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Preface

Dreams. Expectations. Echoes of distant voices. Technique. Experimentation. Drafting.

Several are the words that come to mind when we think of literature. And in a course like Letras whose focus is the reception and consumption of literary texts, few have been the opportunities to reflect and act on the making of any written artistic piece. Yet, things are changing.

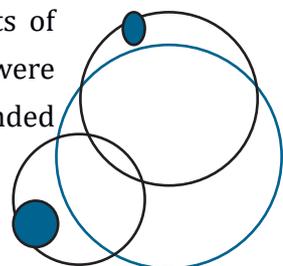
Once upon a time... Never have you seen... The authors of the short stories and essays that follow drew concepts, ideas, feelings, using known colors and similar palettes, but the results were refreshingly diverse. As if painting self-portraits, they used elements of their own identities, whatever made them singular, unique, and stimulated by their inspirations, their creational powers, and academic discussions, they transformed what they are in a narrative.

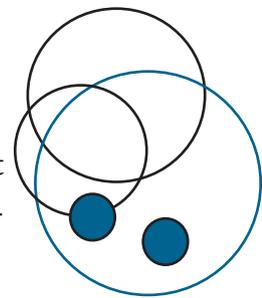
Most of the texts here are the outcome of a process which took place in a course called “Escrita e Narrativa em Inglês”. It occurred in the first semester of 2017. During this course the students were supposed to read texts from different sources, written by several scholars in the field of Creative Writing, and they were required to put their ideas, suggestions, and guidelines to practice or to the test.

The course was divided into four interconnected modules. In the first, the students were supposed to discuss the Fundamentals of Writing: psychological and physical conditions to enhance writing, raising creativity, the rules of each genre, the development of outlines, and pre-structuring the narratives. This was followed by the Working On module: because we had selected the short story form as our literary object, our meetings dealt with narrative elements, such as character, point of view, scene structure and description. By that point, the students should have created at least two drafts of their stories. With luck, the story had been finished so it was time to delve on style, the focus of the third part of the course. Finally, we discussed the criteria involved in assessing a successful short story and the importance of a good title.

In the last classes, the students had access to the productions of their classmates. In groups, they were supposed to shortlist the stories which had moved them more. After that, during the assessment period, it was my responsibility to select some other stories that had stood out and brought reflection and pathos, having progressed from rough drafts to a set of very emotionally charged and powerful texts.

However, YAWP’s mission is to give voice to the undergraduate students of English. Since not everyone had been able to participate in the course, but there were people who might have produced short stories during their academic life, we extended





the invitation for other students to submit their works. As an unexpected but fortunate consequence, we received several essays whose quality led us to add a non-fiction section to the issue.

Therefore, in **Academic**, we have four essays dealing with literature in several different approaches, mostly comparative. Jefferson Martinelli's "Identity in the inside and on the outside" discusses the ideas of space by comparing the novels by the Irish novelist James Stephens, *The demi-gods* (1914) and *Giovanni's room* (1956), by American author James Baldwin. Also commenting on two works, Raphael Valim analyzes the dialectic of rationality and madness in the novels *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) by Jean Rhys, and *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë in his "Senses without sensibilities". The third essay, "The Silence of two Novels", by Renata del Moro, follows the same structure of establishing parallels between *Reading in the Dark* (1996) by Seamus Deane and *The Shadow Lines* (1988) by Amitav Ghosh, focusing its attention on the socio-historical contexts of Ireland and India, and how the narratives deal with such contexts. Finally, Rodrigo Manz de Paula Ramos in "Tunnels of Time" will use the concepts of time's relativity and subjectivity to analyze the character and narrative strategies in Virginia Woolf's modernist novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925).

In **Creative**, we present the short stories that were selected. Because of their stylistic and thematic variation, we were able to divide the narratives into eight different categories – subgenres, one might call them – even though sometimes they escaped any rigid classification and could be placed under any other of the headings.

In *Daily Life Sketches*, there are four stories which deal with the characters' routine but transform the elements presented in unexpected yet beautiful outcomes. The stories are: "Restless" by Isadora Reis Frediano, "The Day I Lost You" by Mayara Alves Andrade, "Just a Bad Coffee" by Rita Aragão de Podestá and "The Boy Who Discovered Infinity" by Victor Bonifacio.

In *Diversity Drama*, the question of social marginality pervades the narratives, be it in its cultural, sexual, and even physical aspects. Ideas like prejudice, exclusion, community, and love are delicately discussed in "I See Fire" by Pedro Lazo, "Flight 0611 to São Paulo" by Laís Cruz, "It Does Not Matter" by Ludmila Almeida Barros, and "An Encounter" by Martina Zardo.

In *Family Drama*, both "Family Portrait" by Caique Furlaneto Saraceni and "Bittersweet Day" by Paula Fioritti da Silva bring the family as the center of the narrative. Secrets from the past and or an unfortunate disappearance set the mood of those narratives and grab the readers' attention.

In *Historical*, the writers Amanda Zimbarg with “Monster in the Closet” and Kátia Mayumi Torikai with “Deep Water” take us back to a personal and collective past when certain events unfolded, and their characters try to make some sense out of the meaninglessness of oppression and death.

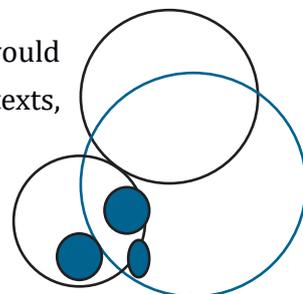
In *Mindflow*, the biggest section, the authors created strong first person (or, as in two cases, third person, but protagonist-driven) narratives which reveal to us the intricacies of living in times like ours, our mental confusions, the importance of thought and reflection in consonance with or opposition to feelings. Intertextuality, depersonalization, free indirect discourse, and different levels of stream of consciousness are strategies they used to create intriguing and deliberately confusing stories as it is confusion itself that structures and organizes our lives (and the stories). “The 86th Day” by Beatriz Ramos, “Breathe in, Breathe out” by Gabriela Datoro Capille, “Splendour in the Grass” by Guilherme Terreri, “First Times” by Isabela Batista de Lima, “To Denver!” by Jéssica de Melo Santos, “Hypothetically” by Mari Uesugui, “The Glare on the Glass” by Natália Grandi de Oliveira, and “A Remarkable Birthday” by Silvia Regina de Alencar Frigatto, all compose these x-rays of the postmodern selves.

In *Mystery*, we gathered the stories that include some type of crime, the unexplainable, the neogothic atmosphere. Violence and death are part of our lives and these authors take the reader little by little into gloomy worlds, with some surprises at the end. Here we find the stories “Carolina Drama” by Beatriz Lanzoni, “They Draw Near” by Jessica R. Bombonato, “The Birthday Gift” by Julia Muto, and “A Strange Man’s Tale” by Nicolle Bedeschi.

A theme that is sometimes seen as a synonym to literature itself can be found in *Romance*. Love and relationships are portrayed, and the authors took care to build their stories with sensibility without resorting to clichés, excessive sentimentality or worn-out formulas. In “When Will You Tell Her?” by Danielle Chinkerman Goldenberg, “The Flow” by Julia Abreu and “Connection”, the second contribution by Kátia Mayumi Torikai, the female touch brings new life to this century-old topic.

The last part, *Worldbuilding*, encompasses texts of several different genres. From the fantastic “The Mountain and the Wind” by Carla Batista de Lima to the dystopic “Code” by Gabriel Soares, the authors do not take for granted our universe and create a fresh and new one, where normally bad situations will entail the search of solutions. The other stories, “Separated by the Sea” by Gustavo Kim Tsutiya and “Sharp Blade, Dull Knife” by Paula do Prado Bortoletto, mix the real world with the mythic and the results are surprising and tragicomic.

As stories depend on several elements to work, so did this journal. We would like to thank all students who submitted their stories, the ones who selected texts,



revised, developed the layout, the cover, and worked hard to bring forward something as beautifully crafted as the texts it contains. YAWP is yours! Also, thanks to professors Laura Izarra and Sandra Vasconcelos, who encouraged the students to submit their papers, Walkyria Monte Mór, for her suggestions of publishing the students' works, and Deusa Maria de Souza Pinheiro-Passos for her editorial guidance.

We hope this issue encourage students to **write more**. It is not only the conclusion of a project, but also a first step toward new and multiple creative works. It incites authors to keep writing and invite those who were not included here to keep improving and trying. It also celebrates the participation of Letras-Inglês/USP in the increasing national academic debate about Creative Writing, which is on its way (and what a long way) to becoming as established as it is in many other countries.

Prof. Elton Luiz Aliandro Furlanetto, Ph.D.

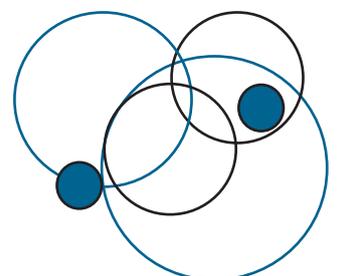


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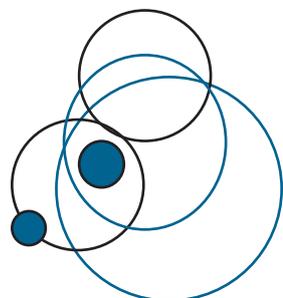
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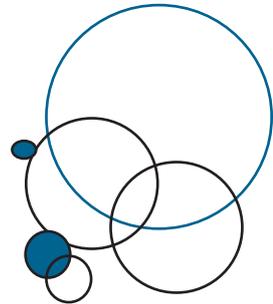
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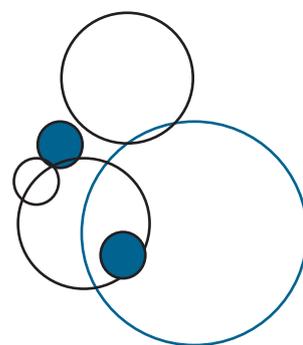
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Identity in the inside and on the outside: an analysis of space in *The demi-gods* and *Giovanni's room*

Jefferson Martinelli de Oliveira¹

One of the formal aspects that can reveal important features of a piece of literature is space. This paper aims to investigate how two very different novels deal with the idea of identity by looking into specific elements of each narrative. The works to be analyzed are *The Demi-gods* (1914), by the Irish author James Stephens, and *Giovanni's Room* (1956), by the American author James Baldwin.

