the town and landing directly in the allotment where his grandfather tended to his vegetables.

‘He was – how should I put it – *well dispersed*,’ the police captain had told Rino’s grandmother when asked about a body. ‘Practically obliterated, in fact, the coroner informed me. You could barely call it a corpse really...’

Rino’s grandmother, whose trembling knees he had sat upon often until she passed, had never shaken off the shock of the news she had received that day. She had never sought another mate, never once thought about replacing Rino’s grandfather. Tragedy had whipped her up in its vortex and refused to spit her back out. Accidents, tragedies, they never seemed to end in that part of the world. If it wasn’t the spontaneous and inadvertent bombing of an allotment and the decimation of a peaceful gardener, it was a beautiful woman like Eva falling victim to leukaemia forty years later while Rino existed on a purely conceptual basis. Gherardo back then had seemed to shrink further into himself by the day as his wife withered before him, and so his eventual demise had come as no shock to the daily gossip that wafted through the town like the summer breeze.

Rino thought of the old man, still waiting on those steps, and the stories promised by him. Could there really have been dragons that terrorised the valley he was now passing through? Rino realised he no longer really cared about the stories; his thoughts were held to the sight of that melancholic gaze he had seen on Gherardo’s face.

Tragedy had haunted his hometown for centuries, phantoms moved constantly through its narrow streets, but here lay an opportunity for Rino to assist one of its famous figures with dedication and kindness, to preserve for him the memory of his beloved wife by fetching him his treasured, perhaps even hallucinogenic fruit. That man had nothing but his peaches, and Rino now felt a sense of duty and pride in being the person who would deliver them to him. Wiping his brow, he pushed his chin to the handlebars and pedalled harder.

*

A growing sense of detachment had taken hold of Gherardo as he basked lizard-like in the pulsing sun, and he suspected he was under the sudden, spooky influence of peach withdrawals. He had retrieved an orange from Giuseppe to enjoy a spurt of energy, to no avail, and now glanced nervously and sporadically from the church steps at the junction where he knew Rino would emerge once he had ascended back up the hillside and into the town but saw nothing save the jittery arrival of the postman in his ramshackle van, who appeared through the vehicle's sputtering fog like some magician's trademark trick.

'Come on, Rino,' he muttered to himself as he fidgeted with the half-eaten orange between his hands, feeling the image of Eva slowly slip further away from his recollective powers. A weakness had taken hold of him and the sun now became an enemy he succumbed to with the same puzzled look a gazelle takes on once between the jaws of a lioness; a resignation to the laws of nature and the indifference of the universe. 'Come on, my boy.'

His vision darkened, and the image of Eva began, as if doomed to the murky depths of some tenebrous lake, to lose its clarity and recede into shadow. Then, as the sounds of the piazza grew muffled to his ears; the chatter, the erratic flutter of a pigeon's wings, the boisterous banter of the market sellers, Gherardo slumped back

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against the steps as his strength began to flicker and fade. He closed his eyes and held them to the sun as a melancholic smile began surfacing slowly upon his face. *To hell with the peaches, my dear Eva*, he thought. *I am coming to you now*. The orange dropped onto the dust, and the piazza's chorus continued unfazed.

FORGET THE STARS

By Emily Antonia





The grass was wet underneath his back. The boy could feel the blades of grass licking his shirt as he sunk deeper into the ground. He propped his hands behind his head and stared up, waiting. The sky was inky black and empty. No sign of the stars he had been promised. The moon glowed alone in the sky, mocking his first night. The boy sat up, his shirt peeling back from the grass, and narrowed his eyes at the sky. He had hoped moving closer would somehow reveal a hidden gem flashing through the black, a speck twisting through the night, a sparkle falling through the air – but still nothing.

He groaned loudly and fell on his back again, covering his face in frustration. This shouldn't be so difficult, he thought bitterly, he'd seen so many nights just like this; the spectacle of a falling star, the beauty in their descent. Though the boy had never caught a star himself, he thought he understood the mechanics of it. He dragged his hands from his face and peered to his right, the small jar staring back at him, empty. Three years he'd been waiting for this night, three years ready to catch his first star, and now three years all in vain. What would his uncle think?

His uncle had been a catcher and had intrigued his nephew into exploring the same hobby. He had poured himself into his uncle's old notebooks, desperately trying to understand his scratchy handwriting, the complicated diagrams, and the original designs of the very equipment the boy now had in his satchel. He knew the perfect time of night for catching, the journey of the stars, the likelihood of their descent. At least he thought he did. The boy had read, observed and listened to all that he could, but never had he put it into practice. The reality was a lot more daunting.

The sky was completely clear, not even a cloud to obstruct the boy's view. An endless sea of nothing. His thoughts rushed back to his studies, wondering if he had missed something. Instead, his father's voice filled his head, *I'd rather you catch a cold, than a star* – The boy needed to be normal, be natural, be him.

Snatching his satchel from the ground, the boy scrambled up, eager to throw off the unwanted thoughts. His legs had that prickly feeling running up and down them, causing him to stumble. He hoped no passing stars had seen him. Maybe he was the problem, he thought; no star wanted to be caught by a gangly thirteen-year-old who clearly didn't have a clue.

He needed to be proactive. Gazing was no longer working for him, and he would have to tempt one from the sky somehow. He knelt down and opened his satchel, leafing through the equipment carefully. He understood most of the items, the small blue knife used for slicing off the tails of shooting stars. The fishing-like net, braided with the harvested tails, for extra strength in trapping the same stars to the ground. They were the most reluctant to escape the sky, their tails tethering them to distant lands. He had watched stars literally fall into his uncle's satchel, happily and readily. Others were fiery and aggressive, and his uncle had claimed they were not stars at all, but spitfires from the sun.

The small pocket on the inside of the satchel was empty, and the

boy turned to locate the missing part. His fingers curled around the jar and pulled it from the ground. He brought it up to his eye level, narrowing his stare as he saw nothing but a warped view of the field beyond. The boy pulled it back and stretched his arm out, presenting it to the sky. He glanced up and waited for a flash, a sparkle – anything. None.

The jar had never been fully explained to the boy. His uncle's notebooks had only stated that the first catch had to be placed inside, otherwise no other stars would follow. How to pocket that first star was a mystery.

He delicately placed the small jar on the ground, his eyes darting up constantly to check for any change. The grass was so tall that it concealed the jar from view. The boy quickly flattened the blades around the jar, patting them down rigorously till they lay flat. He sighed and glanced up again. Blackness. He rubbed his neck, wiping a few nervous droplets of perspiration away. He wasn't keeping track of time, but he knew the night was not far from passing. He frowned down at the jar, aiming all his frustration at it. It was the jar's fault for a starless night, he decided. He could not be blamed, only the jar.

In a last-ditch attempt, the boy knelt down and peeled back the metallic mesh lid. He took a few steps back, sucked in a frustrated breath, and with one last look, closed his eyes and turned his back.

He wasn't sure what he expected to happen, a flash of light, a delicate tinkling sound? Anything that might allude to a star approaching. He tapped his foot impatiently, the temptation to spin back around was overwhelming. The boy considered calling out to the heavens, speaking directly to them as he so often did. The thought made him stop. Stars were so far away that those who gazed at them were seeing ones that had long since died. No wonder they never responded, he thought with a sad smile. He shook it off, getting distracted again. He would give it a minute more, and then turn. He squeezed his fists together, willing a star to come spiralling down.

He suddenly felt a hard jab in his stomach.

“Ow!” His eyes flashed open, searching for the culprit. Scanning down, his eyes fell upon a young girl hopping from one foot to the other. She beamed up at him with a gap-toothed grin and poked him in the ribs again.

“Wh-What are you doing?” the boy spluttered, embarrassed at being discovered, and irritated at being interrupted.

“Looking for you.” She said simply, as if this was obvious. She skipped around him, her dark locks whipping through the air like a shadow.

The boy continued to splutter out nonsense, trying to keep track of the girl, the most coherent words being ‘why’ and ‘what’. She looked familiar, but she must have just run down from the nearest village.

The boy decided the best course of action was to act old.

“You’re not supposed to be here, are you?” He raised his eyebrows in a disapproving look, trying to desperately lower his pubescent voice. The girl stopped, and turned back to face the boy, one eyebrow pricked up.

“Yes, I am.” The girl said with more authority than him.

“W-why?” The boy began, cursing his lack of conviction. The girl paused and frowned.

“It’ll come back to me in a minute,” she quickly said, brushing off the question.

The boy didn’t have time for this, but there was something odd about her. He quickly asked the girl what she meant, his own intrigue more distracting than her presence.

“I don’t know,” she rolled her eyes, and collapsed into a sitting position, “the memories haven’t caught up yet.”

The boy didn’t know what to say to that and decided the *next* best course of action was to ignore her. Not to get distracted and catch a star already.

Keeping a wide berth of the strange little girl, he headed towards the jar. The girl was gazing at it, her fingers inches away from grazing the lip of the lid. The boy snatched it from the ground, oddly satisfied with the sad look that sprung to her eyes.

“Wait,” she snapped jumping up from the ground, “I need that,” she thought for a moment, “I’m almost certain.”

The boy’s eyes narrowed, but determined to stick to his plan, walked away, already decided on another patch of a field closer to the lake. Hopefully, the reflection of the water would give him a better chance at glimpsing a star.

He could hear the girl following him. She was humming a familiar tune, a lullaby all children knew from early childhood. But she seemed to keep forgetting the ending, always repeating the same three notes.

The boy had hoped she would get bored and leave him alone by the time he reached the lake, but she stuck to him the entire way. He sighed, and resolved to continue, despite the distraction. He tugged the satchel off his shoulder, letting it fall to the ground, and stared down at the elusive jar in his hand.

“Are you going to throw it in?”

The boy sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. He needed to concentrate and imagine the girl was not there.

“Well, are you?”

Another breath. She was not there.

“Please don’t.”

Breath. Not. There.

“That’s for the memory?”

He stopped. A trick, surely, he thought. But what did she mean by memory? Was this just some childish explanation? He let out an exasperated sigh and turned around. She was sitting cross legged on the ground, her eyes fixed on the jar, a triumphant look on her face. He quickly shoved it into his satchel, denying her the view.

“What do you mean, memory?” He snapped.

The girl smirked, as if he was an idiot, and then simply pointed at her face.

The boy blinked a few times.

“What?”

She frowned, now looking at him with real concern. She ungracefully clambered up from the ground. The boy continued to stare, annoyed at this game she was playing.

“Oh no one explains it, do they?” She started tapping her forehead, as if trying to turn something on.

“Who?” he asked, referring to her question.

“Anyone,” she said, continuing to tap her head. “Or your-your,” she sighed angrily, trying to remember, “your uncle?”

Her face suddenly changed, looking much older, deepened with a weight of some kind. He stared at her, now realising he wasn’t sure how old she was. Her height and playfulness had convinced him she was much younger than him, but now he wasn’t so sure.

“My uncle’s gone...” the boy chose his words carefully, unsure if he had imagined a flash in the girl’s eyes.

She nodded agreeing, “Most of him.”

The boy stood still, confused by the interaction. Maybe she was just a lost and confused young girl? But there was still a small part of him that thought she was familiar.

“We weren’t sure which one of us it was going to be, you know.” She said slowly, a smile touching her lips. The boy continued to say nothing. She sounded older now too. “Though I was sure it was going to be your uncle,” her smile weakened, saddened. “You did know him longer.”

“I know you?”

“I suppose not *this* me.” She laughed, looking down at herself. Then her eyes flitted up to his face. “He said you’d grown.” She stepped towards him.

“Who?” He stepped back.

“Your uncle.”

“My uncle’s dead.”

“Mhmm.” She nodded with a sweet smile, as if pleased the boy was understanding something.

“So, when did you speak to him?”

The girl opened her mouth to reply but then quickly stopped herself, frowning as if trying to work it out.

“Don’t know really,” she stared up at the sky, which the boy noticed with dread was beginning to lighten with the coming dawn. “Was falling for quite a while.”

He was barely listening, the panic of not catching a star was far worse than whatever this interaction was. “Explains the youth,” the girl continued, staring down at her body, now seemingly speaking more to herself than the boy.

He rushed past her, pulling his satchel open as wide as he could, running around aimlessly and desperately. He could feel the tears brimming in his eyes. This went against everything he had learnt. He wasn’t calm or collected, nothing about his demeanour would welcome a star into his arms. He grabbed the jar from within and held it high above his head, hoping that it would work.

“That’s for me, not them.”

The boy spun round, anger mixing in with his hurt tears. He wiped them away aggressively. “What are you on about?!” he shouted, knowing his time was nearly up.

The girl slowly walked towards him, nothing but kindness in her young face. The boy felt his body relax, his eyes glued to hers. He knew her, but he didn’t know how.

“I don’t really understand the logistics,” she spoke softly, still moving towards him. Her expression was calming. “But I’m so glad I could see you again.”

“Who are you?” he breathed, unsure he wanted her to answer.

“There’s a reason you haven’t caught a star tonight.” She paused, choosing her words carefully. “They’re meant to move on, pass through this world. But when they see others like them below – they can’t help it – they fall for them.”