Stuart Hall (1996) explains that identities are “constructed through, not outside, difference”, as well as they are products of exclusion. To think so is to rely on the assumption that there is One and there is the Other (what it is and what it is not), as Hall himself continues, in other words. The existence of this difference is what creates identity.

In the novels studied, the characters are excluded and opposed to some other culture. What is interesting to investigate are the very different ways they discuss this idea of identity. As it should become clear, James Stephens' novel deals with this as a proud claim to being the other, while Baldwin's will show an impossibility and a reluctance to have pride in the difference. To understand how that happens, one spatial element of each narrative was chosen to be interpreted.

For *The Demi-gods*, the element chosen is the cart. The vehicle, which is carried by the donkey, transports Patsy and Mary around and it functions as a home for the characters. They wander around the country without ever fixing themselves somewhere; the cart is the only property they have. Every present action of the novel happens around that vehicle, as if it were a point of reference between the land (in a general understanding) and the specific locale in which the characters are. At the same time, the fact that their home is a vehicle capable of moving allows an understanding that the entire land, or the country, is their actual home. They are part of a bigger referential, which would be Ireland, as well as they are part of the surrounding space of the cart.

This would follow another definition of identity, also presented by Hall (1996), which sees it as “an all-inclusive sameness (...) without internal differentiation”. If the land and the cart are one, then there is no other. However, the other is the system in which Patsy refuses to enter. He chooses not to have a “proper” house, to have a regular job, or to marry his daughter to a fine British man: he chooses to be excluded from all that in order to maintain his identity, his difference.

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Their transitory home actually does not mean that inclusive sameness, but the affirmation of the difference between the land they are in (and its people) and the others who are colonizing it. The fact that they are out in public shows a sort of pride in their action of refusing to accept and enter the system. In that sense, the cart and the land are unified images, they reinforce the idea of a cultural identity² of the Irish. The angels are important to that understanding, as they represent the mythological tradition of the people and are incorporated into the family and its home.

There is no reluctance, there is only a proud claim that Patsy and Mary live in the margins, but in the margins lies the real cultural identity of the Irish. What happens in Baldwin's novel, however, is quite the opposite. In *Giovanni's Room*, identity is concealed to the privacy of the room in which Giovanni lives.

Alan Sinfield (2005) explains that there was a concept in the American military of activities that were considered Un-American. To be gay was one of them because it went against the national values of raising a family that would perpetuate the American way of life.

Written in the oppressive 1950s³, *Giovanni's Room* speaks of that negation of an identification with the nation's values. For that reason, the story is set in France, where gayness is possible (although not very well-seen as well). David, the American protagonist, is in a foreign land; he is the other already. However, this is intensified when he starts a relationship with Giovanni and they become enclosed by the element chosen to be analyzed – the room of the novel's title.

“We passed the vestibule and the elevator into a short, dark corridor which led to his room. The room was small, I only made out the outlines of clutter and disorder; there was the smell of the alcohol he burned in his stove. He locked the door behind us, and then for a moment, in the gloom, we simply stared at each other— with dismay, with relief, and breathing hard. I was trembling. I thought, if I do not open the door at once and get out of here, I am lost. But I knew I could not open the door, I knew it was too late; soon it was too late to do anything but moan. He pulled me against him, putting himself into my arms as though he were giving me himself to carry, and slowly pulled me down with him to that bed. With everything in me screaming *No!* yet the sum of me sighed *Yes.*” (Baldwin, p. 64)

This is the description of the room at the moment the relationship starts. It is gloomy and decadent, enclosed and disordered. But it is also a place where relief is possible, a room in which a denied identity can become real.

In the first chapter of the novel, David tells the story of his first and only relationship with a boy when he was a teenager. They were friends for years until they had sexual intercourse one night and then never spoke again. It was impossible for David to fulfill his desires in a place in which his identity as a homosexual was denied. Now, in the enclosure of the room, his sexuality becomes real. But even set in a different country, their relationship as lovers only exists there, inside the darkness of that place. Outside, in the bars and on the streets, they are friends only.

Unlike in Patsy's cart, the land and the room are not one in opposition to another. The room is the place of the other who is already in a foreign place. A different sexuality than the "real American" one is only possible in a secret place in another land. Secrecy is the key word to understand the idea of identity in the novel – it is only possible to have an identity in privacy. Even there, as the description above shows, there is a contradiction of saying "yes" and "no" to it. The moment the secret of David's sexuality is out, in the final chapters of the novel, is the moment in which everything goes wrong, culminating in Giovanni's death and David's depart to an unknown future, probably alone.

One Irish, the other American. Written forty-two years apart from one another, both novels are very different and treat identity in diverse terms. In *The Demi-gods*, Patsy claims the land as his home and refuses to give in to the real outsiders (the British). For David, in *Giovanni's Room*, a claim is not possible when even his nation does not recognize him as American – his identity is only possible inside a gloomy room in France.

These issues raised by the novels show that identity is a matter of the public and the private, of the nation and of the individual. It is also a concept that fluctuates through different understandings; what remains is always its importance. To have an identity is to be able to be true to oneself and to claim a place in such a fragmented world as the one of today. Those novels written several decades ago are a testimony that to have an identity is to have a home.

Endnotes

²The use of the term follows Stuart Hall's explanation in "Thinking the diaspora: home-thoughts from abroad" (1999).

³For a better understanding of the oppression suffered by gay people during the McCarthy era, and how it appears on cultural works such as the plays of Tennessee Williams, read Sinfield (2005).

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Senses without sensibilities: the dialectic of rationality and madness in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Raphael Valim¹

When men raised the sails of their ships and crossed the ocean for the first time, they may have carried with them the pretense of conquering the whole world, making it known, apprehensible, logical. Navigating through the sea surface, they believed they knew everything, perhaps ignoring that deep, mysterious, and inaccessible waters lay beneath the boundary of their rational thought. Such image illustrates the logic of enlightenment which, believing in the supremacy of rational, conscious thought, promoted the disenchantment of the world and stimulated the exclusion of everything that did not correspond to its binary logic. Thus madness, the ghost that haunts human convictions, became ostracized precisely for being a certain knowledge that escapes the sapience of men, that is beyond the margins of reason. Jean Rhys' novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* is structured according to this dialectic between rationality and madness, understanding and misunderstanding, truth and lie. Retrieving the character of Mr. Rochester's mad wife from *Jane Eyre*, the novel explores, through a postcolonial view, the ambiguities of madness - or what is called and perceived as madness - by showing that, even from the best-known stories, "there is always the other side, always!"²

Bertha Mason is one of the most fascinating characters in Charlotte Brontë's novel, not only because of the mystery surrounding her origin and her actions, but also because she contrasts with the Victorian nexus of other characters. Surrounded by a Gothic imagery, she is a Jamaican Creole depicted as a ghost, a goblin and even a demon who sucks all of her husband's energies, ever since he was responsible for bringing her to England and keeping her locked in a secret room at Thornfield, where she is guarded by a servant, Grace Poole. In Brontë's novel, Bertha is introduced to the reader from the perspective of the narrator, Jane Eyre herself, who, in turn, is impacted by Mr. Rochester's perception of his clandestine wife, which seems to be that he believes Bertha is clearly responsible for her brutality and psychological instability. Therefore, she is described as the "other" who must die so that the journey of the protagonist concludes happily. By burning Thornfield down and taking her own life away, not without irreparable damages to Mr. Rochester, Bertha makes the marriage between Jane and her previous lord possible. Her nullification allows stability and happiness at the end of the novel; and there's no place for her in such hall of happiness, as Jane's speech shows: "My Edward and I, then, are happy: and the more so, because those we most love are happy likewise".³

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Jean Rhys' novel, on the other hand, retrieves Bertha and seeks to explore the circumstances behind her mental illness. Although the journey of Antoinette Cosway (Bertha's original name in this novel) can be read in isolation, when juxtaposed with the construction of the mad wife in *Jane Eyre*, it gains a greater meaning, since it puts in check what was certain to be madness, considering different factors related to domination, colonization and the use of instrumental rationality. Hence, *Wide Sargasso Sea* humanizes the pejorative characterization of a West Indian woman, giving voice to Antoinette so that she can tell her own story in her terms. Moreover, the novel is not restricted to this subject only. Since it is constructed with the alternation of narrators, there are the portrayal and opposition of both the vision of Antoinette and the vision of her English husband who, although not named in the novel, we know to be the figure of Mr. Rochester, so this is how we will call him from now on.

We are then faced with a novel whose form differs significantly from the one in *Jane Eyre's*. Written in 1966, in the subsequent context of the crisis of the novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* is structured from three different first-person narrators (Antoinette, her husband, and Grace Poole⁴) who develop the narrative based on their impressions and worldviews. It is problematic, then, to speak on the category of the individual in this novel. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, which is centered on the story of a single individual, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, different voices intersect and influence into one another. Moreover, the characters themselves cannot be defined in terms of individuals; they are fragmented identities that are subjugated by the decentering of their thoughts and, in the case of Antoinette, by the domination of other men. Therefore, this novel portrays a world for which the notions of individualism and freedom of action (the fundamental basis of the novel as a genre since its rise happened in the midst of a rising bourgeois class) are no longer valid, corroborating with what Italo Calvino says in his *Six memos for the next millennium*: "today we can no longer think in terms of a totality that is not potential, conjectural, and manifold. [...] the modern books that we love most are the outcome of a confluence and a clash of a multiplicity of interpretative methods, modes of thought, and styles of expression."⁵

But at the service of what is this formal construction in *Wide Sargasso Sea*? We can say that the novel uses a counterposition of narrators in order to make, amongst other things, a historical reappraisal from a postcolonial perspective, exposing how men have influenced and even controlled the destiny of other men throughout time, especially in terms of colonisation. On the one hand, we have Antoinette, a Creole girl from Jamaica (the colonized side); on the other, we have Rochester, the Englishman (from the colonizer side). In their relationship, different people, cultures, beliefs, and points of view interact, and from this interaction, one side tends to become subjugated. Thus, Rochester's domination over Antoinette, consummated at the end of the novel but presented in the very beginning of their relationship,⁶ points to the British Empire's process of domination over its colonies. Moreover, the domination deals with all the patriarchalism that oppresses Antoinette, who is submitted to the will of a man who does not understand her or even cares to.