The boy’s brows furrowed in confusion, “Them?”

“Other stars, other--” she stopped, unsure. “--memories, like me. Catchers have to keep us on them, otherwise the stars will never come to them. We’re like magnets.” She laughed, but her humour was seeping out.

“Who are you?” the boy asked again. He hadn’t misheard, he understood *what* she implied she was. But *who* she was, was something else.

“The first one has to be someone they trust to catch them.” Tears brimmed in her eyes, as she gazed up at her boy. “And I trust you.”

He stared at her. He didn’t know when he realised, but when he did it hit him violently. He looked at the girl’s eyes, recognising them from his own reflection.

The tears fell hot and fast against his cheek, an ache in his chest threatening to consume as he stared at the younger memory of his long-passed mother.

He didn’t think, and he didn’t truly understand, but he rushed to her, falling to his knees and wrapping his arms around her.

She stroked his hair, before moving his face to look at hers. “My boy, we don’t have time,” she said with a heavy heart.

He looked up to the sky, which had the warning signs of dawn.

“Will you come back?” He asked desperately.

She smiled and shook her head. “I can’t fall twice.”

The boy stood, the cracks in his heart widening. “So what then?” he clung to her hand, unwilling to part from her again.

“I either move on, be free, and my memory will eventually fade, or—” She glanced down at the jar which had fallen when he had rushed to her.

The boy stared at it, remembering its purpose. The cage of the first catch.

“With my memory in there, you’ll be able to catch others,” she squeezed his hand reassuringly.

The boy’s mind flooded with new ideas, precious memories shared amongst the living who had begun to forget. He had had no true understanding of what catching stars had meant, and now—

He looked down, his mother’s hand entwined in his.

If he didn’t trap the memory of his mother in the jar, the other stars, the other memories would not come to him. He’d deny others the hope he had glimpsed. Or he could let her pass through the endless sky, her memory fading, yet completely free.

He would begin to forget her.

The jar in his hand suddenly felt like burning ice. He wanted to smash it into jagged, ugly pieces. Let it be buried deep into the ground, along with this decision. His mother, a piece of him, trapped lifeless beside him, but helping him to gift others. Or let her memory and his dreams leave him forever.

He felt the soft touch of a small hand return to his, the heat warming his soul.

“It’s okay.” She whispered.

MAYBE A MAMMOTH

By Josefine Stargardt





I had already missed two buses that night. I stood at the bus stop, arms wrapped around my body. It was too cold to sit. I watched my breath form clouds in unison with the flicker of a streetlight across the road. I counted the seconds marked by the ticking watch at my wrist. The bus was late.

A new sound drowned out the ticking. Footsteps, faster than seconds, in heels maybe, crashing into the rhythm of the night. I turned my head and saw her running across the street. I matched up her face with the sound her shoes made on linoleum floors. She had almost reached the stop; it was too late for my head to turn back; too late to pretend I hadn't seen her coming. I smiled.

"Hello there," she said. I nodded, smiled, took a breath.

"Hi." Silence settled between us. She stepped from one foot onto the other. Her heels made no sound this time.

"Have I missed the bus?" she asked, "The one supposed to leave three minutes ago?"

"No," I said. "It's late."

"Good," She walked over to a bench and let her bag fall onto it.

She saw me eyeing a book poking out at the top. “Yeah, I forgot this at the library, so I had to come back. I need to read it by Tuesday.”

“Oh boy. Good luck with that.” Another silence loomed. She was fidgeting, retying her scarf, zipping up her jacket, fumbling with her hair. She never seemed to stop moving. I turned my head slightly, so she wouldn’t think I was watching her, and tried to watch my own cloudy breath instead. It was impossible. I was all too aware of her standing close by, now heaving her bag back over her shoulder. It would have been her turn to say something.

“You know,” I said, “When I came here earlier, I saw two guys with a refrigerator. They were talking to it, or about it, I don’t know.”

She stopped moving, laughed. “I wish I’d seen that.”

I wished so too. We would have been on the same bus.

Headlights flashed. I watched the bus draw nearer, imagined the driver hitting the break, concentrating. The roads were likely to be icy at this time of night. The bus stood still. It opened its doors for us. I hesitated, alarmed. I could not board the bus first, I would have no idea what to do. Could I ask her to sit with me? Would she want to? I wanted her to, more than anything. I looked at her, willing her to move, but she smiled and motioned for me to go first. I closed my eyes for a second. Then I dug into my pocket for my bus card, showed it to the driver and entered the bus. It was almost empty. I spied three people huddled together at the back, but no one else. I chose a seat and sat down. She was still standing up front, looking for change. Finally, she was handed her ticket and the bus began to move. She walked up to me, slowly.

“May I?” she asked. I nodded. Inside, I was singing. She sat down. I tried not to look at her right away, to give her time to adjust. I pretended to watch the sign that flashed the upcoming stops. It was broken.

“Where are you getting off?” she asked.

I told her my destination, some ten stops ahead.

“Oh, I’m not going that far.” She untied her scarf and put it on top of her bag, which was resting on her lap. Fabric cascaded over her knee and mine. She rearranged it.

“Sorry,” she said.

That’s alright, I thought. It was as if her scarf had burned a hole into my jeans. As if our fingertips had met for just a moment. I looked at her hands. I’d noticed before that they were strangely beautiful, their links and bones pronounced beneath the skin. I cast around for something to say.

“You’ve only just moved here, haven’t you?”

She nodded. “Just before term started. I’m still not done unpacking.”

“There’s time.”

She laughed, her beautiful hands twisting the scarf. “I guess so.”

I would never be able to do more than look at her hands. I would never hold them or be held by them.

“Have you lived here long?” she asked.

“Only two years.”

“I like this town,” she said. “It moves slowly, like it has nothing to worry about.”

I knew exactly what she meant, and it might have been why she had caught my attention in the first place. When I watched her talk, I knew her thoughts were faster and more numerous than all the buses the town had to offer.

“This town is a tortoise,” I said “Or maybe a mammoth. I think it could pick up speed if it had to.”

“You’re Sarah, right?” she asked.

“Yes.” I liked the sound of my name on her tongue.

“I’m Maureen.”

“I know.”

She laughed, a bubble of sound above the humming engine of the bus. We had been talking quietly so far. Tires scraped over ice as the

bus slowed before a stop. She looked past me out of the window.

“The next one’s mine,” she said.

I turned to look outside, surprised. “Wow, we’re past the bridge already?”

“I know, right.” I turned back to see her smiling at me. “Taking the late bus has its perks. Anyway.” She draped the scarf around her neck, tucked the bag under her arm and stood up. “Good night. I’ll see you in class.”

“Good night,” I said.

The bus slowed once more and she left, slinging her bag across her shoulders in the process. I looked at the empty seat next to me and realised I liked the way she smelled. I looked at the empty seat next to me and knew we wouldn’t cross paths like this again, outside the context of our lives. Something inside me broke. I let my arms hug my body and waited for my stop. As I left the bus, I imagined what it would have felt like if she had still been on it. How I would rise and sidle past her, trying not to brush against her. How I would walk towards the doors and turn back to smile at her before I stepped out into the night. How the dark would swallow me and the bus would move on and maybe, in a perfect world, she’d feel the same ache I felt when I looked at her.

I waited at a red light, even though there was no traffic. I could still hear the bus, rumbling past the stop down the road. Back home, I closed the door to my room and sat on the bed. It was three minutes past midnight and my head was full of her. I saw her sprinting towards me, saw her holding onto her scarf, I saw myself holding her hand. I touched the knee of my jeans, where her scarf had been.

“Don’t be daft,” I whispered to myself.

I wriggled out of my jeans and dropped them in the laundry basket. Then I went to brush my teeth.

THE NECKLACE

By Abigail Rose Hurd





I was forged by one of the finest jewellers in Paris, my golden body threaded onto a string of luminescent pearls. I longed to sit in the shop window, on the black velvet neck that shone in the pink afternoon light when the shadows of the European sun hit the town just right. But it wasn't meant to be. I was taken above his workshop and left next to his four-poster bed carved from as exquisite materials as I, and waited. Many women came in and out of my creator's boudoir, each leaving with a smile on their face but a naked neck. Then finally, on a rose hued summer's eve, she came. My Jennifer.

My creator enticed her in, just like the others. They made love, just like the others. But, in her rare bare beauty, under the moon's full glow, my creator gently placed me around her neck. I felt the balm of her post euphoric wave on her wet skin. Her chest was beating, it increased as she gazed into the mirror's reflection of us, of me. We both fell in love with each other that night.

Jennifer snuck out in the early hours the following morning, draped in a silk dress from the night before, careful not to wake her sleeping Parisian lover. She clutched me as she ran down the cobbled

path, giggling to herself in excited delight. She had never done anything like this before, and I was her luxurious token of a wild passionate escapade. She swung herself onto a bench with a smirking friend, recalling the night, and more importantly, the gift of moi. Her friend stroked me, with green eyes and a sincere smile.

I travelled through the sky, sat on her neck the entire journey. I had only seen clouds from below a shadowed chin, and now I had witnessed the blue heavens above in the safe comfort against her gentle beating heart. I noticed her heart rapidly beating as she knocked a door back on the ground. This wasn't Paris, it was a wet grey town, with even greyer people that all had necks covered in wool rather than art. A man answered the door, she was Missus to this Mister. I was a badge of betrayal, a pawn in a lustful liaison. But Jennifer held me close, passing me off as a cheap market find. A bittersweet lie; I resented the notion, but revelled in the glory that I was to remain upon her.

The Mister was as dull and grey as his town, but he did help to provide a glimmer of light into their grey life, a small Jennifer, a baby. Little Annie cooed at my golden glory, reaching for my mesmerizing beauty, getting closer with each embrace. I witnessed Annie's first words, first steps, first fall, first day at school. Jennifer didn't have as much time to admire me in her reflection as she once did but still made brief inspections in shop windows as she rushed around town for her little family. With every glance, I noticed more and more laughter lines, grey hairs, and frowns. Was this still my Jennifer from Paris?

On rare occasions, I witnessed my Jennifer's old spark, she now only lit it for special occasions. As Annie grew older and moved out, Jennifer and the Mister went to bright and loud parties, laughed, and drunk until they couldn't stand. I felt her heart beating as quickly as she did the night we met, as she looked into her Mister's eyes. I couldn't understand why, he wasn't as dark and handsome as my

creator, but he was kind. He made her feel the same way she made me feel, like home. Sadly, this new-found old love wasn't to last another year. Mister's heart stopped beating, as soon as hers finally started to yearn for him.

Jennifer no longer looked at her beauty, she no longer gazed at mine. She wrapped me up in tissue and placed me in a draw. A dark, crowded draw, with other discarded gifts and memories. I searched for my place, was I a gift, or a memory? Can something be both? Can a gift be a present if it was never wanted? Can a memory be recalled if you don't want to remember it? Once in a blue moon, my draw would be slid open, but I would be pushed aside, with a wrinkling hand, weaker with each visit.

I was no longer hers. She didn't like drawing attention to her neck and breast anymore, my cold edges would now only poke her old bones and mock her once subtle skin. I was now a bittersweet token of her wild youth, what it was to be carefree and new. I was forged by the greatest jeweller in Paris, placed upon her nape by a lover's hands, where she wore only me on her beautiful naked body. Those days were a veiled nostalgia, fogged by an aging glare that would soon fade away.

One day, a stranger's hand opened the draw, smooth and small. They picked me up with a careful touch, wiping away decades of dust and shame. The small person ran to a bigger Annie, almost as beautiful as her wild mother. I felt the warm sunlight as it caressed my pearls and embraced my charm. I forgot how dazzling the world could be, I forgot I was meant to be seen, to be cherished, to be adored.

The sweet child cleaned my pearls and polished my stiff clasp. Then, finally, I was placed upon their little neck, smaller than the one I was made for, but it felt just as right. I understood I now belonged on this neck, that my Jennifer had not forgotten me, she had been preserving me. I was not a burden, but an heirloom.

WHEN A TREE FALLS

By Sukanya Menon





In the summer of 2002, most of my evenings were spent under the shade of a towering poinciana in full bloom. I remember being enraptured by the beauty of its blood-soaked flowers flickering a scarlet red against the setting sun. Back then, time seemed to pass quickly, much like those shrill rose-ringed parakeets that flitted about in the branches, graciously springing from flower to flower while snacking on the flushed petals. The serenading wind carried whispers of prolonged melodies and hushed confessions, healing my soul in fragments graced by the warm rays of the sun. That summer saw two things flourish – a flamboyant tree speckled in crimson and my spiritual connection with it. In many ways, I was a seed cast into the mud, left to blossom and bear fruit; my roots entangled with those of the tree in the lush soil that unfurled beneath. Those carefree days were marked by an exuberance reminiscent of one’s youth. As I grew up, the sweet rhapsody of birds was soon transformed into a boisterous cacophony while myriad hues were replaced by a grey smog. The skyline, once distinguished by rows of fiery-red poincianas, now outlined lifeless buildings draped in concrete. A

constant fire rages in the forest and from its charred depth sprouts a gloominess that reminds me of the royal poinciana's sombre shadow.

Today, as I flipped the calendar open, it occurred to me that time has swapped the last two digits of the year. Somehow, 18 long years have passed since the summer of 2002. Despite the changes that now seem evident, my love for the poinciana tree remains undeterred, as though frozen in the raw confines of a distant childhood truth. When, during damp evenings, I stare out the window of my nondescript apartment in the city, I am overcome with sentiments buried deep beneath memories of lost time. Today, yet again, as my thoughts began to merge with the constant murmur of rain drumming against the windowpane, I recalled the laughter of trees. A strong desire transcended upon me – to relive those sultry summers soaked in nostalgia, to seek shelter under the sturdy branches of the flaming poinciana (which mother lovingly nicknamed *gulmohar* after its rosy peacock flowers) and get a whiff of the simpler times.

In no time, swinging a backpack over my shoulders, I was off to the local bus station. I resolved to follow my heart today, which ached to undo the passage of time. The station was built around what was once the Ashtang lake – the centre of a thriving ecosystem – which gradually dried up as a result of rapid urbanisation. It was easy to get lost in a flurry of swarming crowds, buzzing vendors, and screeching buses. As I waited in the designated platform for bus 302 to arrive, I observed people from all walks of life: travellers rushing to catch their buses, lovers exchanging shy glances, quarrelling families, and homeless people in tattered clothing being some among many. It struck me that although our destinations differed, it is the journey that bound us together. I caught sight of the bus as it rounded the corner and my heart filled up with a palpable sense of delight. I boarded the old, creaking machine with renewed enthusiasm and occupied a window seat on the last row, my face flushed with heady excitement. After waiting for more passengers, the half-empty bus finally

announced its departure, leaving a trail of black smoke in its wake. I purchase a one-way ticket and settle into my seat, inwardly braving the four-hour journey that lay ahead. Glancing out the window, I let my mind drift like the puffy white clouds that were cradled in the arms of a big blue sky. The journey was, to say the least, a nostalgic joyride; it was a mingling of the road that lay ahead, and a past that was left behind but not forgotten; it was an emotional exploration of the unseen cause and effect behind things that are often taken for granted. Just as I was deeply entangled in the untimely spell of existence, the conductor yelled “Mitura!”, jerking me out of my reverie.

I found shelter beneath a sprawling banyan tree, where I remained seated for several long minutes upon the square-shaped cement structure that encircled the tree. The eagerness with which I had begun my journey had faded and, in its place, a sort of rigid idleness was seeping into my bones. Here I was, far from home, in familiar territory where time, it seemed to me, had stood still since the beginning. I was too caught up in my surroundings, intently scanning its depths for meaning. Rocky hills loomed to the far east, shrouded in the evening mist. The air was full with the rustle of leaves, knotted roots of the banyan cascading down to the earth while its branches embraced the sky. Somewhere in the distance, the sleepy silence of this remote village was shattered by the resounding echo of a temple bell...

“Didi! Are you lost?” came a meek voice out of the corner.

When I turned to look, I caught sight of two eyes peeking from behind the banyan’s wide trunks. The question threw me off guard because, at that point, I was merely a soulless body with no fixed purpose, so mad, so lost as to be everywhere and nowhere at once.

“Yes, if one can be lost in thought.” I heard myself replying without stopping to think whether the boy would understand or not.

The little boy of perhaps eight or nine years broke his reserve, immediately abandoning the safe space behind the tree to look me straight in the face.

“Amma once told me Appa used to let his mind wander so often that one day it never returned.” Taken aback by this swift remark, I suddenly couldn’t find the words for an appropriate response.

“He spent more time thinking than doing,” said the boy, easing up beside me with a lopsided smile plastered on his face, his eyes full of intelligence.

The boy’s cheerful disposition, in turn, brought a smile to my own face. I couldn’t help but relate to his father, a complete stranger, who mimicked my own state of affairs. “What if I told you I did something without thinking?” I asked the boy while internally trying to justify bad decisions.

“It depends. What did you do?” the boy asked in return, his childlike curiosity eclipsing his intrusion of another’s privacy.

Feeling rather sheepish, I said, “I travelled a long distance and came all the way here to take shelter under a gulmohar tree.”

“You came all the way to see a tree?”

“Yes. Does that make me odd?”

“I think it makes me like you more.”

On hearing this, something in my heart clicked, as though it were rejoicing in finding a long-lost friend. When the boy, overjoyed by my bizarre but private confession, asked me if I found what I was looking for, I couldn’t hide my sorrow, my eyes promptly laden with salty tears that refused to drop. It so happened that the poinciana was chopped down a couple of years ago because its extensive taproot system had devastated a humble man’s abode, fully cracking the ground beneath his feet with deep-rooted enthusiasm. The boy, noticing the change in my demeanour, immediately realised what was

wrong, for he was aware of the gulmohar's untimely demise, having been an active part of his living surroundings: a tree hugger and climber in earnest. Deft for someone his age, the boy quickly connected the dots and, lest I broke down completely, he allowed silence to fill the gap.

We sat there for a long time without saying a word to each other, reflecting on our own insignificant battles. Both of us understood what the other had failed to mention, and in that moment of clarity, we found refuge in shared loneliness.

"The earth cried the day the gulmohar fell. I know because it rained," said the boy and, after a drawn-out pause, he continued: "It's sad that one man's house was upturned, but no one shed a tear over the home that was lost to the many creatures who dwelt on that tree." At this point, the boy abruptly got up and left, saying he'd be back in a minute.

I remained silent, unable to process the boy's mature grasp on reality. His words indefinitely stirred something within: when a tree falls, who is responsible? The tree itself, for endangering mankind in its untamed journey of growth? Or the man, who believes he is a victim and, upon his lust for vengeance, decides the fate of the tree? What about the common folk who stood by and allowed the scenario to play out without uttering a word of protest? And the woodcutter? How did his conscience allow him to carry out this merciless act? Would he do the same, without blinking, if it were human limbs he was dicing? These questions deeply troubled me, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't step out of this psychological vortex I had been pulled into.

Time ticked away slowly when, finally, the boy returned, hiding something in the palm of his hand. He unfurled his fingers to reveal a heap of parched gulmohar seeds.

"Didi, the tree you came to see may not have survived but let us plant these and allow time to renew life."

Overcome with gratitude, I took the seeds from him. Nestled in my palm was the coming of a new age, a promise of memories yet to be made. Maybe it was too late for me to rekindle those summer days, but it wasn't too late for the poinciana to blossom anew and nourish the spirit of those who will gradually seek its shade and quaint charm.

My devotion to the poinciana tree was born out of that flaming pit, which forges an arranged marriage between the body and the soul, and it was with a sense of duty, not passion, that I dug the raw earth with my bare hands, burying the seeds of time and change. When we were done, the boy took my soiled hand in his, regarding me with love and respect.

I implored him to watch over and nurture the seedling until it sees the light of day. He assured me by gently squeezing my hand, and we stood there, two strangers, against a blushing sky set ablaze by the last rays of a dying sun.

JOINING UP THE STARS

By Soren S.





There are stars the night Fabiola meets Pauline.

Fabiola meets Pauline on a winter night that's so cold the wind burns, and the skeletons of trees are left shivering without the skin of their leaves. Fabiola can't bring herself to look away when her eyes land on Pauline; the lightning of dreadlocks, dark as night, twisting down her back like the veins of trees sinking deep into earth.

There's a laundromat right in the ribcage of Chinatown, a ferrous little part of New York city that cries red at night and laughs during scrawls of daylight. Fabiola lives there in a tiny, tiny apartment, the old building nestled just above the daunting laundromat. In the beginning, New York left her bruised. Growing up in Puerto Rico meant that nature became an inextricable part of Fabiola. The ocean-waves that clustered like blueberries and the tall trees that ribboned over every road felt like a part of her; the star-specked night skies like lengthened veins hugging her bones. So, New York bruised her up with its concrete jungles. College became difficult and being away from home became difficult until her *abu*, short for *abuela*, taught her to find beauty wherever she was. To stop being sad while she was

away from home. Slowly, of course, because these things take time and time is difficult to untangle. Time is both extensive and instantaneous, and unkind to what the heart attempts to hold onto. *Abu* taught Fabiola, her voice echoing like the crickets of fallen stars, to take chances. To give her heart away to even the tiniest things.

And that's what Fabiola started doing. She began drinking her morning coffee while admiring the grays and blues of the city. She read books and studied hard. She lost herself in music. Shutting her eyes and hugging herself under sleeves of sunlight and fibres of moonlight, she learned to appreciate where she was, losing herself in the moment.

Falling in love with Pauline is exactly like that. Something that rushes towards her with saltwater footprints, reminding her of the ocean and making her want to hold on to it for as long as possible.

There are stars the night Fabiola meets Pauline. Not in the sky but in Pauline's eyes, in the red of her sweater and the threads of yarn in her scarf. In the dreadlocks of her hair too, and in her hands when she taps her fingers against the countertop. Her voice is dangerously comforting when she speaks, gentle and soft, syllables sticky with honey and promise.

"Hi," she says. "I like your hair."

They're facing each other. Pauline is sitting on top of a counter used for folding clothes. On the wall behind Fabiola there is a Chinese lunar calendar with the wrong month and year, and an arrangement of bright red lucky knots hanging from the ceiling.

"Don't you think the colors are pretty?" she also says—Pauline—before Fabiola knows her name, before Fabiola even feels the weight of the letters on her tongue, curling up in the notches of her breath and wanting to stay.

When Fabiola tilts her head and offers a polite but hesitant smile, confused, Pauline flicks her eyes toward the first washer, toward whatever it is behind the round glass whirling in a dizzying motion.

"I just bought it," she adds.

Fabiola blinks a couple times, confused, and when Pauline smiles as she makes a comical expression, Fabiola leans forward, squinting. The water inside the washer is sprouting bubbles in all the colors of the rainbow.

"It's my way of coming out to my family." Pauline seems proud of herself when she says this. Confident. Eyes as bright as the stars. But the brightness sort of flickers away. She looks scared too. Lonely and betrayed. Still, behind the little springs of deep-riddled sadness, there is kindness. So much kindness. She stares at Fabiola softly, the same way water runs in a lake: with care and fondness. And Fabiola knows that water carries love. Water carries kindness. Water carries comfort.

Fabiola chuckles, scrubbing at her face with the heels of her hands. It's late at night, three hours before midnight, so she should be in bed by now, or better yet, studying for next week's biology exam. Instead, she is doing her laundry and possibly falling in love. Or definitely falling in love. She just doesn't know it yet. "You bought a rainbow blanket to tell your family that you're gay?" she asks Pauline.

"I mean, yeah," Pauline answers and laughs along. The backs of her sneakers bump quietly against the wall behind the countertop.

"Why can't you just tell them?" Fabiola asks, but after a split second something stings in her chest. "Wait—no, I'm sorry. I—I shouldn't have asked that. Wow, I can't believe I just asked that." She twists the cap off the soda she got from the vending machine and takes a large sip.

Pauline grins sheepishly, twisting her fingers through the strands of dreadlocks falling over her shoulder. "Yeah, it's not that easy."

"I was lucky. When I told my grandmother that I wasn't interested in dating men, like, at all, she listened to me, and understood. Or at least tried to understand. She told me that she loves me no matter what." Fabiola feels a little guilty saying this.

Pauline shakes her head, shrinking into herself like she's cold. The fluorescent lights on the ceiling makes all of her glow. "Lucky," she sighs after a moment.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I really didn't mean it like that. I guess I wouldn't understand what it's like." Fabiola shakes back the bangs that are falling down into her eyelashes, embarrassed.

"I know you didn't," Pauline laughs, showing pearly rows of tic-tac teeth. "My parents are just painfully conservative, nothing much I can do about it. We are from a little village in the countryside of France, but they're originally from Ethiopia. So, they're not used to these sorts of—um, things, I guess. You know what I mean."

"That sounds pretty. The countryside of France, I mean." Fabiola says. "And Ethiopia."

"They are," Pauline agrees, nodding sagely, voice airy. "They're very beautiful places. But I feel free in New York."

"I'm Pauline," she also says, a little later, after she compliments Fabiola's hair again. *It's so curly and long and pretty*, she tells her.

Fabiola smiles. "I'm Fabiola."

"And where are you from, Fabiola?" Pauline asks and the way she says Fabiola's name, as if gently squeezing the air out of every letter, makes Fabiola's chest feel a warmth that seeps up from the ground.

"Puerto Rico," Fabiola answers.

"Ooh," Pauline says. Her lips are pink, Fabiola notices. A pretty pink. The pink of blooming azaleas and the pink of watermelons.

"That sounds pretty too," she says, smiling again, and all the stars in her eyes erupt. The sparks land on Fabiola's skin, in the empty spaces between her fingers and over the pulse on her wrists.

Fabiola closes her eyes, draws in a small breath, lets it out slowly. She opens her eyes. "It is. But I also feel free in New York. Or at least I'm learning to feel free."