In order to encompass all these oppositions into a larger one, which interests us most, we can think about the clash between rationality and madness - madness here is understood as the knowledge that escapes certain rational logic. But is there a relationship between domination and rationality? Why can we say that Mr. Rochester's abusive behavior towards Antoinette is related to rationality? The sovereignty of reason in human relations has long proliferated in Western philosophy and has become one of the basis for notions such as progress and civility. For Nietzsche, the belief in the superiority of rational thought comes from Ancient Greece. Platonism was the first great example of an aristocratic thought used by men who placed themselves in a position of superiority, as masters of themselves, since it threw "drab, cold, gray nets of concepts over the brightly colored whirlwind of the senses - the rabble of the senses, as Plato said"⁷ Since then, enlightenment has been seen as the ideal system to deduce anything that can be captured by unity, and men have maintained the unwavering confidence that they could dominate the world through logic and science. Thus, "enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them."⁸ Sustaining rationality as the only valid form of thinking is to believe that men can be masters of themselves and the concepts they establish; it is perhaps the safest way to orderly arrange a chaotic and mixed world.

Madness, on the other hand, is a misfortune for enlightenment, precisely because it is basically a type of knowledge - a difficult, esoteric, and impenetrable knowledge that is outside the fields of rationality. It is thus "the punishment of a disorderly and useless science",⁹ causing discomfort for being the anathema of a civilized society, and hatred for being incomprehensible. Michel Foucault is one of the leading thinkers who conceived madness as a place of exclusion, understood in different ways throughout history. For him, madness has historically occupied the place of leprosy as the great evil of mankind. By the end of the Middle Ages, with the considerable disappearance of leprosy in Europe, madmen gradually became excluded from communities, imprisoned in hospital prisons or sent to the ocean on trips with no concrete destination. With the rise of the Renaissance, the world begins to shuffle according to an increasingly restricted logic, "showing faces whose meaning was no longer clear except in the forms of madness".¹⁰ Consequently, the label of "crazy" has been ambiguous since its inception, for it was restricted to the same category a plurality of people who shared only the tone that differed them from the dominant logic.

In light of these discussions, what we call dialectical process in *Wide Sargasso Sea* is expressed through the contact between two characters marked by different ways of interpreting reality, one based on the logic of sensitivity and symbology, and another based on referential rationalism. In such clash, the latter eventually overlaps the former. The novel form is constructed from this clash: we have Antoinette (thesis), Rochester (antithesis) and the catastrophic result, for both, of their involvement (the synthesis in "Part Three" of the book). It is crucial that Grace Poole narrates the beginning of "Part Three" because her presence is only justified as an intermediate being between both: she

is the guardian who transits between these two poles and tries, miserably, to keep them away. But in the end, when Antoinette returns to the position of narrator, the consequences of this encounter arise in the glare of the destroying flames; that's the inevitable result of a series of misunderstandings and attempts to repress, by force, anything that causes discomfort.

In order to understand in advance this clash of comprehension, it is necessary to analyze how the narrative structure alternates according to the alternation of narrators. Let us begin with a fundamental issue: the emphasis on the conscious and the unconscious. When Antoinette narrates, dreams become essential. They retrieve the power of the unconscious and develop an imagistic construction rich in symbology. Their realm is that of metaphor, of free associations, and from them, we can understand much of Antoinette's subjectivity. On the other hand, when Rochester becomes the narrator, dreams practically disappear. There's only one dream of his in the whole novel, but it is developed in less than two lines with a much more simplified construction if compared to the ones used in Antoinette's dreams¹¹. It is in his part as a narrator, though, that elements such as letters emerge in the novel, either written by him or received by him. Unlike dreams, letters keep a precise referential value that points not to the primacy of the unconscious, but to the effort of the conscious, since the thought placed in words becomes conscious, creating an intrinsic relationship between consciousness and language. As Nietzsche says, "the development of language and the development of consciousness (not of reason but strictly of the way in which we become conscious of reason) go hand in hand"¹²; that is, for the man who calls himself rational, it is the conscious manifested in the language that matters the most, even though it is the "the shallowest, worst part"¹³ of thought¹⁴.

Sense and sensibility get opposed again in the context of perception of nature. In "Part One", when Antoinette narrates her childhood, there are descriptions of a narrator sensitive to the environment around her. There is a prominence given to the sensory perceptions that shape her contact with nature, which serves as a shelter to the impasses of a social condition of rejection: "Watching the red and yellow flowers in the sun thinking of nothing, it was as if a door Opened and I was somewhere else, somebody else. Not myself any longer"¹⁵. In the exposition of her thoughts, the description of colors is privileged, mounting an imaginary panel that explores the crossing of different sensations from a synesthetic construction: "It was a bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, wonderful to see. **The scent was very sweet and strong.**"¹⁶

Mr. Rochester, the rational Englishman, has an opposite vision of nature. His stay in Jamaica and in Granbois, Dominica, where he spent his honeymoon with Antoinette, became a real nightmare. The place's vitality annoys him: "Everything is too much, I felt as I rode wearily after her. Too much blue, too much purple, too much green. The flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near."¹⁷ Nature is then apprehended mathematically from the logic of quantity rather than quality; it causes an immense discomfort to Rochester, who cannot adapt precisely because he is accustomed to live in the midst of English civilization. Therefore, for the rational man, the natural loses its value in itself and is perceived through a utilitarian logic. Rochester exemplifies what

Adorno and Horkheimer say in *Dialectic of enlightenment*: "What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings"¹⁸. From the moment he cannot perceive the value of the place where he is, Rochester comes to hate it as an enemy, even confronting Antoinette's feelings about it ("I loved it because I had nothing else To love"¹⁹).

Rochester's practical rationality encompasses not only its relationship to the environment, but also to other people. He and Mr. Mason exemplify the interests behind Englishmen who decide to go to the West Indies "to make money as they all do"²⁰. The perspective of the two characters seems to be inseparable from economic logic. In the case of Rochester, it is even more evident given his fear of people saying that Antoinette bought him when they got married. For such a practical man, the possibility of being reduced to a commodity is frightful; he must get out of this position to reaffirm his superiority as the real colonizer. In the end, when his wife already shows signs of madness, he switches positions and takes her as a possession: "she's mad but mine", "my lunatic, my mad girl"²¹. The subject only reaffirms his position by creating an object for his domination. It is clear, then, that Rochester conceives his marriage under a very different logic from that of his wife. Antoinette tries at all costs to make Rochester love her because she sees in this love the condition to bring her back to life after so much suffering, which is nevertheless fearful for her, since she knows that her destiny is delivered into the hands of a man who can stop loving her at any moment. Nevertheless, Rochester himself admits that he has never loved her, claiming that his relationship with her is useful only from the economic - to have the rights over her inheritance - and sexual point of view: "I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that is not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, stranger who did not think or feel as I did."²²

That's the condition that defines Antoinette: unworthy of love only because she thinks differently. The fact that Rochester considers her a stranger shows the flaws of his criteria of calculability; the stranger is never positive for the principle of enlightenment, for it encompasses the dark depths that the luminosity of reason cannot reach. The very conditions of her place of birth make Antoinette, right from the beginning, someone who is beyond the margins of reason. The way she is called as a child - "white nigger" - already points to her complex condition in the midst of a society marked by the clash of classes in the colonization process. She and her mother inhabit this nowhere between extremes; they are always on the threshold between two worlds, without being accepted by either one of them. For Englishmen, who lived in a totally different social context, it is difficult to comprehend their situation, so much so that Mr. Mason and Mr. Rochester repeatedly claim not to understand them: "'No, I do not understand,' Mr. Mason always said. 'I do not understand at all'"^{23 24}. Faced with the incomprehensible, one does not seek to know the other in his subjectivity from a decentralized look. On the contrary, the stance is to lower the unknown as barbaric, senseless and - finally - mad. From this logic, only the known has value, as exemplified in Rochester's treatment of Baptise, "the half-savage boy" who, despite speaking English, is inferior because he does not speak any English that Rochester can understand.²⁵

Thus, we can question the madness in the portrayal of Annette and Antoinette, who, in the context of the novel, share the same condition perhaps less by heredity and more by the compulsory domination of *those who know more than them*. "Annette, be reasonable," says Mr. Mason.²⁶ "Only if you promise to be reasonable!"²⁷ says Rochester as a condition to listen to Antoinette. In order to be heard, both women must submit to the dictatorship of what is reasonable. Reason serves then to domesticate them, stealing their subjectivity little by little and imposing on them a condition of silence, since they can only speak what is pertinent. The scene in which Annette returns to save the parrot Coco in the middle of the fire in Coulibri tells us a lot about this process. Coco serves as a correlative for the fate of both mother and daughter by having been removed from contact with nature and domesticated by an Englishman. Mr. Mason cut its wings to tame it - as it is expected to do for an animal - and after that, it became bad-tempered and reclusive. Annette's return to save it reflects an attempt to save the remains of a violated subjectivity, of her own, which will nonetheless degenerate into the ashes of a buried past.

Another way of disrupting the identity of mother and daughter is through the imposition of morals and laws of decorum, which teach human beings to contain their feelings all the time. For rational patterns, the excess of subjectivity belongs to the order of barbarism, it is a remnant of a prehistoric world. Therefore, the rational man hates it, since the principle of disorder frightens him in all aspects, but mainly for its unpredictability. This is exactly how Rochester thinks about the people in Granbois: "I thought these people are very vulnerable. How old was I when I learned to hide what I felt?"²⁸ He even criticizes Antoinette's affection for Christophine, saying that he himself would not embrace her - "I could not."²⁹

Submitted to this logic of impersonality, mother and daughter end up being labeled as crazy because of the acts that allow them to maintain their subjectivity in a context in which they were robbed of everything. As Foucault explains, "there is no madness but that which is in every man, since it is the man who constitutes madness in the attachment he bears for himself and by the illusions he entertains."³⁰ Such imaginary attachment is what remains for Antoinette and for her mother, and that makes it possible to turn lie into truth, dream into reality. Interestingly, this attachment is also part of the characterization of Rochester, who constantly says that Granbois is nothing more than a dream, an unreal place. He also clings to himself and his rationality as a way of mitigating the consequences of a place he hates so much. The difference is perhaps whoever holds the final word. Rochester finally gets back to England and turns his wife into a prisoner in his mansion. He effectively controls her, and - as a God - he renames her Bertha. Thus, if the madness that inhabits the human heart translates into the acceptance of "error as truth, lies as reality"³¹ Rochester is as crazy as his wife because he longs for "the day when she is only a memory to be avoided, locked away, and like all memories to legend. Or a lie ...".³² The label of madwoman only applies, however, to the dominated side, the one that has all its identity destroyed and yet carries the weight of its existence.³³ The domineering side remains with his sadism saddled and still drinks the Five O'Clock Tea that his civilized and sane condition allows.

Locking his wife is a way of denying her existence. For Rochester, there is no truth beyond his line of vision, and that's why condemning her to isolation is a reaction to the fear of the unknown by denying it. Why, fear is the antagonist of enlightenment, for it appears as a counterpoint to the comfort of an enlightened, orderly world. Rochester's contact with the unknown, the nameless, and even the fanciful is so shocking that he cannot rationalize it. As an example of such fear, we have the scene in "Part Two" in which he walks alone through the forest in the middle of the night, feeling lost and scared "among these enemy trees".³⁴ When he finally meets Baptiste, the one supposed to be inferior to him, he is rebuked for believing in zombies.³⁵ In such descriptions we see the resonance of the Gothic genre, which is, in essence, a genre of oppositions, whose resistance to realistic aesthetics makes it: "[dar] voz ao medo do 'bárbaro', do 'não-civilizado', e [abrir] espaço para áreas da vida sociopsíquica que, se não cuidadosamente reprimidas, podem colocar em risco o equilíbrio dos indivíduos e da sociedade".³⁶ What is also curious about Gothic literature is that, historically, the rise of madness was perceived through the ruin of Gothic symbolism.³⁷ With the disenchantment of the world, the Gothic is overcome by the rationalist spirit; it gradually becomes silent, ceases to speak and teach, and, finally, is categorized around the idea of madness. Such process is exactly the one that takes place in *Wide Sargasso Sea* with the domination of Antoinette.

What, then, can we say about the synthesis of this clash between rationality and its half-sister, madness? Considering the situation of Mr. Rochester, we can relate the imprisonment of his wife to the process that Freud calls "repression." The essence of repression is to reject an instinct and keep it out of consciousness, as if it did not exist ("Or a lie ..."), precisely because it can provoke displeasure or anguish. The representative of the instinct, however, continues to exist in the unconscious, in the obscure depths of thought. Freud illustrates this process with an image: "eu ordeno a um hóspede indesejável que se retire de minha sala ou do vestíbulo",³⁸ and furthermore, "é preciso deixar um vigia permanente junto à porta que foi proibida para o hóspede, senão este rejeitado a arrombaria".³⁹ Thus, Antoinette occupies this undesirable role of an experience that needs to be eliminated from the hall of consciousness, and thrown into the darkness of a lonely room kept by a guardian, Grace Poole. However, the process of repression does not always work, and sometimes we can have the so-called "return of the repressed", which is manifested as symptoms or dreams, for example. Antoinette is then this being who returns in the dead of night, in the midst of a dream imaginary, bringing to the surface all the disorder that had hitherto been attempted to be contained.

We can also relate the idea of the return of the repressed to Antoinette, mainly because the final scenes of the novel occur in the midst of a dream that brings back memories of her distant childhood, which were forced to fade from her consciousness. Thus, the two characters suffer the simultaneous consequences of this return of the repressed, even though the nature of repression is different in each of them.

Therefore, the synthesis of the novel seems to be much more related to a sharing of consequences than of points of view. In the final descriptions, we realize that Antoinette

continues to occupy this place beyond rational interpretation and, thus, remains oblivious to the understanding of her husband, as we can perceive from the antitheses that mark her dream state, especially in the case of water and fire and the symbology both of them bring. In her dream, Antoinette sets fire to the mansion and, trying to escape from the fire, she climbs up to the battlements and begins to see a series of images related to her childhood, the last one being Coulibri's pool, where her childhood friend Tia is calling her. She then decides to jump and hit the lake, which is actually made up of hard stones that lie outside the house.

The element of water is associated with madness in various ways. From a historical perspective, it is enough to remember the ships of madmen that emerged from the Renaissance and brought to the seas those excluded individuals who were opposed to the luminous stability of the earth. From a symbolic perspective, there's the idea of water as the purification of diseases in the context of Christianity (especially considering the interrelationship between leprosy and madness) and the literary representation of "crazy" characters who find in water a correlate for their inner disorder. That's the case of Ophelia in *Hamlet*, of the father in the short story "A terceira margem do rio", and of Ismália of the homonymous poem composed by the Brazilian poet Alphonsus de Guimaraens.

Fire, on the other hand, is related not only to purification but also to degradation, independence and even rebellion (retrieving the imaginary behind figures such as Prometheus and Lucifer). In *Wide Sargasso Sea* we have this relation when the blacks burn the house in Coulibri. Considering that, we can say that Antoinette was raised from experiences involving fire - damaging - and water - purification ("There was a smell of ferns and river water and I felt safe again").⁴⁰

Consequently, her final attempt at purification - diving into the waters and finally integrating into her childhood environment with her friend Tia - can only result in degradation, the fire that destroys the mansion and herself. It is a mixture of sensations involving both the quest for the comfort that appeases and the search for the revolt that instigates. Returning to the religious imaginary in the novel, we can note that these elements are integrated into the character's journey from the beginning, either in the speech of Godfrey (who one day believes that "the righteous are not forsaken"⁴¹, but on the other, when he gets drunk, says to Antoinette that "we were all damned and no use praying"⁴²) or even in the sudden desire of Antoinette to die, as a means to approach God: "I could hardly wait for all this ecstasy and once I prayed for a long time to be dead. Then I remembered this was a sin."⁴³ These examples show how the purification of the righteous is interrelated to the condemnation of the excluded. And these seemingly illogical relations make the final act of Antoinette a mean both of annulment and of meeting with herself; paradoxically, she goes to find herself when she is degraded, and when she wakes from her dream, she finally knows what she has to do. Water and fire

are then mixed, creating a paradox in which, as Foucault would say, “victory is neither God’s nor the Devil’s: it belongs to Madness.”⁴⁴

Therefore, throughout the novel, the rationality of the so-called men of progress, Mr. Rochester being one of them, is extremely limited in the approach of the complexity that results not only from a heterogeneous and disorderly world, but also from the multiple subjects who live in it. Nevertheless, clad in shining armor, the knights of reason still struggle against darkness, perhaps for fear of finding dragons, zombies, and other primitive beings, perhaps because they refuse to see the glow in the darkness. *Wide Sargasso Sea*, by focusing on the clashes of a limited rationality, is configured beyond the black and white binarism; its color is the color of sargasso. As a summary of the discussion, we can finally perceive in the title the synthesis of all the contrapositions in the book: the Sargasso Sea is a region of the North Atlantic Ocean that lies on the threshold between two different worlds; it is the middle ground that unites and separates Europe and Central America at the same time. In it, elements of the order of the rational and the irrational are mixed, for it stands out both by the mythology that surrounds its existence from the accounts of Phoenician explorers and by the economic utility that the sargasso has, since it produces Alginate, as a versatile raw material used for various industries - such as the industry of food and cosmetics. With this information in mind, one can infer that the Sargasso Sea also corresponds to the condition of Antoinette, withdrawn from a world considered mythological, inferior, and imprisoned by the utilitarian logic of civilization.

Thus, human beings can only grasp the madness behind rationality, and vice versa, if they plunge into these amalgamated seas, leaving the boat and the fishing rods behind. To all those who venture to dive, there is the reward of finally understanding what Fernando Pessoa says: “Minha alma é lúcida e rica, / E eu sou um mar de sargaço —”.⁴⁵

Endnotes

² RHYS, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 2011. p. 99.

³ BRONTË, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre* (edição bilíngue português-inglês). São Paulo: Landmark, 2014. p. 650.

⁴ Antoinette is the only one who narrates in the three parts of the novel. Her husband and Grace Poole narrate only in parts 2 and 3, respectively. Grace is the narrator who narrates the less, only for three paragraphs.

⁵ CALVINO, Italo. *Six memos for the next millennium*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988. p. 116.

⁶ Shortly after her marriage, Antoinette already describes Rochester as a king, an emperor.

⁷ NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. *Beyond good and evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. p. 15.

⁸ ADORNO, T.; HORKHEIMER, M. *Dialectic of enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. p. 6.

⁹ FOUCAULT, Michel. *Madness and civilization*. New York: Vintage, 1988. p. 25.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 18.

¹¹ This is Rochester's dream: "I woke in the dark after dreaming that I was buried alive, and when I was awake the feeling of suffocation persisted." (RHYS, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 2011. p. 106).

¹² NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. *The gay science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2008. p. 213.

¹³ Idem.

¹⁴ Language is so significant for Rochester that he criticizes the way other characters (Christophine, Baptiste ...) speak throughout the novel, considering them inferior.

¹⁵ RHYS, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 2011. p. 12.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 5 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 49.

¹⁸ ADORNO, T.; HORKHEIMER, M. *Dialectic of enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. p. 2.

¹⁹ RHYS, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 2011. p. 100.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 14.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 131.

²² Ibidem, p. 69.

²³ Ibidem, p. 17.

²⁴ Annette realized that she couldn't stay longer at Coulibri, but she was ignored by Mr. Mason who considered her unreasonable. Ignoring her, he sacrificed her fate forever, making her face the loss of her son and her parrot, and taking away the last shreds of sanity from her.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 136.

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 16.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 99.

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 77.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 68.

³⁰ FOUCAULT, Michel. *Madness and civilization*. New York: Vintage, 1988. p. 36.

³¹ Idem.

³² RHYS, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 2011. p. 137.

³³ Antoinette's process of disintegration occurs dramatically in the novel. Rochester steals all from her. He betrays her, criticizes her behavior, makes her hate the place she has always loved, and forces her to be trapped in a lonely room. Thus, Antoinette no longer know who she is: "Now they have taken everything away. What am I doing in this place and who am I? "(Ibidem, p.144). The looking glass, which is a recurring symbol for the contours of the self, does not exist in her domestic prison, which means that she cannot see herself as a subject anymore.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 79.

³⁵ The cases in which this inversion is operated in the novel are interesting. The rational

man just accepts the rules of fantasy as the only possibility to deal with the unknown. In that sense, Rochester's cunning is to revert the myths to his own favor, as he does with Christophine, putting the blame for Antoinette's madness on her and her obeah practices. On the other hand, Christophine, the barbarian, rightly realizes that it is Rochester's aristocratic behavior that has driven Antoinette to madness.

³⁶ VASCONCELOS, Sandra G. "Romance gótico: persistência do romanesco". In: *Dez lições sobre o romance inglês do século XVIII*. São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2002. p. 133.

³⁷ FOUCAULT, Michel. *Madness and civilization*. New York: Vintage, 1988. p. 18.