The moment settles. After Fabiola's clothes stop spinning and the rainbow of Pauline's blanket stops spinning, they stand outside the

laundromat with their baskets full of warm cotton, wool and polyester. Pauline is idling off center in a circular pool of light from the streetlamp, sandstone glittering. The air is cold and bitter, but Fabiola feels surprisingly sweet and warm. Fabiola feels so sweet and warm that she wishes she could bottle Pauline's voice up and place it next to the lamp on her nightstand, a little treasure that brings comfort.

"I usually come here once a week. To do my laundry, of course." Pauline says and her voice is suddenly cut off by the rush of the city even at this late hour of the night, old chrome bleeding out of every corner. Reds and blues and burnt yellows sprawl out of skyscrapers, the whizzing of cars and the screams of the subway buzz under their feet.

"Me too," Fabiola whispers. "For my laundry, of course."

"I figured," Pauline says, rocking back and forth on the balls of her sneakers, arms behind her. "I saw you last week too. Maybe I'll see you next week?"

"Yeah," Fabiola scrunches her nose, teasingly. "Maybe."

"Fine," Pauline laughs. "Maybe it is then."

That night, Fabiola dreams of stars and saltwater and clouds of rainbows, and then *maybe* keeps her going through Saturday and Monday and then Wednesday and before she knows it, it is Thursday again. It is raining and the sidewalks are drenched in puddles and the glass windows of the laundromat are fogged, the city lights a hazy escape of a dream.

"Hi," Pauline says.

"Hi," Fabiola smiles. "So, did it work?"

Paulina tilts her head. She's got all her dreadlocks tied up in a knot with a blue scrunchy. She looks so pretty like that. "What did?"

Fabiola fidgets with her sleeves, gives herself sweater paws. "The thing with the rainbow blanket."

"Oh, that. Heh, actually, I haven't spoken to my family about it.

My grandma is really sick and just got admitted in the hospital, so I don't think now is the right time. I don't want to make this about me, you know," she says, and after a moment of silence, "I like your sweater."

"Thank you. I got it at the thrift store. I like yours too. And I'm sorry about your grandma."

"Yeah, thank you. I spoke to her in the morning, she's really not doing well. The doctors say the cancer is spreading fast."

There's a pause. Outside the rain continues to clatter down.

"I like thrifting too," Pauline says a bit later, outside the laundromat under their umbrellas. "Maybe we should go together."

Pauline also likes coffee, Fabiola learns. And trees in the summer. And French music. The ocean. The way coconut oil moisturizes the skin. She likes painting on cloudy days the best. Pauline paints with watercolors and sometimes with color pencils and oils, on big canvases and also on smaller ones. Fabiola learns all these things about Pauline after they decide to meet one weekend and then a second weekend, after exchanging text messages drenched in moonlight. They go thrifting and they go to parks. Sometimes they walk through crowded streets and they try foods they have never eaten before and it's all magical. It's all magical and New York is suddenly the brightest place on earth. Sometimes they meet for coffee or tea and ride the subway together. Sometimes they do nothing and give each other space to think and feel, to miss each other and yearn. They give each other time to study and work at their jobs and be apart, time to rest and slowly fold in each other's lives.

"I have been crying all day. I don't know what's wrong with me. I can't make myself stop crying," Pauline tells Fabiola one evening, when they meet in Pauline's apartment.

The woollen hat on Pauline's head barely sticks to the top of her head and under the unzipped coat there's a sliver of an olive-green cable knit sweater. Her eyes are puffy and red. Fabiola leans forward

on the railing of the fire escape, pressing her shoulder into Pauline's.

"That's okay. It's okay to cry, Pauline," she tells her, softly, looking at her like she matters, like she is important, because Fabiola knows it feels nice to be treated like that. "Sometimes it's okay to cry and be sad."

The window is ajar, Pauline's favorite French music is pooling out, languid and lazy. Pauline gives Fabiola a lopsided smile. She rests her head on Fabiola's shoulder and closes her eyes. They breathe together. It starts to snow.

A few days later Pauline sticks her head out of the bathroom, arms around a laundry-filled basket, and says something Fabiola doesn't catch.

"Mmm?" Fabiola hums, peering up from her book, bundled under the rainbow of Pauline's blanket. She can smell the snow from outside, all the cold air gathered in the room, a window half opened ruffling the homework Pauline finished yesterday and left on the desk. The floor is covered in newspapers, a painting drying on the floor and the citrus scent of its paint still lingers in the room.

"Fabiola," Pauline whispers, putting down the basket.

Fabiola takes another look at the painting. It is entirely covered in thick slabs of green and brown paint in varying shades, yet there's an order to it, a lovely blend, easy coexistence. Like the gentle humming of a forest. Like Pauline. To Fabiola, all her paintings are reflections of her: a swirl of inexplicable feelings enclosed prettily in paint, incredibly pretty, filling white spaces with light and soul and color.

"Yeah?" Fabiola says. "What is it?"

"Fabiola," Pauline whispers again.

"Pauline," Fabiola whispers back, stretching out a hand for Pauline to grab.

"I like you," Pauline says, sitting on the edge of the bed, bringing Fabiola's knuckles to her lips.

"Yo también," Fabiola tells Pauline, something throbbing in her chest. She straightens up, positions herself in front of Pauline.

"I hope that means something good. Should I start learning Spanish?" Pauline smiles, stroking the tangle of dark curls behind Fabiola's ear.

"Only if you want to," Fabiola answers. "Should I start learning French?"

"Only if you want to," Pauline says.

"I want to," Pauline whispers, her eyes sparkling, hand caressing Fabiola's cheek, slowly pulling her closer and closer until their foreheads touch. "I like your hair."

Fabiola breathes out a laugh. "And I like yours."

They kiss. And the kiss is cold but tastes of sweet cream soda and the creases of sunsets. The promise of something new unfolding.

By some miracle, Pauline's grandmother gets a little better and is able to leave the hospital and return home. There are more days of snow and days of rain and finally days of sunshine because winter always ends. Spring arrives with flourishing yellows and pinks, blooming with emerald diamond-shaped trees and skies of blues. Pauline and Fabiola kiss and they hold hands, and they laugh and they cry. They drink tea and watch movies and study for exams and get stressed out. They visit each other's tiny, tiny apartments and sleep on each other's beds and braid each other's hair. Pauline tells Fabiola childhood stories from her days back home in France and Fabiola tells Pauline childhood stories from hers in Puerto Rico. They watch the sunset bleed and disappear, and they count the number of times they hear sirens. They intertwine their pinkies and whisper each other's names before gently falling asleep.

And then summer announces its arrival, and another college semester is over. Exams are done and the wind is no longer cold. Summer announces its arrival and Pauline's grandmother dies when the air is warm, and the city is bustling with life more than ever.

When Pauline's grandmother dies, Pauline can't stop crying. She curls up small under the rainbow of her blanket and shivers and won't open her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," is all Fabiola can say, kissing her and pressing her gently against her chest. "I'm here, Pauline, it's okay, it will be okay," she tells her, over and over. "I know it's not fair, I know it hurts. Pauline, I'm here for you."

"Thank you," is all Pauline can say in return, shifting to curl around Fabiola, tucking her head into the crook of her neck. "Thank you for being here. I'm happy I met you. Thank you, Fabiola."

Pauline leaves for France on a rainy day. Outside the airport she says that she is going to stay for the rest of the summer, but also asks a question that sinks into Fabiola's heart.

"Will you wait for me?" Pauline asks and kisses Fabiola on the cheek, on the tip of her nose, on her forehead, twists her fingers through the curls and oils of her hair.

"Will you wait for me, Fabiola? I will come back by the end of the summer. I promise." Pauline says, her eyes as dark as night.

Fabiola looks up at her and smiles. She breathes deep. "Your family will be so happy to see you. I'm sure they've missed you. Will you tell them my condolences for me? Will you tell them about me?"

"I'm not going anywhere, Pauline," Fabiola assures her when there is a pause and Pauline says nothing. They're both trying not to cry, their throats visibly shifting and tightening, their voices quiet and painful. "We can talk on the phone. You can call me, and I can call you. I'll wait right here until you come back."

"Yeah, okay," Pauline finally says. "I will tell my family about you, and—I will tell my grandma too. Fabiola, I will miss you."

"I will miss you too," Fabiola whispers, giving Pauline's hand one last squeeze.

And the stars in Pauline's eyes light up light up light up, and Fabiola says *see you soon* to them, to the pink of her lips and the

freckles of her cheeks, to the lightning of dreadlocks in her hair and the sweet honey of her voice.

And so, Fabiola waits, because she has already fallen in love. She hopes that time will be kind to her heart this time around.

ELECTRIC ICE CREAM

By Nora Baker





It was coil-upon-coil of pale fluffiness, twisted round just for me. I told myself that it was obvious, from the way she'd stabbed the chocolate into the cream, that my feelings were reciprocated.

I'd first seen her on a Wednesday night. I used to spend most evenings out walking in the days before I'd met her, wandering by myself, getting lost and trying to feel warmth towards the faces I passed in the street. I'd smile at the people around me, but they'd either stare blankly back or avoid my gaze. It seemed I still had a lot to learn about the social rules of the city. Once or twice, I'd tried to ask people for directions to get back to the street I lived on, but no-one would stop to talk to me. I always felt relieved when I spotted the post office-cum-corner shop just a few blocks down from where I lived; its presence would show that I was close to where I belonged – just a few more steps, and I would make it back home.

It was late when I passed the shop on that Wednesday night. It had long closed at that stage, and so its shelves and products were mostly lost in the darkness. But through the window, I could see every soft inch of a girl's face. She was checking something to do with the ice

cream freezer, and its blue light settled on her features while she ruffled through the packets of Magnums and Cornettos. Best of all, I was able to stay watching her work for a few minutes, because she was so absorbed in whatever she was doing. I pretended to be looking around casually at my surroundings while I waited to cross the road, but really, I was looking at her, carefully committing to memory her intent expression, and the brightness she brought to the empty shop. Suddenly the dirty evening around me seemed to glow like she did. It was raining, so ordinarily I would have been miserable. I nearly slipped when stepping off a wet kerb but, after seeing her, even that couldn't upset me. I saw the reflections of streetlamps in puddles and the effect reminded me of glitter.

I wanted to go to the shop as soon as it opened the following morning, to see her in action in the daylight. In the sun, I thought, she would look even more radiant. But I just about forced myself to delay my gratification. In fact, I had tried to Google its opening hours, but it was such a small business, it didn't seem to have an internet footprint. Fancy that, in this day and age. I was impressed and began to entertain romantic notions of how I would woo her organically. Maybe she preferred hand-written messages over texts, human faces over emojis. I mused over these possibilities in the middle of the night. I couldn't sleep, though it wasn't strictly just because of her: the music room above my small student flat wasn't as soundproof as had been advertised, and so soprano wailing was coming through my ceiling well into the early hours. I kept pacing back and forth from my bed to my sink to refill the glass of water I always kept on my locker. But as I went through the motions of twisting the tap, letting the liquid flow, and drinking it, it was as if I wasn't really there. On one level, I could see the layout of the room around me, my familiar possessions in front of my eyes. But another, inner eye, continued to picture the face of the girl. I imagined her so strongly that she could have been in the room with me too.

*

Though the sight of it had always brought comfort, I hadn't been to that particular shop before. Since I'd moved to the city and started my studies, I'd mostly frequented big-name supermarket chains, stockpiling up points on my loyalty card. 'All of your points add up!' an automated voice would ring from the checkout machine as I scanned my purchases. This little shop was very silent by comparison. I got the impression most people entered just to use the post office function, and walked straight to the back, passing by the dusty magazine rack and the soft serve machine at the counter without really noticing them. The girl, however, made use of both of these things. She was flicking through a glossy issue and leaning against the ice-cream maker. She looked up when the little bell above the door rang out my entrance. I asked her for a .99 and tried not to lose myself in her eyes as I spoke.

I started going there every two days, then, as I couldn't keep away. Quick glances at her nametag had taught me that she was called Milly. She always seemed happy to see me, as I made my entrance as the main man in an empty shop. Just seeing her smile once in a day could make the rest of the hours seem sunnier. At some point, I started going there every day, making my visit part of my routine, as automatic to me as brushing my teeth. I fancied that my frequent custom had created an air of mystery around me, one I hoped Milly would find alluring. Still, I nearly melted when, one hot September afternoon, she agreed to a date.

*

Anytime I felt nervous, or worried about something, I found it comforting to spend a few minutes looking at her face, studying its features. My eyes focused on her freckles as I worked up the courage

to free the words that had been bubbling inside me for weeks.

“Mil,” I said, “I think I may be in love with you.”

We were seated on a park bench on a promenade. The air was cold – a seaside trip in January was, we’d agreed, quirkily romantic – so we huddled together. But the sun was out, and we’d bought ice creams, as part of a little in-joke, a way to remember how we’d first met each other. Milly – Mil – had laughed when I’d told her how I’d first seen her that night when the shop was closed. “I must have left quite an impression!” she’d said.

“I think I’m in love with you, too,” she said now.

We took off our mittens to squeeze one another’s hands, her touch warmer than any fabric. We stared out at the water for a few minutes, and I imagined that those who rushed past us were jealous of how intimate we looked. I could have stayed there for hours, listening to the waves and seagulls, but after a few minutes Milly shivered and suggested it was time to leave and find a cosy spot inside somewhere. I quickly agreed, of course, but I stumbled when getting off the bench. My cone went flying.