³⁸ FREUD, Sigmund. "A repressão" In: *Introdução ao narcisismo, Ensaio de metapsicologia e outros textos (1914-1916)*. (Obras completas volume 12). São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2010. p. 68.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 73.

⁴⁰ RHYS, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. London: Penguin Books, 2011. p. 18.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 4.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 17.

⁴³ Ibidem, p. 38.

⁴⁴ FOUCAULT, Michel. *Madness and civilization*. New York: Vintage, 1988. p. 23.

⁴⁵ PESSOA, Fernando. "Tudo que faço ou medito". In: *Obra poética de Fernando Pessoa - volume 1*. Rio de Janeiro: Nova Fronteira, 2016. p. 162.

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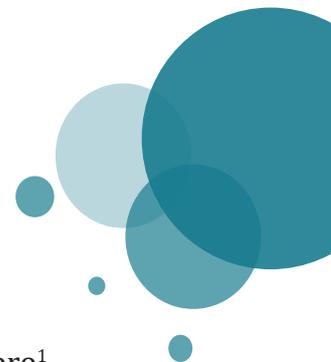
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The silence of two novels

Renata del Moro¹

Ireland and India might seem very different countries, with very distant cultures; however, a more accurate study reveals that those nations have a wide range of elements in common. The connections between them are mainly related to History, and can be also noticed in Literature. Once two novels, one from each country, are compared, the similarities are highlighted. *Reading in the Dark* – written by the Irish, Seamus Deane – and *The Shadow Lines* – written by the Indian, Amitav Ghosh – both have a narrator who describes different situations that happened, mostly, during the period of childhood.

The background of the stories is important as it represents the social-historical context in which the narratives are placed. Both novels approach, mainly, the Partition of each of their nation's territory, but also depict other effects of the British colonization. Therefore, it is possible to find several elements that allude to politics and past events which still affect those communities, such as a constant mentioning of the IRA, the police, religion and myths (in *Reading in the Dark*), as well as a contrast between the old and the modern India and the relationships between that of the colonized and the colonizer (in *The Shadow Lines*).

Along those lines, it is possible to notice that in both novels (although in different ways) there is a connection between the narrator's personal experiences and the wider context of the country. This connection could be considered a centerpiece as their family issues help in the understanding of the broader context in which they are inserted. Alongside with that, Historical facts are a way for the narrators to comprehend, discover and solve (or not) their individual problems and family's secrets. Perhaps the culture that these countries used to have and the way it was taken from them is still present on "mainstream lives". For instance, situations concerning a particular family might be applied to another, who could be living in one of those countries at the same historical period. In very much the same way, the particular turns into general: a family trauma becomes a cultural trauma. The British colonization and the Anglicisation of those countries are not only introduced in the narratives through their background, but are also present in the images that are created, reflected in small situations throughout the books.

Furthermore, the movement established - from the micro to the macro, and from the macro back to the micro - can also be found in a metalingual level. There is an opposition within both stories involving language and silence. This opposition appears not only in the fictional level, but also in the "real" level, bringing up the issue of Literature's role in society. Through the narratives, it is possible to pinpoint several "silences", not to mention a "wider silence", surrounding every action and every speech.

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Considering Seamus Deane's book, there is a family secret about the narrator's uncle, Eddie. This secret is slowly revealed as the narrator puts the pieces of a puzzle together, completing it with his imagination and deduction. Yet, there is an unbroken silence in the narrative, which creates an accumulative tension, as the narrator gets closer to figuring out his parent's story.

In a deeper level, there is also a language problem. The communication within the family is broken due to a historical past and a cultural trauma. In fact, we can notice different silences in Ireland: the silence imposed by the colonizers, which forbade the natives to speak their mother tongue; the silence as a consequence of that prohibition, for now most Irish people do not understand their own language; and the silence of a cultural trauma, of not willing to reveal or to bring back a past too heavy to be bore.

Amongst a plethora of examples that could be mentioned, the one that better illustrates this issue is, perhaps, in the Fourth part of the book, in chapter five: the mother knows typically Irish poems, although only in the English language, whereas the narrator, who speaks Irish, does not know the poems of his country². Here we can see the Irish culture broken into pieces and spread, incompletely, through generations. This lingual-cultural gap destroys the family, as it is also destroying the country. Douglas Hyde discusses this issue and calls attention for the importance of recovering the Irish language, and to the fact that Irish people do not notice how Anglicised they are. According to Hyde, people in Ireland "drop their own language to speak English"³; and this happens not only with language, but with culture as well. So unconscious is that process that:

(...) although they adopt English habits and copy the English in every way, the great bulk of Irishmen and Irishwomen over the whole world are known to be filled with a dull, ever-abiding animosity against her, and – right or wrong – to grieve when she prospers, and to joy when she is hurt⁴.

That element is evidenced, among other moments, in the father's attitude: he fancies listening to Irish, yet he does not recognize a word of it. He appreciates a language he has abandoned. The loss of the Irish language is the strongest representation of a cultural loss, of a country each day "less national" and more colonized (even though it is "independent"); in Hyde's words: "(...) The losing of it is our greatest blow, and the sorest stroke that the rapid Anglicisation of Ireland has inflicted upon us"⁵.

And the "solution" for this problem apparently lies within language: in *Reading in the Dark*, the narrator writes down everything he knows in a letter, in Irish. He reads it aloud to his father – if his father knew Irish, he could have been set free from his family burden and would have known that his brother was not a traitor. Similarly, Seamus Deane writes a novel about Ireland: using literature, he is portraying his country's history, its trauma, assimilating not only his country's past, but also its present. In that sense, the book is socially relevant as it copes with Historical problems that are still currently affecting Ireland – and it deals with these problems through language. This is also, the

“solution” Douglas Hyde suggests in order to “de-Anglicise” themselves: “we must at once arrest the decay of the language.”⁶ Amitav Ghosh also places a language issue in his story, represented in various ways through different sections of the novel, the most relevant example perhaps being the trip of the narrator’s grandmother to Dhaka. After the Partition, plenty of Indians suffered an identity crisis: when the country was split, there were many refugees from both parts of the country, and people did not “belong” anymore in anywhere. Thus, their references of nationality and nation had changed and this change affected their essence as citizens. This identity problem appears in the narrative as a technical, formal problem, when the grandmother has to fill in a form: “(...) at that moment she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality.”⁷ This identity problem is what will cause a difficulty in defining “coming” and “going”:

(...) Every language assumes a centrality, a fixed and settled point to go away from and come back to, and what my grandmother was looking for was a word for a journey which was not a coming or a going at all; a journey that was a search for precisely that fixed point which permits the use of verbs of movement.⁸

The problem, as the narrator states, lies in language; and the solution to this conundrum could not be anywhere else. The grandmother looks for a place where she belongs; once she finds it, she can figure out her identity. However, she can only find this place once she’s solved the problem of “coming” and “going”; that is, she can only understand her identity once she knows where she is going to and from where she is going away.

Perhaps this is exactly the “fixed point” that the narrative presents to the reader. One attentive look at the structure of the book may illustrate how this is done. The novel is divided into two parts: in the first part, the narrator is *going away*; in the second part, he is *coming back* – and he goes away from and comes back to *India*, not only as a country, but also as a culture, as an identity, as a history, as home. Thus, it is possible to conclude that Amitav Ghosh does a similar movement in the character of Seamus Deane: he recovers his country’s identity through his narrative, that is, through language.

On the other hand, there seems to be no “definite solution”, no “redemption” to the cultural trauma. The books finish with loose ends and what is left is some sort of absence, of lack, as though something is missing. Consequently, the goals of both novels could be, perhaps, rather to achieve understanding rather than the “cure” to the trauma. It would be a “half cure”, as it tries to achieve a kind of “relief” through comprehension.

After all, the issues do not disappear. Yet, it seems to make the burden not so heavy to bear, once the situation is cleared and the secret is revealed.

Endnotes

² DEANE, Seamus. *Reading in the dark*. London: Vintage, 1997. p. 194.

³ HYDE, Douglas. "The necessity of de-anglicising Ireland". In: *An Irish literature reader*. Syracuse: University Press. p.139.

⁴ Id. Ibid. p.140.

⁵ Id. Ibid. p.146.

⁶ Id. Ibid. p.146.

⁷ GHOSH, Amitav. *The shadow lines*. New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1998. p.152.

⁸ Id. Ibid. p.153.

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Tunnels of time: the use of time's relativity and subjectivity for building characters and narrative in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

Rodrigo Manz de Paula Ramos¹

As a modernist writer, Virginia Woolf was concerned with new literary forms to represent reality. One of her biggest concerns was with the treatment of time within a narrative. In literature, time was traditionally treated as a steady and continuous stream, in which the present comes from the past and is ever heading to the future, inspiring thus, chronologically organized narratives. Kelly E. Nelson exemplifies in her thesis this objective treatment of time with John Milton, connecting his representation of time with scientific theories contemporary of his time:

“To Milton, as to other conventional thinkers, time has but one dimension, a linear order from an indefinitely stretching past to an indefinitely stretching future. This concept of time was supported by the scientific theories of Newton in the seventeenth century. Philosophers and writers cannot help being swayed by what is happening around them in the fields of science, music and other arts;”²

In the eighteenth century, Laurence Sterne was one of the precursors in changing the representation of time in literature. Ahead of his time, he would make use of digressions to “freeze” or “expand” certain moments in time, chronologically stretching short periods along several lines. By doing that, Sterne was emphasizing human subjectivity over the external world.