“Jesus! Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” I insisted, even though I’d cut my left elbow on the jagged tarmac and some blood was now seeping into the pool of spilt ice cream, forming a little white-and-red puddle to mark my embarrassment.

“Let me see.” She beamed her phone torch at my arm.

“It’s not so bad. Only... I think you’ve got a squirt of dessert in the wound.” She pretended to dab the cut with her finger and lick it. We both giggled.

*

“She’s only interested in you for your money.”

“Mum, she has money. She’s working part-time because she’s

industrious, not because she's poor."

My parents had been asking to meet Milly for months. I hadn't wanted to share her with them, hadn't wanted to subject her to their gaze. But they'd been so insistent that I'd eventually given in and let them arrange a meal together.

We'd sat stiffly round the dinner table. I'd been so nervous that I could barely hold my cutlery properly; at one stage, the edge of my sleeve slid into my soup. She told them how she'd started studying Politics a few years ago, before dropping out. Now she was back and in the second year of a new set of studies, still in the Arts faculty, but this time with Maths and Computer Science as her subjects. Although, she admitted, with a self-deprecating chuckle, Python could sometimes be a difficult beast to tame.

The others tittered along politely, though they didn't understand. They hadn't heard of the coding language before. I could tell what they were thinking. Who drops out of an Arts degree? Isn't that the easiest course? These days doing English or History didn't even mean you were automatically resigned to becoming a teacher. You could study philosophical concepts and then end up a lawyer, or a banker. That's what people in England do, my London cousin had told my siblings at Christmas. They follow their passion at first, and then repackage it into something financially viable. The best of both worlds. But Milly hadn't approached things that way. It wasn't until the pudding arrived, and my brother started asking tough questions about her life plans, that she realised she was under more scrutiny than she'd anticipated. So we'd argued that evening.

"Is that what you see 'us' as? Some kind of sick 'sugar daddy' relationship?"

"Mil, no. They're just... old-fashioned. They have some straitlaced ideas about life. But I don't care what they think."

I hadn't wanted to introduce her to them in the first place; I knew they'd try to ruin things for me. I'd only given in because she'd

insisted that she'd like to meet them, and, in the end, her reception had been even frostier than I'd expected. I told her again and again how much she meant to me, and I think – I hope – that at some stage, she started to believe me.

*

It was so easy to get distracted. Certain names and places that popped up in my cases reminded me of her. I'd sit still in the library, trying to appear focused and studious to those around me, while my mind was drizzled in memories of our bliss. I'd reward myself for writing a few sentences of an essay by spending half an hour scrolling through her photos, even though I knew them all by heart already. I'd end up doing all-nighters to get assignments finished, taking endless doses of fizzy drinks, then wallowing in an energy crash the next morning.

One evening, I'd hit pause on the tv while she went to the bathroom. The screen was frozen on a sitcom character about to speak, their mouth open in anticipation. I started to feel uncomfortable in front of this image, as though I shouldn't be wasting my energies concentrating on something of its ilk. I looked around for other things to focus on, and my eyes fell on her phone, as it was buzzing. I reached over to stop the sound, because after a few minutes, it started to make me nervous, but my movement caused it to fall down the crack between the sofa cushions, and I ended up having to wrestle it out. My eyes had settled on the message.

“Who's Linda?” I asked when she came back.

“It was just an innocent flirtation,” she'd cried, and I believed her.

There was no sense in sacrificing what we had over what she claimed was a little experimentation. And so we went on as before.

But a few weeks later, she'd suggested ‘going on a break.’

“I want to explore my sexuality,” she said. “I don't want to be

unfair to you.”

“Can’t you explore it with us still being together?”

“What?”

“I don’t mind – I mean, I’m very open-minded. We could have an ‘open relationship.’ That’s very common these days. You can do what you like with whom you like. But I’d like to see you still.” I begged, I pleaded, I cried. I’m sure the other students could hear me through the thin walls. But she was eventually convinced, so it was worth it.

*

She started seeing me for a shorter time each day, and then just once every two days. The hours without her felt hollow, but I tried to sweeten them by thinking about how nice it was when she was around. At night I would lie back and picture her. I was alone, with the lights turned off, but I could still see her face. The opera students in the music room had started their practising again, providing a high-pitched soundtrack to my fantasies. I didn’t really mind, it actually made me feel less alone. The singing felt like the one constant in my life, something I was guaranteed every evening. I knew I would miss it when I moved out of the first-year accommodation.

Then, one day, she had an announcement to make. “I can’t go on like this,” she said.

Thank God, I thought, this phase has come to an end.

“I’ve tried to tell you this before. The attention you give me makes me feel uncomfortable.” What? “Please, Mil –”

“That’s another thing. When did I ever tell you to call me Mil? That’s not my name. I don’t know why you decided it was.”

*

She still hasn’t come back, or answered my calls, or my texts. I didn’t

leave the room for a few days after she left. I didn't leave the bed much, either. I think maybe I felt that if I stayed there, if I deprived myself of nourishment, it would be a penance for whatever I'd done to upset her. And what would happen if I left, and she came to my door looking for me, and discovered I was gone? Better to let my limbs waste away, and lungs wither, than to venture out and face the city without her. My quilt weighed down on me as I slept, and I dreamt I was embracing her. Then today I finally started feeling hungry again and I noticed that the food in my little personal fridge had gone rotten.

I couldn't go back to the corner shop, though she hasn't even worked there for a few months now. It would feel bare without her. So I had to turn the other way down the street and block it from my view. I walked to the big supermarket, even though the sting from its lights made my eyes sweat. I grabbed a Dairy Milk from the shelf, knocking over a box of Smarties as I went. I didn't stop to pick them up, I stepped over them and queued for the checkout. My heart beat faster each time I heard someone beep! through a product on their self-service machine. I fumbled for my loyalty card and tried not to jump too noticeably at the beep! for my own purchase.

I shuffled out past people chatting as they stacked up shopping baskets and clanged trolleys into place. For a second I had the strange sensation that I was going to be snapped in two by the sliding doors, though of course that didn't happen. Then I was free and I was in the car park.

I looked down at the chocolate and saw that my grip on the wrapper was such that my fingers kind of obscured the 'r' and the 'k', so that it seemed to say 'Daily Mil.' I quickly ripped open the foil before I could start crying again. But the chocolate bar had melted.

THE LITTLE PINK BOX

By Milagros Lasarte





Had anyone seen her little pink box?

The question swayed on its wavelength, travelling across the living room but finding no destination. Maddie rushed down the stairs, stomping on each step, but stopped halfway down her course, realising there was no one to witness her impatience. She stood still for a moment, contemplating. Was this what they meant when they called her unreasonable?

She continued to make her way downstairs with a little more grace, a little less nervousness.

The main door of the house was ajar, and Maddie could hear her parents' cordial smiles as they tried to reap a reasonable price for... She looked around but couldn't tell which object they were bargaining over. So many were already missing.

'Twenty-five for the clock— deal!'

The mantelpiece was bare now. Not *that* clock! It was so quaint and gothic. Maddie placed a hand on her heart and bid farewell to the ancient clock. Then, not wasting another second, she got hold of one of the boxes lingering beside the washed-out blue couch – of every

other piece of furniture, somehow this one had stayed put – and plunged her hand into it, rummaging through. It was unlikely her pink box would be in there, among ladles and pans, but there was no telling how deceptive her family could get.

She'd only asked for a little more time – just enough to figure out which things she *desperately* wanted to keep and which ones she could bear to add to the pile on sale. But they'd sent her on an absurd errand, depriving her of any choice, and while Maddie generously bicycled to the store, hoping the cold breeze would help clear her mind, they'd packed everything.

Maddie moved to the porch. She leaned over the wooden rail, stretching her neck forth to project her voice.

Had anyone seen her little pink box?

Her words were drowned by the loud bargaining on the front lawn. With a sigh, Maddie leaped down the steps and went over to the tables neatly aligned along the kerb.

She joined the crowd of neighbours, eager witnesses to this display where her family's memories were categorised and valued, each with its own white price tag. Maddie stopped in front of the section labelled *kids' toys* – still no sign of her little pink box. She nudged some lingering coats to get a better look, but a firm grip on her arm pulled her away.

'What exactly are you doing?' her mother asked.

'Just observing.'

Maddie wouldn't be fooled again. If she told her mother what she was looking for, she'd be confronted with greater obstacles.

'Right, and while you observe, maybe you could help your brother out?'

Maddie looked down at her feet and stood still, waiting for her mother to walk away, the way she always did, with that long sigh through gritted teeth. When Maddie was satisfied that her parents' attention was elsewhere, she joined her brother. *Had he seen her little*

pink box?

‘Which box?’

‘The little pink one!’

Her brother shrugged and returned to counting the notes their next-door neighbour was handing him. It was then Maddie noticed the bag the man was holding. A doll’s hand reached out from its zipper. What else was inside? She circled the tables and walked discreetly to his side. The man had just started a conversation with the town’s librarian and the bag now lay at his feet.

‘Old toys have so much more personality. My niece will love them, no doubt!’

Maddie knelt on the ground and peeped inside the bag. There were some toys in there – that awful doll with her twisted eyes, the red Teletubby with its ripped television – but not her precious box. Her cheeks grew hot, and Maddie clenched her fists, trying to calm down.

‘What’s the problem now?’ her brother asked, looking down at her from his seat, his eyes tinged with betrayal.

Where to begin? Perhaps with the harsh realisation that her own family didn’t care about her feelings. That someone had packed all of her belongings and hid them so well she was now forced to embark on a treasure-hunt she really had no time for. Or maybe it was that her family hadn’t believed her when she said she’d have her things sorted out in time. And she’d intended to put some things aside for the sale, she’d even got as far as spreading her possessions on the floor of her bedroom to study each case carefully. She just hadn’t reached a decision yet. Far from it! She’d been arguing with herself when her mother interrupted her. Milk! They needed more milk, and it was urgent. She sighed, but complied, finding no reason not to. Maddie trusted them enough not to question this odd request. She believed her mother, her *mummy*.

It was awful, them sneaking behind her back like that.

‘Didn’t you think I’d reach a decision eventually?’

‘No.’

Maddie jumped up, enraged, but she didn’t know what to say. She glared at him before running away to the garden, away from this unsympathetic crowd. Was it Maddie’s fault she was more sensitive to these things? They didn’t believe her, but she’d tried – earnestly – to do away with the things she’d hoarded over the years. Every object and toy was special in its own way. There were those she simply thought of as aesthetically pleasing; those she’d bought on a whim then desperately tried to find a use for because those were also the most expensive ones. Finally, there were those that had *once* been useful, that had *once* been pretty, and still reminded her of simpler times. Maddie knew she didn’t *need* them: they were either broken, worn useless, or meant for the young child she’d once been. But was it a question of necessity? Did one keep objects just because one needed them?

What if she was allowed to keep *one*? Which one would it be?

Maddie had looked around the room and crawled over to the little pink box with its heart-shaped clasp on the front. When she opened it, a little ballerina sprung upright and started to spin on the tip of her left foot. Beethoven’s *Für Elise* played from somewhere within the box. Behind the ballerina was a mirror, heart-shaped as well. It was scratched all over by the stretched arms of the ballerina – scratched from all the times Maddie had only opened the lid halfway, when she couldn’t bear to listen to *Elise* anymore but still wanted to get the golden necklace stored inside.

The first time she’d opened the box was on her seventh birthday. The ballerina guarded a watch, whose round face was too big for Maddie’s wrist. The watch was now long gone, and Maddie didn’t really need the ballerina anymore. Inside the box were rusted rings and lace string necklaces she’d collected but never worn. Still, on days she felt sentimental, she’d open the box to find the ballerina still

dancing for her.

They were asking too much of her, and Maddie fretted change. She needed to be eased into it, warned many months in advance. She didn't understand why her parents were selling the house in the first place. Was the seaside really that much better? And how, *how* could they bear to leave it all behind? To know that once they locked the house and surrendered its keys, they would no longer be able to walk freely inside it. Someone else would climb its stairs, eat in *their* kitchen, sleep in *their* bedrooms. They'd have no reason to return to this place, a place they once called home.

They went through all the formalities with such ease, but *she* had built ties. Thin strings departing from her body and connecting her to the world around her: the striped wallpaper in the kitchen, the flowerbeds that separated their lawn from the two adjacent ones, the street and its lampposts, the road to school, the bicycle she rode around town. She was even connected to things she wasn't particularly fond of: the Rottweiler at the end of the street who always made her jump when it barked; even the two old women seated on the park bench and whispering to themselves whenever she walked past them, with their sly *'morning* that chilled her spine. All these ties had taken hold of her so that whenever Maddie ventured a little too far from the town-line, they pulled back. Gentle tugs reminding her of what she was leaving behind.

Feeling their call in that moment, Maddie decided to try one last time.

She left the front lawn and marched into the kitchen where both her parents were sipping coffee. As she stood in front of them, they exchanged looks of worn-out patience. Maddie ignored them and enquired once again:

'Have you seen my little pink box?'

No answer came at first, and Maddie imagined the worst: the little pink box discarded in the bin, the ballerina smothered under layers of

rubbish.

‘What box?’ her father asked, shattering the silence.

‘The little-pink-one! With the heart-shaped mirror and the ballerina!’

‘Oh, *that* one... I think someone already bought it.’

Her heart skipped a beat.

‘Well, *who* bought it?’

‘Does it even matter?’

Of course it did! It mattered whose hands would touch her little pink box, lift the lid and listen to *Elise*. It mattered that her rings and necklaces were still inside, even though she didn’t wear them anymore. It was simple – she hadn’t consented to this sentimental theft.

‘No, I guess it doesn’t *really* matter,’ Maddie answered tightly, devastated inside.

She knew all they were asking was that she be a little more reasonable.

It sounded so easy coming from their lips, but whenever she tried, Maddie faced time and time again the complexity of that request. Reasonable wasn’t something one could just be. There was a long journey to it, comparing different perspectives, weighing her options, and finding which was the better choice, the *grown-up* one. But what if she had only one perspective? Or two, but so similar to each other it was impossible to draw a clear line between them. How should she be reasonable then?

It seemed to her that in order to be reasonable, she had to test what being truly *unreasonable* was like. So maybe it did matter after all, and *yes please*, could they tell her who bought it?

Her father smiled.

‘One of the old women you don’t like. The one always wearing a blue cardigan.’

Maddie sprinted out of the house. She knew exactly where to find

the woman, and only a few meters separated her from her precious little pink box. She ran towards it, following its vibrating pull, that thin string that hadn't been severed yet. The sole of her shoes slapped the ground. The wind blew at her back, pushing her forth, encouraging her, and Maddie wondered what would happen once she got her ballerina back. Would she still dance for her? Would *Elise* still play her song?

Maddie slackened her pace and eventually came to a standstill when she caught sight of the blurry blue figure, sat on her favourite bench in the park. The street was quiet except for the rustling of leaves, and something else... Maddie walked a few steps closer to the blue figure, her ears pricked up. It was *Elise*. And if the music was playing, then the ballerina was also dancing. Dancing for someone else.

Für Elise came to an end, then started all over again. The old woman in her blue cardigan had wound the chord on the back of the pink box, feeding the ballerina with renewed energy.

Spin, my friend, spin! Show off your pirouettes! But not to me, not anymore.

The chilly breeze blew past her once again. Maddie folded her arms, shielding herself from its touch. She was transfixed, held in place by the haunting melody of the little pink box. Then it was over, and silence reigned once more. The old woman had pushed down the lid and the ballerina had fallen asleep. The blue figure was as still as her. Had she noticed Maddie's presence? If she had, the old woman didn't acknowledge it. Instead, she slowly got to her feet and headed in the opposite direction.

The blue cardigan and the little pink box together.

Maddie felt some more vibrations, a last gentle tug, then nothing.

When the woman became a dot in the distance, Maddie finally managed to move. She turned around, placing one foot after the other, and soon enough, she was heading back home.

Old home. Not home.

When she stepped on her lawn, the vibrations around her were essentially gone. The tables were almost empty. Only a few objects still waited for a new owner. Maddie continued along the gravel path that led to the porch. One, two, three steps. A pause, then on again, crossing the threshold and dragging herself up the stairs. Her feet skimmed the steps, almost soundless, completely unnoticed.

Maybe being reasonable sounded a little bit like that.

LIFE'S PAINFUL TRUTHS

By Faye-Alexandra Rose





Heather stared into the chest filled with her mother's belongings. Old trinkets lay in a heap – post cards from holidays, polaroid snaps from anniversaries and jewellery boxes containing her most sentimental heirlooms. Each object mapped out the 57 years she had on earth. She picked up the letter her mother wrote to her on her deathbed, ‘I’ll still be here, Heather, I’ll always be with you.’ Tears cascaded down her cheeks as she longed to hear her mother’s voice once more.

‘I wish that were true, Mum.’ She whispered to the letter, smelling the creases in the hope that her mother's scent had somehow buried itself into the paper. She carried it along with a glass of red wine to the bath that had just been drawn and peeled the black clothes off her body in an effort to wash the heaviness of the day away.

*

I arrived here this morning and it’s not what you’d expect it to be. I wouldn’t even call it ‘heaven’ as such. You don’t swim inside the clouds with the loved ones who passed on before you. Life doesn’t

suddenly become relaxing because you've broken through to the other world. In fact, it's nothing how you picture it to be when you're down there – alive on earth. Nothing about this place is soothing, on the contrary, watching your family's lives moving on without you is overwhelming and heart-breaking. They're so oblivious to the control your choices have over them. This one guy, Gerard, three seats over from my desk just made a wrong choice and it cost his daughter her university acceptance. It's an unsettling feeling to know that life really isn't at all what you think it is. You can try so hard for everything you've ever wanted but if someone up here doesn't make the right choice, then it's all in vain. I wish I'd known this before I came here, I would have stopped fretting over anything and everything. My mother always used to say that I was an overthinker and life always had a way of working itself out. Little did she know that there was a lot of truth in her idle wisdom.

It turns out I have been assigned to Heather's life now. It's my turn to do something good for her. I was never a great mother; I was never there for her as much as I should have been. I always prioritised work over picking her up from school or cooking her dinner to come home to. I thought I was doing the right thing by making money to keep a roof over our heads, but now, up here, it's made me realise I needed to have some work/life balance. I needed to spend more time with her. I would give anything to push my hands inside of this computer screen and hold her in my arms. I wouldn't even say a word, just bury my fingers in her hair and nuzzle her. The fact that I'm now in charge of her life without having earned that privilege is a painful pill to swallow. I'm due my first assignment shortly. I'm praying I do this right - not that praying will do much good as it turns out - it's just a habit, I guess.

*

The alarm rang at 8:15am. Heather dragged herself out of bed and sat down at her dressing table. She looked into the mirror, horrified at the bags that had appeared under her eyes. There was no escaping the grief that had embedded itself into her face.

‘Why did I make plans for this morning of all days?’ She whispered to herself.

A text came through: Still up for this morning? X.

‘I guess I don’t have a choice.’ She muttered.

*

URGENT: PLEASE OPEN.

A flashing box suddenly appears on my screen and I click to open it. It’s my first assignment.

Read carefully.

It seems like a multiple-choice question:

Question 1: In 1994 your daughter took part in a school play, what role was she cast?

No, not this, anything but this. I remember making up a lie to skip the play that night, I desperately needed a night alone. I had been working so hard all week. If only I knew how important this moment would have been. I wish I had known how invaluable the smaller things in life were. You never realise how you take these small moments for granted until it’s too late.

I click on my answer. The screen turns red.

*

Heather was driving down a dual carriageway when a sudden feeling

of déjà vu came over her. ‘How many times have I driven down this road during my lifetime,’ she thought, with a twinge of realisation, ‘I drove down this very road yesterday on the way back from the funeral. Maybe this is a sign to move away and start afresh somewhere else.’

She switched on the radio to drown out her thoughts. Her favourite song began to play.

She escaped into a world of her own, completely oblivious to the car speeding behind her. As it attempted to overtake, the front of its bumper collided with the back of her car, causing her to spin uncontrollably into the oncoming traffic. Wrought with panic, she instinctively grabbed the steering wheel, throwing her into the path of a lorry. The screeches of tires drowned out her screams. Then darkness.

*

Heather, I am so sorry I failed you. I wish I were there to hold your hand. Please get better, I am begging you Heather, please fight. What happens now?

‘You decide that.’ The man next to me replies.

A box appears on my screen.

URGENT: PLEASE OPEN

Another assignment.

MONKEYS TYPING AT THE COSMOS CAFÉ

By S. E. Hartz





The year I graduated from high school, a utility repairman uncovered the remains of a speakeasy underneath the parking lot of the Cosmos Café. A passageway below the lot opened up to a pair of derelict chambers filled with copper funnels, glass jugs and three old, cracked kegs dated from the 1920s. It was the talk of the press for a few weeks, and some local archaeologists took interest. The papers never noted that for years it had been a speakeasy of my own, a clandestine escape from the strictures of my suburban teenage life; I felt stung for a moment, like my secret had been stolen. Mostly, I was proud.

Ten years passed since graduation, and I still logged onto Facebook every so often to stalk my old classmates from high school, to find out who had gotten married or pregnant or arrested, when I saw the post from Keith, the café's owner. Boarded-up businesses were not a rarity for our rustbelt town, not since the microchip industry had moved on, leaving only a legacy of groundwater pollution behind, but this one hit me in the gut. One hundred years after Prohibition, the Cosmos Café was closing its doors for good. I thought historical significance – global or personal – had to be enough

to save it, but meaning doesn't make money. If it was going to be saved, it might be up to me.

I lived in New York City by then and ran with a circle of artists and organizers who were both wedded to the city and wanted to leave it as often as we could. It was 2020, and the commune was in vogue. It was the sort of thing we all planned to do at the end of the world, date pending – to pool our resources and buy a property and be accountable only to ourselves and our dreams. Lizzy was pushing for Queens; Marya for anything with “Heights” in the name, to account for sea-level rise. We contemplated a mountain house in Virginia, where Clair was from. On a few of our trips upstate, though, an idea had taken root, one that I now saw flowering with specifics. I called Lizzy.

“It’s not for sale yet as far as I can tell, but when it is, I want to put a bid in on the place.” I waxed poetic about the music festivals we could host in the parking lot, how we could turn the upstairs rooms into artists’ residencies, how we could sell our homemade vegan goods and maybe our friend Myles’s microbrews.

“If you love it,” Lizzy had said, “I’m sure we will too.” And so, I booked a van from JFK two weekends later, and we set out.

I have always found a collective to immerse myself in, no matter where I go. I think I get sad when I’m not a part of something bigger than myself, or maybe I’m just lonely. It was theater club in my hometown – a place small enough that you didn’t have to be good to get a part, you just had to be different. The auditorium was at the edge of the school and so were we; football ruled our town, but between the stage curtains we formed a shifting conglomeration of queer freaks and kids too smart for their own good. We came out to each other. We tripped together for the first time. Most intimately, we talked about our dreams of getting out.

“Make your own fun,” my mother used to tell me when I was young and still worried about conventional popularity. It may as well

have been a tagline for survival in our hometown, where a night on the town often consisted of buying up tawdry romance novels at the Thrifty Shopper on Front Street and reading them aloud at the Dunkin Donuts. One time we found a copy of the Necronomicon and read it aloud in the laundromat. I think we just wanted to make someone, somewhere, uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as we were. Often, we wandered the night with no agenda, breaking into abandoned buildings and swapping gateway drugs in the backseat of our cars. But mostly, we went to the Cosmos.

My hometown was somewhere I felt hemmed in. For many of us, we felt like we would never be able to leave. Cosmos, though, was different – it had the style and history of a place that you might come back to by choice. I knew Keith as a presence behind the bar, the details lightly sketched, but he had lived in New York, in San Francisco, and had bottled up bohemian flair to bring right back to Main Street. The café occupied a two-level house painted burnt orange with a peacock purple awning, burnished metal wind chimes hanging below, sculpted half into a raucous sun and half a dozing moon. Inside, the walls were lined with tapestries, paisley or tie-dyed or arrayed with cosmic patterns, and though incense was never visible, it smelled like it was burning, somewhere just out of sight. Local beers were on tap at the long wooden counter, and psychedelic paintings from artists in Woodstock and Ithaca oversaw tables ringed with old locals and eager students deep in their books or laptops. The back of the café opened onto a stage, house band instruments standing at the ready. And behind, a mustard-yellow nook filled with couches, stacked board games, a dartboard, an old Ms. Pac-Man machine and games of chess, always half-finished. Up the wooden staircase, its walls nearly covered with stickers and posters advertising bands and beer, was a labyrinth of rooms, shag-carpeted and bursting with moth-eaten sofas and jewel-toned easy chairs. My favorite was a room with a pool table and a pockmarked loveseat, painted the same orange as

the siding, its border trim dark as night and strewn with stars. I could have lived in that room, with windows that looked out over the Wendy's, a warm summer breeze coming in, just tinged with the scent of fries.

The Cosmos was a glimpse of what could be in other cities and other towns. It was where art and music were created. It was a portal to the future. But it was the people, most of all, that held me. I listed their names to my newer cast of friends as we drove upstate. There was Finn, quiet and dark-eyed, who would sit with me for hours on summer afternoons while we worked on our respective fantasy novels. There was Eli, who always smelled of patchouli and wore thrift-store skirts to school, a famous stoner who starred in the local production of the Rocky Horror Picture Show. There were Evie and Scott, an inseparable duo who were transitioning out of their emo phase and writing a wry revenge comedy about the football team, who were enemies one through eleven on our list of the hometown small-minded. There was Chloe, always the lead in the school plays and always the star of some other secret drama at the neighboring high school that she kept purposely shrouded in mystery as thick as her eyeliner. There was Julia, a straight edge Christian punk with a troubled home life. There was Dylan, my sister's ex-boyfriend who ran the teen poetry nights that met on the threadbare sofas upstairs; they didn't speak but I still had a soft spot for him, for convincing me poetry could be cool. And there was Kel, who had gotten me into theater club in the first place, who had taken me to my first poetry night, who had held my hand while I swallowed nerves before reading aloud for the first time, whose hand I held the night his mom's boyfriend was taken in and he had to move away in eleventh grade.