Only more than two hundred years later Albert Einstein would come up with his theory of relativity, which encompasses the subjective perception of time:

According to Einstein's theory of relativity, the amount of time an event takes is dependent upon the observer's frame of reference; in other words, time is relative, a concept which agrees with the modern writer's view of time.³

This theory is consonant with Woolf's musings in *Orlando: a biography*, over the discrepancies “between time in the clock and time in the mind”. The power of human thinking allows for an extreme contingency of facts, memories and feelings in a short period of external, objective and clock time. According to Elaine Showalter, Woolf was also influenced by modernist philosophers:

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Henry Bergson had dealt with the difference between historical time, which is external, linear, and measured in terms of special distance travelled by a pendulum or the hands of a clock; and psychological time, which is internal, subjective, and measured by the relative emotional intensity of a moment. Bergson had also given guidance to writers seeking to capture the effects of emotional relativity, for he had suggested that a thought or feeling could be measured in terms of the number of perceptions, memories, and associations attached to it. For Woolf, the external event is significant primarily for the way it triggers and releases inner life. While an exterior incident or perception may be only a brief flash of chronological time, its impact upon the individual consciousness may have a much greater duration and meaning.⁴

To exemplify this statement, let us recall the scene in the very first page of Woolf's novel in question, *Mrs. Dalloway*. The story begins with Clarissa Dalloway concerned about the flowers she is going to buy for her party. The narrative is centred in the present until Clarissa's attention is drawn towards the doors, which will be "taken off their hinges"⁵, as she steps out and watches the morning admiringly. This fleeting and simple act of stepping out into the open, hearing the squeak of the hinges and feeling the freshness and calmness of the morning air transports her, and the narrative along with her, to the past, to the time when she was courted by Peter Walsh. She recalls the sensations of that time and gives the reader its first account of her former suitor, some of his words and habits, as well as a little bit of her past and, therefore, of Clarissa's character. Then, the remembrance that he was supposed to be back from India on that very day gently brings the narrative back to the present. Showalter points out that: "The main problem Woolf faced in the novel was that of making her characters four-dimensional: getting the element of time into the book through the characters' memories."⁶

Mrs. Dalloway's narrative constantly oscillates back and forth between past and present. It is by doing so that Woolf gives depth to her characters. Going to the past by probing the characters' memories, she stills the external world's time, thus allowing the build-up of characters by the telling of their past experiences. In order to do that, the author digs up caves into the innards of the characters, a process in which she focuses the attention of a character on a determined element, brought forth by the present narrative, that will stimulate memories which will be conveyed by indirect reported speech, revealing the characters' personality, feelings, story etc.

One example of this cave-digging process lies in the scene where, during Clarissa's party, Sally Seton is talking to Peter Walsh about her and her husband's current comfortable economic situation: "Yes, I have ten thousand a year"⁷. It makes Peter remember her humble past:

And Sally used to be in rags and tatters. She had pawned her great-grandfather's ring which Marie Antoinette had given him – had he got it

right? – to come to Bourton. Oh yes, Sally remembered; she had it still, a ruby ring which Marie Antoinette had given her great-grandfather. She never had a penny to her name in those days, [...]”⁸

From then on, the focus on the ring channels the narrative to Sally’s past, giving the reader an account to some of her intimate feelings about going to Bourton.

In her thesis, Kelly E. Nelson states “*Proust agreed with Bergson that real time is not that which is imposed upon man by space, but that which lives within his mind.*”⁹ Virginia Woolf seems to agree with this idea and constructs her novel mainly with the use of subjective time to dig deep into her characters, which is often interrupted by the external time symbolized by clocks. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, clocks, and therefore external time, symbolize imposed order and social conventions: “Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day, counselled submission, upheld authority, and pointed out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion, [...]”¹⁰ Proportion is exactly what the doctors recommend to shell-shocked Septimus Smith. Woolf critically portrays the doctors who try to control, with their conventional knowledge, something they yet do not understand nor attempt to. Septimus’ unbridled thoughts are a challenge to the measures and control of the external world, as well as subjective time undermines and swerves impositions from external time.

The impositions of the external world, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, are constantly represented through the passing of monumental or external time. It not only regulates the narrative but also people’s social lives and their biological age:

[...] In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the striking of Big Ben acts as a temporal grid to organize the narrative.

Woolf’s working title during most of the time she was writing had been ‘The Hours’, and the insistent chiming of clocks keeps us aware of the passage of time and the measuring out of human lives and seasons. A major motif of the book is the analogy between the hours and the female life cycle, what we would now call the biological clock. Woolf gives us a full range of portraits spanning the seven ages of woman.¹¹

Woolf portrays Clarissa Dalloway as a woman recovering from an illness, a woman who might be going through (or approaching) menopause, a biological process that, at the time, was associated with illness. At this stage, women were considered to lose their capacity for that which was considered their social duty, namely bearing children. This physical condition, associated with the loss of youth and of sexual disposition, proved to be a heavy burden on Clarissa’s conscience, making her feel socially less important and less of a woman, as it can be perceived when she is not invited to Lady Bruton’s lunch party:

'Fear no more,' said Clarissa. Fear no more the heat o' the sun; for the shock of Lady Bruton asking Richard to lunch without her made the moment in which she had stood shiver, as a plant on the river-bed feels the shock of a passing oar and shivers: so she rocked: so she shivered.

Millicent Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her. No vulgar jealousy could separate her from Richard. But she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton's face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life; how year by year her share was sliced; how little the margin that remained was capable any longer of stretching, of absorbing, as in the youthful years, the colours, salts, tones of existence, so that she filled the room she entered, [...].

[...], she thought, feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed, since Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her.¹²

After her illness, Richard insists that she must sleep alone, undisturbed, so her bed grew narrower and cold. This is an evidence of Richard's loss of interest in his wife, and Clarissa's reading of Baron Marbot's retreat from Moscow symbolises her husband's retreat from the "winter" of her body. In an opposite perspective, denouncing the discrepancies between genders and gender roles in society, we have Peter Walsh who, being almost of the same age as Clarissa, does not have these similar worries. Even though he has grown old, he still is described as being a virile man, as the reader can perceive from his affair with a married young woman in India, his fantasies with women on the street and in his persisting attraction for Clarissa. He has no male biological factor that would make him, in society's eyes, a lesser or ill man.

Perspective is an important factor in relativization. In the field of visual arts, the modernist movement of Cubism combined different perspectives in order to represent tri-dimensional things in the two-dimensional world of paintings. This technique can be analogously applied in literature and is present in Virginia Woolf's work. As an example of that in *Mrs Dalloway*, we have the scene where a luxurious motor car draws the attention of several different people at different spots on Bond Street. At first, the identity of the passenger is a mystery that is solved only with the sum of the knowledge of these people's different perspectives.

Multiple perspectives are also connected by the sky-writing aeroplane, Big Ben and the city of London as a whole. Woolf uses these three elements to connect different characters and spaces and to give fluidity to the narrative in a technique called tunnelling. As Showalter points out in her introduction to the novel: "many people project their

fantasies, allowing Woolf to pan from mind to mind with great economy and directness, and to capture the chaos in an image.”¹³ Accordingly, Julia Briggs states the following:

“The idea that time is experienced differently by different individuals, and that each of us has a series of different internal clocks measuring different times plays upon *Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity* (1905) which established that time was not absolute but flowed at different rates for different observers moving at different speeds relative to one another.”¹⁴

Therefore, by understanding time in consonance with modernist scientific, artistic, and philosophical points of view as a subjective experience, Woolf explores the relativizing power of the human mind to richly represent people as an amalgam of past and present experiences and future expectations viewed from more than one perspective.

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² NELSON, Kelly Egan. “The Concept of Time in the Novels of Virginia Woolf”. Texas Technological College: 1969, p. 2-3.

³ Idem, p. 5.

⁴ SHOWALTER, Elaine. “Introduction” In: *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Penguin, 1992, p. XX.

⁵ WOOLF, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Penguin, 1992, p. 3.

⁶ SHOWALTER, Elaine. “Introduction” In: *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Penguin, 1992, p. XXVIII.

⁷ WOOLF, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Penguin, 1992, p. 206.

⁸ WOOLF, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Penguin, 1992, p. 206.

⁹ NELSON, Kelly Egan. “The Concept of Time in the Novels of Virginia Woolf”. Texas Technological College: 1969, p. 11.

¹⁰ WOOLF, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Penguin, 1992, p. 112.

¹¹ SHOWALTER, Elaine. “Introduction” In: *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Penguin, 1992, p. XXX.

¹² WOOLF, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Penguin, 1992, p. 32 – 33.

¹³ SHOWALTER, Elaine. “Introduction” In: *Mrs. Dalloway*. London: Penguin, 1992, p. XXIII.

¹⁴ BRIGGS, Julia. *Reading Virginia Woolf*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006. Print, p. 134.

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Daily Life Sketches



Restless

Isadora Reis Frediano¹

The grating sound of the alarm clock pierced the perfect silence that can only be found in the earliest hours of the morning. The dawn hadn't quite broken yet and, from the birds nestled on the trees to the other people in the house curled up in their beds, everyone seemed to be sound asleep. But not Jane, and she envied their good fortune.

It was 5:00 a.m., and while being abruptly awakened by the irritating tune of the malevolent alarm (for she had tried every option, but no melody was less aggravating at such an ungodly hour) was a bleak prospect, Jane would have gladly taken it over her present situation: already being awake, hoping and praying to get some sleep before it was time to get up; eyes tightly shut as if she could convince her brain to doze off by pretending to be asleep. And yet, she had been at it for at least a couple of hours when the despicably chipper notes reached her ears.

She hit the button that set up the 5-minute snooze with quite a bit more force than was necessary. It was time to start the day, and the girl's immediate reaction was, as usual, to assess how much damage would be made if she were to stay in bed. "Well... I guess today's class is hardly important. Attendance is mandatory, though... but the big exam is a month away! Maybe I can afford one more absence".

She pulled the blanket closer to her body, turned to the other side and once more tried to fall asleep. One minute passed, then two. "What if today's lesson ends up being super important?" She tossed and turned and tried to find a more comfortable position. "Nonsense! Besides, there's no point in showing up when I am so tired I would barely pay attention to a word out of the professor's mouth". She tried to clear her mind, but that was always a fruitless effort against her many worries. By the time the third minute went by, her internal monologue had already resumed: "What if there's an unexpected assignment due the following class? Well, I suppose I could just ask a classmate about it. That is, if I can muster the guts to speak to any of them this time. And what if I get sick after I already blew the limit of absences? I can't fail a class, I just can't!". She was staring at the ceiling when the fourth minute came about. It was useless; her anxious thoughts wouldn't let her be.

With a resigned sigh, Jane kicked away the blanket and stood up: tired, irritated and with no motivation other than the fear of failure to push her forward, she cursed the day she decided to attend such a distant university. She walked into the bathroom to brush her teeth, wash her face and feign a feeble attempt to tame her bushy hair. "This

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is useless. How can there be so many tangles? This mess on my head gets “bushier” every time I brush it, what a nightmare”. Feeling defeated, she just tied it up in a disappointing lopsided knot. When getting dressed, she found a hole on her favourite t-shirt and when she grabbed her backpack, the house keys weren’t in it, forcing her to turn the bedroom upside down to find them. “I’m gonna be late. I’m gonna be so late. And then I’ll have to interrupt the class to walk in and everyone will stare at me and hate me for it.” Her breath was already laboured by the time she walked out of the door, and still she had to run towards the bus stop.

*

The morning commute had been disastrous. The bus was crowded and the passengers were packed like sardines. Jane was squished against a metal bar for most of the long and dull ride and wouldn’t be surprised to find a bruise on her ribs. Her left sock was soaked from accidentally stepping on a puddle before getting on the bus and a pesky leak on the roof dripped rain water on her every few minutes. “I swear”, she mumbled to herself, completely disgruntled, “I would gladly put up with everything else if I could at least get those damn windows opened and breathe some fresh air”, but the downpour outside kept the windows shut and the air stagnant the whole while.

Now, she rushed into the university building, dodging the people who (she thought, exasperatedly) somehow had enough indifference and self-confidence in them to be walking leisurely and chatting the time away some ten minutes after the classes were supposed to start. Her stomach rumbled from the lack of breakfast but she knew she didn’t have the time to spare for the cafeteria’s interminable line, and kept her hurried pace until she reached the right classroom.

The girl froze for a second, feeling like a big chunk of ice had replaced her heart as she looked down at her watch and attested that she was indeed fifty minutes late for the class of her most strict and scary professor. She reached for the doorknob and tried to open the door as slowly and quietly as possible, and was left mortified by the blaring creak it emitted.

The professor’s head (along with those of about fifty students) turned to the luckless girl, and her face transpired nothing short of disgust and outrage as she stared at Jane coldly: “Well, are you just going to stay there? It is clear you have no regard for punctuality, and probably none for this course either. I should send you on your way right now...” It took the poor girl a few seconds to realize the professor expected an answer, but she could barely stammer out an “I’m so sorry”. “Fine, stop wasting everyone’s time. Don’t ever expect such indulgence again, but take a sit immediately and I’ll allow you to take the exam.”

“The exam”. The chunk of ice sank down to her stomach. It couldn’t be. Failing that exam meant flunking the class. How could she have possibly forgotten? She was so sure her notes said the exam would be on the following month. That couldn’t be happening. She didn’t study at all, and in this fit of desperation all acquired knowledge seemed to have fled her brain. Feeling humiliated, she closed the door and made her way to an empty chair, choking back bitter tears.

*

The hint of a squeak remained as Jane stamped her feet on the flooring on her way out of the doomed exam. “How freaking long will this damn shoe take to dry out?” It was almost lunchtime and she was starving. She tramped towards the busy cafeteria and entered the lengthy and excruciatingly slow moving line to buy a sandwich. She grabbed her phone and plugged in her earphones to pass the time with some music. Maybe the smarter choice would be a pick-me-up playlist but “screw it,” she thought, as she selected the gloomiest song available. The melancholy notes soon hit her right ear, but not the left one. “Oh no. No, no, no, no, no, not my earphones! I just got them. You have to be kidding me.” She ripped them off and tossed them angrily back into her backpack.

After about ten minutes (which felt like ten years as she grieved her failure in silence and hunger), there were only a couple of people between her and the cashier and she reached for her wallet. Her arm was elbow deep into the backpack as she scoured its contents. It wasn’t there. The image of herself retrieving the bus pass from the front pocket of the bag earlier that morning came to her. She hadn’t reached for her wallet or used any money yet that day. Of course not, she didn’t have any.

Furious and helpless, Jane stormed out of the building. She wanted to scream and cry and throw a complete tantrum where she stood, but alas she couldn’t. Feeling overwhelmed, she absent-mindedly rushed towards the bus stop; too apathetic to take the precaution of an umbrella, she allowed the cold water to soak into her clothes and hair. The fact that it was also slowly flooding her backpack hardly crossed her distraught mind.

The rain had brought chaos upon the city: the bus stop was crowded and there wasn’t a bus in sight. People complained, tried to find other transportation alternatives, failed to do so and complained some more. Jane just stood very still under the few inches of shelter she could manage to secure at the corner of the crowd, closed her eyes, tried to block out the outside world and waited.

*

It had been an hour and a half before she managed to get inside a bus that would take her home. And not twenty minutes after she found her bus was stuck in a gridlock. Cars honked their horns incessantly. The rain grew heavier and heavier, and after the day-long downpour the streets had started to look a lot like rivers, making it impossible to see the road. Jane leaned closer to a window to peek at the outside. All she saw were blurry headlights in the watery turmoil.

Worried, the girl reached for her phone to call home. She found it in between ruined textbooks, on a small pool of water that had formed at the bottom of her bag. The water had damaged it to the point where it couldn't even be turned on. The other passengers also grew agitated and Jane couldn't recall ever being more ill at ease.

With every passing moment the water outside kept rising and rising. People were getting louder and louder. Jane was terrified. Her heart pounded inside her chest in an erratic rhythm, her breath shallow and quick. Water started seeping in through the narrow gaps between glass and metal: the flood had reached the bus's windows. She felt a scream forming in her throat.

The alarm rang loudly and startled her. Her eyes shot open as she was abruptly brought back to reality with a gasp. The snooze was over, and so was her reverie.

Jane turned off her phone and threw it inside the bedside table's drawer. Her heartbeat still irregular, her breath still choked. Weakened and run-down, too scared of facing any of the problems she anticipated, she buried her face in the pillow and didn't leave her bed for the rest of the day.



The Day I Lost You

Mayara Alves Andrade¹

*The day I lost you
was dark grey and cloudy
Maybe the rain was about to fall,
I can hardly remember.*

*The day I lost you
was a Monday or Tuesday,
and it was September 22nd,
your friend's birthday.
No watch, no makeup,
no hair or nails done.*

No love.

That's what teenagers do, isn't it?

*Young people are controlled
by their bodies and emotions,
but couldn't you foresee
how dangerous it would be?*

*There are cliffs inside people's hearts,
they choose whether to jump or not,
some are higher than others,
and it depends on each one,
they can fall and fly later,
or die inside, resurrect or
get so hurt*

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they will never be completely alive

The day I lost you

was as cold as it should be

The stars are grey until today,

but let's come back

to telling at which point you got lost.

A touch and a kiss was quite enough

The cliff in your heart was too high

your mind, an empty box,

which got, eventually, broken.

Days and weeks would pass on and on.

Seconds

Minutes

Hours

Years

I know you would fix it all if you could

So here it goes.

I was dreaming? No. That wasn't exactly a dream, was I even sleeping? Am I hearing voices?

There was a song or a poem, and melody. It sounded sweet to my ears, as if each word could touch my soul. The melody, bubbling inside me, brought peace. It was the voice, a powerful and tender one. And the melody, something like a flute, but better.

While I could still hear it, I felt happiness. But suddenly it was gone, a final sharp tone took it away.

I don't know how, I understand nothing, but it hurts.

*

I wake up feeling something freezing all around me.

Shaking, afraid, trying to breathe, but it was almost impossible.

Where am I? What is happening to me?

Eyelids so leaden it is hard to open my eyes. When I try to scream, no sound comes out, I can't move. I don't remember what has happened, when I open my eyes, I can't understand: the water in the bathtub is red, it contrasts with the white of the walls, and the golden of the sink. My wrist is burning. I can see what I have done, somehow *I know*, even without understanding, I know.

So, dying is like this, right? I've always thought it would be peaceful and beautiful, but all I feel is pain. My soul hurts, is it possible? My mind is working, but my body can't make a move, I know, my spirit is about to flow, and I can't help it.

I've never been a sad person, I've never felt that before, I don't know how I ended up here. Warm tears on my face. Was it a good life? I don't know. But as my body lays rigid, as cold as the red water and as painful as my soul feels right now, I don't think so.

Never thought I would die crying.

I can't move my hands or my feet, they are too heavy. I am only conscious of pain, emptiness, darkness, and the picture hanging on the mirror.

It was a sad life, at least that's the sensation. I am letting myself go.

*

When I tried to see my reflection on the first mirror, I did see me, but not now. My blue eyes shone on a 16 year-old face.

My glossy hair was long and almost orange, it was straight, falling beside my face and neck. I reached out my finger and could touch the young version of me. That was not a mirror, maybe it was more like a window. The drizzling sensation makes me feel like I am dreaming, but I keep going, and get through it.

Laying on the grass, I couldn't help the tears rolling all over my face: those were the green walls of Salerno Secondary School, probably in the 90's, when I studied there.

"It wasn't like that in Manhattan".

"Why don't you come back there, then?"

"Don't be silly, honey. I am right where I am supposed to be".

"You and this American accent".

He held me and then I felt his lips.

Sweet moment, I thought. I don't remember we have lived it, but we must have. We had started dating in high school, and seeing him now makes me wonder: what exactly is happening?

I could feel my heart beat too loud as I ran out, ending up again in that mirror gallery.

The walls were filled with mirrors, my bare feet touching the ground, the beat of my heart and my legs shaking. I chose one more mirror, maybe I could wake up from this weird dream, and it is a dream, isn't it? If it isn't, I want to understand.

I was shivering while getting into this second one. A wind takes me and now we're lying on the bed - the younger me and him.

I remember this one, our weekend down the Dog's Bay four years ago. I can't help but smile seeing us. Somehow, I had the same feelings as I had had before.

"It's too cold today".

"I know, but we could still go for a walk. I don't want to swim, honey".

"Let's just hang a few minutes more, okay?"

I remember myself looking outside the window: the clear blue water and the white sand, the shy Sunday morning sun coming up, the silk sheets against my skin.

Peace of a heart filled up with bliss.

Maybe I am dead now, having the chance to see my happy moments. Is death like this? Only recalling your life? I wonder how he is now. The last time we talked, he was on a business trip, and would be there for a week. Now he lost me, I lost me.

If I am dead now, I'm still keeping the feelings from when I was alive.

I wish I could take a picture of what I see right now to keep it always with me. And those feelings, I wish I could save them throughout eternity. This is how I would like to spend death, this light soul inside me, and our bodies held close, connected, as it has been since the beginning.

I stared at him, it could be my last time. I wanted to remember every single detail of him. The hair up, sun-tanned skin, and brown eyes, light like honey. What we have lived was unique.

I felt warm tears again. But now, I walked away missing him and all these moments, wishing I could have one more day like that, wondering how I could have done this to myself.

Countless mirrors all over the hall where I was, the walls were tall, and I could see no ceiling. I kept walking until I found the biggest mirror of them all. It was like a wall itself, but it was darker than the others.

There it was. I put my arm through it and felt the darkness. While I was getting into it, pain reached all the extension of myself.