"I've never heard you talk this fondly of your hometown," Clair pointed out as we passed horse pastures and barns crumbling into the earth.

"I guess I didn't realize how much it mattered," I said back.

If my first memory on the threadbare sofas had been one of fear, my best was of safety and love – the first time I found somewhere I wanted to stay forever, in the place I had spent all my time dreaming of leaving. We had gone, the group of us, to the Rocky Horror Picture show at the Cinema Saver – dingy, tobacco-stained and sticky with the residue of popcorn and soda – but an escape hatch to the stars when the lights went down, and Eli took the stage. Keith would stay open late for us those days, the last Saturday of the month, and we would stop in for his famous dark roast coffee and bean burritos before our drive back to the rural outskirts where we would fold ourselves back into our beds. It was my first time, and a lipstick “V” was still painted scarlet on my forehead as we stumbled in from the cold, in drag and draped in boas and each other’s arms, Eli in some ripped miniskirt from the costume closet that showed fishnets and his golden thong. I was too stoned to go home, and the bartender could tell – a hippie speedball, he had called it, when he pushed my dark roast across the counter to me. Upstairs, Scott and Eli shot pool for hours while Finn wrote in the corner, and Kel and I cuddled up like puppies on the couch and promised we would grow old together one day: get a farm and raise goats and live off the land. Snow gathered fast at the windows and we lost all perception of time’s passage, and Keith let us stay until four, dreaming up the best futures that we could believe in.

There was no snow on our drive, not like the winters when I was young – just an endless slog of grey and brown. But I could smell home as soon as I pulled off the Binghamton exit and onto Main Street. We were back somewhere that I belonged to. We passed landmarks meaningless to all but me: the old Masonic Temple, the Congregationalist church where my dad had been a deacon for one short year, Leroy’s liquor store and the museum and the grimy Cinema Saver, the hospital where my sister was born and my grandfather died, the Belmar Hotel where you could get any drug you

could dream of. I knew I would see it soon, rising up from the grey like the swelling of my own heart – that golden-orange siding, the sun and moon, the chalk illustrations on the board outside the door where Keith would write quotes by Allen Ginsberg or Jim Morrison, the big picture window filled with plants, the “Open” sign.

I had gone to Cosmos for the last time in June, for what ended up being their final concert before the close. A number of bands had graced the stage over the years, folk or psychedelic artists on their way south from Ithaca, but the house band was Monkeys Typing. They played every Thursday, with Keith on lead guitar. When he took the stage that night, a rolling cheer went up from the crowd gathered, and I felt a belonging, though I had come alone that night, my friends scattered on several winds by then. We danced until two, swirling through the smell of incense and the familiar comfort of the flowing tapestries, and an old man took my hand and twirled me around during a rollicking Allman Brothers cover. He had moved out to a farm in Pennsylvania years prior, but he had come back for the concert, too, he told me over beers when the music had dipped down to a slow seventeen-minute jam.

“It’s great to know you always have a home,” he said.

I had seen Monkeys Typing dozens of times before I knew the origin of the name – that if you set an infinite number of monkeys to work at typewriters for an infinite period of time, they would eventually complete, at the very least, a Shakespearean sonnet. I already knew something similar – that in the infinity of time and space, sometimes the stars and planets circle up, and hometown alienation and apathy align to produce something truly brilliant.

When we pulled up outside the building, I thought I must have gotten turned around – that years away had scrambled my internal compass and I had landed on the other side of town. Though it made no sense, I was sure the café had moved – that it had jumped time to avoid its fate. But the truth, reported in an issue of the Press & Sun-

Bulletin I had missed in the midst of my reveries, was plain. The orange paint was gone; the moon and sun had set. The siding had been painted a drab grey. The Cosmos Café was a real estate office.

“Wow, things really are cheap up here,” Lizzy said, looking through the listings.

I mean...” Clair said, trailing off and gesturing around to the parkway of boarded-up stores.

I saw myself rendered, then, through the eyes of the others. There was something here that they would never be able to see. I loved these people; they were the ones I wanted to spend my life with. But by comparison they felt rootless, here, while I was glued to the ground. The thing is, we can’t always make our meanings mean something to other people. And sometimes, over time, we become other people, too.

When I moved away, I forgot. I forgot the importance of nurturing the creative soul of wherever you were planted. And when I moved to bigger places, places like Washington and New York, and met people who grew up around a wealth of museums and not the small-town history center with its ten-year-old display about the civil war, who had taken prom photos on the Brooklyn Bridge and not on the banks of the Chenango River, I stopped talking about it. Suddenly it wasn’t so special to have had a café to hang out with my friends at into the late hours of the night; they had hundreds. It was just some town, I would shrug. Glad I got out. I had spent so much time shitting on my hometown and now that the heart of it was gone to pieces, I couldn’t breathe. I could only cling to a day in June, the day after our first collective acid trip, when we had soared down Main Street quiet and contemplative, listening to that Flaming Lips song, the soundtrack to our summer:

“Do you realize / That everyone / You know / Someday / Will die.”

Even if I could buy the building back, the soul was gone. And I wondered, too, whether it was anything without the people. I recognized in retrospect that while theater was an escape from mundanity for me, it was an escape from more for others, and I turned to everyone I had lost track of over the years. I wondered where all of them had gone, my one-time family, so easily scattered. Some, in and out of institutions. Some, battling addiction in other states. One had pivoted from his lawless teenage years to a career as a cop; he lived in town, but I wanted to lose his number. The people who had formed the shape of my dreams were people I no longer knew. And I guess that's the problem with moving on; you keep watering new ground and sometimes there's just not enough to go around. And you have to live with that and live with the things you've turned your back on.

Someone was starting to look up day hikes, planning a drive further up the road to Ithaca.

I wondered how Keith had felt, packing up. Rolling down the tapestries. What had he done with the Pac-Man machines, the old board games? What had he done with the chalkboard? Had the game of chess ever finished? I thought about the speakeasy bottles scattered in the remains of the basement, as if we, the group of us, had drained those bottles ourselves. More history I hadn't been there for.

"I'm just going to walk around back," I said, needing something I couldn't name.

Behind, in the old parking lot over the speakeasy, were remnants of a vibrancy long gone. The stone walls that demarcated the parking lot had been painted with murals decades before, the sort of psychedelia that decked the walls of the café itself. A man made of stone, striding across the globe; a woman of fire, carrying the spark of inspiration in her hand. White doves and rainbows and starbursts going down over the ocean. I touched them all, tracing the cold stone with my fingers. At the far corner of the wall, next to a broken

shopping cart and a smashed bottle of local beer, a part of the wall was crumbling into ivy and moss. I sifted through rubble and pulled out a piece that tugged the invisible strings in my heart – the eye of a face with a pupil painted spiral, going inward. If time was still infinite, maybe we would all find each other again, the next time around.

My own eyes blurred as I stared into its labyrinth depths, and then Marya came up behind me and took my hand, understanding without words.

“There are a lot of places to make home,” she said. I wrapped my fingers tight around the eye and followed her back to the van.

SMALL CHANGE

By Katie Veitch





Yes, you can check my bag, you asshole. On you go, make it ten times worse for me.

For whatever reason, it is so uncomfortable to see a woman on the street carrying literally nothing. I mean, why is it so necessary that I have a bag with me? Is it so I am constantly equipped to save any child around me from any sudden runny nose? So I am able to fulfil every need? So I have the utensils required for any and all minorly important situations?

The stares you get are nothing short of demonic, so I just paid a pound for this shitty little bag at a charity shop to stop people looking at me like I'm newly on the run. It's really quite obvious there's nothing in it. It sags in at every angle and the cheap cardboard rectangle at the bottom is pushed vertical, giving it the shape of a sad, deflated bagpipe. It gets whipped up by the wind very easily, so it often smacks people as I walk past them. I can't even apologise because of the embarrassment of how light it is when it collides with one of their many variable winter jackets. Did they even feel it?

I'm only in here because it's raining, but because my hair is in a

messy ponytail since I haven't found anywhere to wash it for the past 6 days, the shop assistants stare. I don't blame them, we have a distinctive look and we do steal, there's no denying it. I don't even think the staff are mad at us for it; they're just blindly following orders because they don't want to end up skint and on the streets like us. I can deal with the stares. It's almost nice to be looked at for once.

But do you really need to check my bag? Surely in the past 7 minutes that you've echoed my every step around this shop, you have realised that I haven't actually stolen anything. It's not worth it, I don't need a £42 T-shirt, I need fucking running hot water. Your overpriced, under-designed clothes aren't worth my dragging time.

He opens my bag, noticeably gulps, sweats and reddens, and hands it back to me. "Thank you, ma'am." Great, just another place I have to tick off the list of temporary shelter from the relentless Glasgow weather. As I walk out the door, I see him wander off in the direction of the till to tell all the staff about the gaping hole of nothing in my handbag; a conversation that will pull them through till lunchtime, making the next hour go a little faster.

I would walk back to the bridge for shelter, but it can get so loud under there. That's where 'we' sit to take the drugs that numb the cold and wet, taking us one step closer to death but one step further from suicide. I don't blame them, and everyone else shouldn't either. You try getting through below freezing weather with an inch of sleeping bag between you and 25mph winds. A hit helps blur the piercing rain.

Instead, I opt for the Marks and Spencer's which has a long canopy overhead. If you're lucky, there's sometimes a space near the bus stop, far away enough from the door for you to get shooed away but not close enough to the corner that the rain blows in. I got lucky today.

Time goes quicker in this spot. There's usually a busker on here, and although the songs can get repetitive, I enjoy watching the shopper's reactions. Most people give a glance as they walk by, using

the performers age and the state of their instruments to determine how talented they are rather than actually listening. Some people stop for a song or two, if it's not raining too heavily, and send a kid up to throw a little change in their weathered guitar case. Strange how it's so fun to be kind when you're little. Then there's the people who stop for hours and take videos or bring their lunch over to listen while they eat. I think if I didn't have to spend so much time out here already, and actually had somewhere else to come from or go to, I would be one of those people.

My quiet spectation is soon interrupted by a wave crashing into my left side and seeping through my many layers which always try their very best to fight the wet. Unfortunately, this is not a metaphorical wave, but a real one caused by a bus running late colliding with a puddle filling fast. The ends of my ponytail are sucked into the curve of my neck, chilling straight through to my bones, totally invading any privacy I wish I had from the weather. Of course, I jump on reaction, like anyone would. I haven't fully adapted as it may calm some people to think. But there's not much more I can do now than wait till the heavy winds dry me off. No point in wiping any affected skin as all the cloth is already damp. No point in lifting the hair from my neck as it will just lengthen the shock. But as a warm, fresh towel glides up my cheek, along my hairline, and dabs the nape of my neck, I must admit I feel immediately better.

"Oh my god, you just wouldn't believe it! You think they'd slow down when they see you and try not to drench the life out of you! Here, keep these. What a nightmare, honestly."

At first, I don't even know whether to let myself feel the relief that has just come over me; it surely has to be a dream induced by shock. And then I realise that the woman now kneeling beside me has breath that shows in the air like mine, and her hair is soaked like mine, and she is actually looking into my eyes, mine. I manage to stutter out a thank you, but the look of confusion on my face makes her stay a

while.

“Oh, I’m awfully sorry, I shouldn’t have just rushed into your space like that and touched you. I just know the longer you’re wet, the more likely you are to get sick, and well, you got such a huge shower from that bus.”

Again, I simply stared, like a child lost in a Disney film.

“My name’s Fay.”

“Eve.”

“Hi Eve.” Hearing my name through teeth that aren’t jittering in the cold or grinding their way through a council office job is something I haven’t heard in such a long time. She made it sound like mine, and not like a label.

“I’m sorry, I really am thankful. I’m just very tired, I’ve not got much energy just now. I really appreciate the towel.”

Her lips press and curl, and another tuft of breath escapes her nose. She notices the end of her coat has been dipped in a puddle this whole time and has seeped about a foot up to dampen her hip. She jumps up and nods.

“Right, Eve, let’s get you up. If it’s okay, I’d like to go somewhere warm where we can both dry off.” It’s not the first time someone’s offered to take me for coffee or dinner. It happens sometimes and its generous and nice to be inside and fed, but it’s truly not worth it most of the time. The staff always want you out, and the chivalrous saviour always fights your battle and pushes through an awkward dinner by asking you about you. But you can’t help feeling like you’re working for your time with them - having to give them a worthy experience that they’ll be thankful they had on their way home, and maybe give someone else a chance another time.

But something about her made me take the chance this time. When she said my name, I heard it as a word with meaning; ‘the day before’. Not before Christmas, or New Year, but simply before. And when she said it, it felt like *this* was the day before - the last day I would have

to go through this. Like she was telling me it was *my* eve. And so, I went with her, and hoped the next day would begin.

I thought TGI Friday's was quite a strange choice for a fast feed and warm up, but Fay said that the busier it was, the more privacy you'd get. I'd never thought of it that way, but I guess she's right. I mean if you ever want to be ignored, sit yourself down on the busiest high street you can find. I chose the grilled salmon because fish isn't something you get often on the streets; it's not a quick food. And it was hard to relax into the meal, but her voice helped.

"My goodness, I cannot remember the last time I sat down for a meal in a restaurant. It's been years! My two boys have recently left for university you see, and I feel like I've been cooking for four my whole life."

Aaron and Ben were 2 years apart. One had gone to study sports science and the other engineering. They sounded like lovely boys, a bit rowdy but very polite and determined. I tried to picture their faces but they kept coming up too American in my head, like I was watching them on television. And that didn't seem like the kind of family Fay had; they sounded more real - less try hard and more try your best. It seemed like she loved them dearly but in a fun way, like she'd found the friend/child balance so many parents struggle to get.

"It is odd having no kids at home now. My mum and dad must have felt the same when I left, except I never stopped going back," she laughed.

"You didn't have any brothers or sisters?" I asked. I had imagined them for her already, from the way she talked about her children, how she played with them until they were old.

"Well, I have a younger sister, Rose, but she passed when she was 15."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, that must have been horrible for you and your parents."

“Thank you. It was rough but we got through it. Cancer, you know. It’s always a shock when it gets to the kids.”

I had to start my picture all over now. This new piece didn’t fit with what I had already painted; the whole colour palette had to change. But not to a blue or a grey – maybe a yellow. Her eyes didn’t show any pain; they almost grew with courage. Her spine had straightened, her navel pushed forward, and her shoulder blades drew down her back like settled wings. It may have been a defence mechanism, but it came off awfully strong.

She moved on quickly and managed to pull me back into conversation comfortably. She was good at this; I was glad I went. The format tended to go as follows; a pleasant story about herself, not too dolled up and decorated but just enough to make me smile, then a relevant question about me. With each question, I would divulge a little more into the answer, talking for a little longer each time and even managed a question or two back at the end. I wanted enough to paint my picture.

But I was aware not to get too attached. I don’t get to have relationships like this much anymore and I know I’ll miss it when it’s gone. I didn’t want to see her as a mother or a sister, or even a friend at the end; I have learned to enjoy without setting myself up for disappointment.

After dinner, we walked back to my spot. Fay ran into Tesco to grab me an extra blanket and rain cover for the night. I was very grateful, but my energy was beginning to fade as I prepped for my usual life to resume and my hope of this eve drifted away. Just as we were parting ways, Fay took off her coat.

“Here, I’ll be home within the hour, you need this more than me.”

“No, Fay, I don’t need your jacket. You’ve done more than enough.”

“You can give me it back next time.” She paused. “Would you

like to meet again?"

No, I didn't. I didn't want someone to watch me wither away, or to be disappointed on the cold and hungry days with my lack of effort. I didn't want to have to smile thank you every week. But though her mouth said, 'would you like to', her eyes said, 'please can we'. I'd never felt needed before, but I got the sense that she got something out of this night too. She looked much more calm now than when she first came to me with the brand new, still tied in a bow towel; something had changed.

"To be honest, I don't have a lot of friends to talk to. I've spent so many years taking care of my family and working, and now I've noticed that I've lost all the women in my life." With nerves, she darted in the other direction. "I understand if you don't want to meet again, you may be uncomfortable."

"-No. I do. I would like to." The feeling of not being defined by my lack of a home rushed back to me. The feeling of someone wanting to spend time with me made me feel it all again. It made me feel like I had a home to go to, something to get up for in the morning, something to achieve. We arranged to meet her at the same time next week. I'm going to save some change to pay the tip, and I'll get to finish my picture.

Once Fay had left, I felt warmer. My sleeping bag felt more like a bed, my clothes felt more like new Christmas pyjamas. I stuffed my new coat into my empty handbag which had found a new purpose and laid my head down, letting the growing silence around me echo in my mind.

She needed me, and it was beautiful.

ARID

By Emma Urbanova





Imagine this. You're in Lucas's apartment. It is the door of his shower which flashes apple green as you let boiling hot water examine your body. There are two strands of dark brown hair against the wall of the cubicle. It is the door of his shower that you open, shyly at first, clasping the towel upon your naked, trembling body, petrified to death that someone may witness your clumsy, hastened journey from the shower back to his room. It is him who left that apricot-coloured bruise above your left hip by a naughty nibble of his small, brisk teeth. Your hair is wet. You are naked and wet. And your thoughts – that solitary teaspoon laying estranged on the windowsill, the mouldy teabag in the wastebasket – these are also the thoughts of his that penetrate his mind, readily and quickly, like a switchblade.

He caresses your naked, wet feet as you put them up on the bed linen, leaving bright watery stains. And now I have to interrupt this – you know this is merely a literary caress. He would not be capable of such caress in real life.

Never acts, remember? Only words. Words in messages,

clustered together in the impersonal yet so personal space of Facebook, Instagram, you name it. Never, never physicality.

Those thoughts are what remained in me after three years of his concentrated and meticulously vial presence in my life, if you are asking. Those thoughts only. After three years of wondering and occasionally spotting him on odd corners, once or twice a year, with my vision befuddled by booze, not even being sure if it was him I was seeing. I am drawn to what we had, irreducibly. Firstly, a mere pastime, for the sake of intellectual or maybe egotistical fulfilment, that grew into something out of control. We have both had different partners since then, but the phenomenon of our interaction still kept occurring, to put it scientifically. We still thought to seek the phone when drunk or lonely or both. The phone, through the screen of which the illusion of human interaction shined, where I was naked before him and where everything was at stake.

And yet nothing had happened.

When I am being kissed by other boys, I am able to transport myself into his lips and into his arms. It is his mouth that I am kissing, exceptionally red and plump with blood. I know that with my one bite, that blood would spill out and cover me all. When other boys make love to me, I have this strange power to enjoy, with closed eyes, Lucas's embrace. And everything that follows is enjoyable to me because I'm doing it with him. Figuratively, of course. No one knows. It's like dipping your feet into a damp mass of leaves anywhere, on a rainy night on the pavement. The corpus beneath your feet can be anything, it almost feels like the insides of a human body. When I'm grasping live boys with big backs and beating hearts, I imagine that Lucas must have a body like this too, a body that pulsates warmth. Figuratively, of course. I have never seen him. He is like the last letters of some French word, lost mysteriously in the pronunciation and never retained, hopelessly

unknown to somebody who doesn't know how to spell it. Well, I didn't.

I like a lot of things. James Joyce. D.H. Lawrence. The rain. The colour of window blinds in bed & breakfast hotels. Alcohol. I liked Lucas more than all these things. I was too afraid to lose him. Or to love him, if you like.

Upon a strange set of coincidences, I found myself in Paris just before my dissertation was due. It was yet another of my friend's mindless and heedless ideas, to fly to this capital of aesthetic meaning, artificial *poeticity* and European self-centredness. I never liked Paris that much. But there I was, on a flight, splashing salt and vinegar crisps with the cheapest champagne they had. We arrived already pissed. It was just a matter of time to find a bar. Stumbling with our suitcases, Yves dubiously eyed the halls of the Charles de Gaulle airport.

'It feels like escaping yourself.'

'Tell that to *yourself*,' I caressed my forehead absent-mindedly as we were comfortably tucked in an Uber. 'I don't feel like escaping anything. Maybe my dissertation.'

'*You* are the one who has a problem, the one who sleeps around pathologically. You call that self-care?'

'Shush,' I looked at Yves, into my head suddenly creeping some odd champagne worry that the driver might hear and understand. But he seemed not to, his eyes were set straight on the road and he was humming to the tone of some French *chanson*.

When our flight clothes had been tossed away and both of us had taken a shower, we headed downtown. We'd paid the accommodation for two nights in advance; if we liked it, Yves said, we could stay a little bit longer. All around us was city, throbbing with its mighty heartbeat, almost a human mechanism. I did not quite grasp the fact that we were in this grand cultural metropolis of Europe. To me, it seemed like every other big city.

Or I was simply drunk.

We never went anywhere but this one big bar. So big you could get lost inside it like in a separate city, a microcosm inside a microcosm. You could meet so many different people that you would have trouble remembering the names of. That's what we had intended to do. I lost track of Yves after the first two rounds. Sometime after that, the most unexpectedly ordinary thing happened. A man spotted me, we sat at the bar and drank and talked like millions and millions of other couples in this world and other worlds did at that moment. It was during Lady Gaga's *Disco Heaven* that he found it appropriate to suggest we depart to his place.

The usual stuff followed. I woke up the next morning with my head a mess and particles of suspicious substance in my hair, never feeling more arid. Looking at him, I felt sorry for him.

He was an Arab, his skin had a beautiful cognac shade. His chest was bare, he was sleeping. I left the room, intending to leave no traces of me in what seemed a peculiarly colour-coordinated, pricey king-size bed.

I brushed my teeth with a disposable hotel toothbrush I carried in my bag. I put my hair up with a loose hairband into an improvised ballerina bun. It felt funny, promenading myself around his flat in black thigh-high leather boots: a sad statement of the bygone night. No longer feeling the putrid taste in my mouth, I wandered into the kitchen and opened the fridge. There was a half-empty bottle of white wine and a single can of San Pellegrino. I took the Pellegrino.

For a while I stood facing the window, observing the tightly packed set of apartments on the street before me.

Tell me a single greater thing than reading before bed when it rains, than making meaningful connections with complete strangers, than having sex with them till the heavy *chocolatier*-y

taste of love slips down your throat and awakens your senses like the smell of a warm sultry kitchen when you're hungry. A single greater thing than rushing into something of which you're so painfully unsure, but you still strive for it recklessly, headlong. Tell me a single greater thing than headlong.

He awoke. I heard him turning in the bed. Shit. I quickly walked to the door, braless. My boots made a distinctive clacking sound against the floor.

'*Où allez-vous?*' I was surprised he used the formal form. After all, we weren't really strangers.

'I'll be back,' I lied.

Taking the elevator down to the exit of the building, I felt somehow relieved. The crisp air penetrating my worn-out lungs, I contemplated what I had just done. Unlucky for him, though. He will wonder where I am. He will find the lipstick stain I left on his bed sheets (I can't help it, I leave marks everywhere I go) and reminisce on the night. Meanwhile, for me, it will be just another one of the ghastly reminders of what kind of person I am. Just another blotched mistake, an unpleasant memory which I'll write *sic.* after in brackets in the story of my life to indicate that I have consciously erred. Unlucky, unlucky guy. I strolled for a while and when I was sure to be in an area quite distant from where his damned apartment building was, I walked into the nearest café.

Carrying my morning guilt like some people carry their baguettes in a paper bag, I was suddenly ashamed of my attire. Everywhere, there were people immaculately dressed, reading the morning paper. I walked in there like the embodiment of ruin. I felt guilty of my dishevelled hair, of my big fancy boots, of my bare body under the vast white shirt. Still, I did not dare to leave. Exposed and uncomfortable, I proceeded to one of the baristas and asked for a cappuccino. He got my order, nodding accordingly and turned his back to me immediately, busy with the espresso

machine. While the milk was frothing and bubbling, I surveyed the place. It was then that my eyes froze mid-stare.

I *saw* him.

Him. Lucas. Or a man that very closely resembled him. I saw a patch of unkempt brown hair, a little bit grown out on the sides indeed. The unmistakable frame of his glasses, his face partially hidden behind a large newspaper. And the hands. I immediately noticed the hands. I never knew what hands Lucas had, or if he had some, but if he did, they would definitely look like this.

I panicked. What should I do, for fuck's sake? I am in a café in a random Parisian quarter and, of all people, Lucas is there. Freaking Lucas. All kinds of terror ran into me, until I noticed the barista was impatiently handing me my cup. I swiped my card when the terminal flashed and waited for the big letters, APPROVED. But of the scenery, I disapproved. My legs slightly trembled (it happens each time I am, or I think I am, seeing him) when I was avidly searching for a spot to sit. I needed to sit down to stomach this fact, to digest the presence of Lucas, so impossible and improbable right here, on this Earth, in this moment. This was unfair, it was an invasion, a scam, like a machine that charges £1.99 for bank withdrawals. I came here for peace of mind. Instead, I was experiencing a war.

After I took a seat by the window, the wide Parisian avenue was not of my interest as much as the uncanny guy resting in the back, his identity still unrevealed to me. Is it possible that it's actual Lucas, taking his morning coffee with his statistics? It seems most likely, when you look at it from the reasonable perspective, that it's not him. It probably isn't him at all.

Then why do I get this strange, pervasive, even perverse sense of his very presence, like suggested by his words, the one and only marker of his personality that I knew? Why is it that the room is unbreathable, it feels like being in a hot air balloon, and he is the

centre, drawing me aggressively towards him? Why do I feel like it's him, that it - without doubt - has to be him? And here of all places, yes, because it feels the sanest, even when it's insane. And why? Why am I such a hungover mess again, why does this have to be every time I am encountering him?

As my coffee went cold and people left and entered the café, I sat there frozen in thought and time. I pondered all these reasons in a bittersweet tremor, not keeping my eyes off the man. Slowly, he withdrew the newspaper from his face.