I felt like I was there and wasn't, the heart beating inside my chest didn't feel like my own, it was beating electrically, heavily. Running on my street, crying all the way to the apartment.

I had never lived it. I would remember if I had. Even my building was different. This time, I could not see myself, I was in me. Although everything was kind of automatic, I had

control over part of my mind. I looked for a phone in my pocket, the screen was displaying the year of 2017. Five years ahead the last day I can remember. I let this future me be the guide to what she was supposed to be doing. I knew it. I could tell from the darkness in my soul, the day of my death. I felt like a ghost alive, no reason to be living. I allowed her to cry for endless minutes in the bathtub, holding a blurry printed picture. So much effort to breathe, I don't know, but I understand why I did it. How was I supposed to be living like this?

In. Out. In. Out. In.

Out.

I could no longer breathe. Pain was springing from my heart to all over my body.

I closed my eyes and let her do it. My part of the mind got silent as she got the knife and cut the wrist.

When I got to the hall of mirrors again, I took a deep breath.

"I don't want this! Whoever is listening to me, if there's someone listening! I don't want to end up like this!"

Suddenly I was surrounded by images, they came straight out of the mirrors, I touched them and saw myself as an old lady, walking happily on a shiny morning. I saw myself getting married to a blond guy, looking deeply inside his eyes, smiling. My daughter, a little baby, running at a park.

"I WANT IT. I want to live, I want life!"

I would do anything to have it again.

The images were touching me, bringing me to pieces of life I wanted so badly to have lived. The smell of the rain on a cold Sunday morning, freezing, while we get into the car, my girl is not so little anymore, I look at her and recognize how she resembles me.

An image touches my cold hand and I see it, like a room of images, with Daniel's face. My beloved. What happened?

I know it. The effect is a snapshot. I know the truth. It was him, but why? What did he do it to me? But I still need to know what happened, I don't understand! What did he do?

I am longing for what I have seen, the life flowing on me again, but how am I supposed to come back? I don't know how.

"TAKE ME BACK TO THE NIGHT WE MET!"

I run into the lightest mirror in the room, letting my soul guide me, I could feel it, my chance, maybe my last one.

"I will do it, I'll do whatever it takes to have my life back. I don't know who I am talking to, but help me, help me come back!"

I saw myself leaning on the bench park, waiting for the concert to start, it was September the second, my friend's birthday, but she wasn't there yet.

I got closer to my young self, being invisible now. I was able to watch me, I remember exactly how it happened, and living it again got me paralyzed.

He was coming.

I saw love at first sight.

Staring at him again. So young. Such bright eyes.

It isn't easy to say goodbye only by glancing at what we could be, I actually don't want to say goodbye, I mean, what if my short life was worth it, and I don't know what he did to me, maybe I can fix it somehow, there must be a way.

He was the first person in my life, as far as I can remember, no one will ever take his place.

The images of our lives dancing around my mind, as if we were ghosts of people who lived long ago.

Maybe it's worth it.

"I choose him, listen, whoever is hearing it, take me out of here, help me fix it, or help me see what I have lived again! I-I...I don't want my life back".

"Hold on! Hold on! Clarissa, please! Clarissa!"

I glimpse someone's eyes wide open, close to my face, all the images blurred, together at the same time, I can see through it, my bathroom, people around me.

"Is she back? Doctor, is my daughter back?"

It's hard to breathe. I don't want to breathe. I am dizzy.

I can't help but run towards him, if I am walking up, maybe he can see me.

He sits by the young me.

I look at him looking at my young version.

"Daniel!"

No, I don't want to come back anymore.

"Take me out of here! I choose Daniel!"

"Daniel..."

My mother's tears are warm against my cold skin.

"Honey, please... who's Daniel?"

Daniel?

What is happening?

Where am I?

"He is...I don't know".



Just a Bad Coffee

Rita Aragão de Podestá¹

This is the worst espresso I ever had. Some things in life allow the middle ground. Pizza. White shirt fabric. Sunday afternoon movie. French fries. It is possible to go unnoticed by a half-dried, half-fried potato. But an espresso lies on extremes. Never in between. An espresso like this rips the throat, burns all your daily expectations. Some situations require a cappuccino; milk is the only rescue for a bad coffee.

It's simple. I should not have gone into this café. There are so many cafés in NY. Uninhabited cafés do not always mean productive solitude. I will never be a Simone Beauvoir just by sitting in a French café between a British pub and an Indian restaurant. The menu in French and English does not give me a global feeling, but a sense of not-belonging. I'm not in Paris. The waiter is an American guy who probably does not understand the origins of a rendezvous and he is still far away from his thirties.

"More coffee?"

"Yes, please."

I'm so weak at saying no. Just missed the chance to order one Cappuccino or say something about the weather or even pay for the damage in my throat and leave. When you can't say no, life becomes a sequence of nasty bad coffees. When you deliver a social yes, prepare to swallow the bitter consequences of your false positive decision. On the other hand saying yes to one thing means saying no to another. That's why I'm terrible at making decisions.

While I find the courage to turn the black liquid into a shot, I remember the day's plan. Find a quiet charming café to finish the reading. Repeat. Read. Read. Read. Thus, the coffee was left behind, giving place to the book. Brazilian literature translated by an American to read in a French Café, probably drinking Brazilian coffee prepared by a made-in Italy coffee machine. Again, how can I find my way in a miscellaneous world?

"It's hard to get lost. It's so hard that I'll probably quickly figure out some way to find myself, even if finding myself is once again my vital lie"

It's definitely not a good place to find yourself or any other one. And why fitting iron chairs inside the place? If the intent was to resemble Paris, it would be necessary to pass a bill allowing them on the sidewalk. No one wants to sit in a cold-iron-chair in the middle of this unfriendly made-in-NY winter. Not to mention those small round tables. Mere frivolities. They can't stand three cups of coffee side by side. Perhaps two.

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In case of two cappuccinos mugs there will be a mandatory well-trained dance where the drinkers need to orchestrate their steps – one drinks while the other rests their cup on the table. The place's decor is a note of desperation. Take everything you know about France and stick them to walls. Frames of Audrey Tatou beside Gerard Depardieu; Carla Bruni alongside a drawing of Napoleon Bonaparte; one bottle of wine sharing the same space with a Tour Eiffel. No frame of Bouvoir. This place smells like good coffee, but serves a terrible drink. How is that possible?

“This is a book like any other but I would be happy if it were read by people whose souls are already formed”.

What would be a formed soul? How about an incomplete soul? How do we manage to carry ourselves in pieces? Once I believed in souls, in soul mates. But I only found a far relative soul. One uncle-cousin-cousin-brother's family. Our relationship was as distant as our relation was. Love is about having doubts together. Try placing side by side two interrogation marks. You will form a heart full of uncertainty. In that case, would soul mates be like finding someone with the same questions instead of answers? In this room it's impossible to find a formed soul. Is the waiter old enough to be formed? Notwithstanding my soul is definitely colorless without shapes or any pretentious project of being entire.

“Would you like to order your meal?”

“No, just one sparkling water, please.”

Well done. Here comes the insistence of breaking the silence. What's wrong with the world with no words? Silence is the best way to express what is inexpressible. We need to consume sounds and products all the time. We need to be consuming amid talking and communicating and selling and buying and living. It is the 'ing's time. These are the times of fast foods and slow digestion. If I need I will ask. I bought the time of a glass of water to read in silence. Next time I will order the time of a Moroccan sweet. Maybe a pancake's time. Actually, I see no real French options in this menu.

“Good morning. May I help you?”

Again? I just ordered. It's not for me. Another soul traverses the portal to the sad red world of iron chairs. Is it a complete soul? I try to hide my watching. I feel invaded. I had already got used to the idea of my own démodé café. I considered changing tables every other coffee that I ordered. Maybe asking the waiter's name and if he had ever had the coffee he serves. I could teach him one or two French words. Au revoir productive solitudes. No more calm reading. The new soul, that we don't know whether it is formed or not, sits at the next table. Six round tables and he sits right next to me. Intruder soul.

“One espresso, please.”

He's not from America. One intruder in my coffee and in my country. Italian? No, the accent does not denounce the Italian vivacity. What does he look like? His hair is a smooth transition between brown and black seventy percent. His thin nose could be from

an arrogant woman. What about those eyes with the color of a weak coffee? I hate weak coffee. Maybe he's searching for a decadent warm comfort fantasized of home. Everyone should know that it isn't polite to enter a place with one client only. It's a form of disrespect to lonely souls. He has an expression of those who seek without knowing what he's looking for. Does he feel I'm watching him? Still, he must feel cold in contact with these damn iron chairs that have been displaced from their natural habitat. Maybe it's someone that comes from a hot country. Go back to your warm natural place and leave me in my cold refuge.

"Can I take your order?"

"Sorry?"

"Would you like to order something to eat?"

"Coffee."

"Anything else?"

"Ah...Coffee?"

"Do you want more coffee, is that it?"

As if one voice interrupting me was not enough, now there are two keeping me from reading. A desired loneliness is the luxury of a few.

"I believe he doesn't want to eat. Just coffee is fine."

The waiter expressed no intentions to hide his dissatisfaction. Maybe he realized that the tip would not be as good as he expected.

"Thanks."

"It was nothing."

Back to the book. I will return to my proposed duty. I do not want to interact. Don't talk to me. Don't talk to me. He doesn't speak, but has a visible desire in his mouth which denounces he's going to say something. His lips are moving as if he is trying in silence before saying. Say it! No words. He returns to his coffee as if it's a good coffee. My mother hates coffee, but she loves the smell. I believe the opposite to be impossible. Can you hate the smell and just love the taste? Perhaps he has no inclinations to coffee and just drink it because of its aroma. He has not yet taken off his coat.

"The world's continual breathing is what we hear and call silence."

My peace was this quiet noise. The waiter who constantly passes a cloth on the counter that nobody used. The sound of tap water which washes the glasses of drinks that no one drank. Now the intruder drinks the coffee as if in a search for some heat. I hate it when realism intrudes on my reveries. I read him instead of my book. If he were a book its cover would be a warm landscape, a tropical island where no one speaks English. He looks at me and raises his book as if he made a toast. I do the same. Who makes toast with books?

"The same!"

"What? What's the same?"

He points to the book. We are reading the same book! Better, we are both not reading the same book, since in this café nobody is allowed to read. He shows me the name of the author. Clarice Lispector. *A Paixão Segundo GH*. He's trying again to say something in this language that his mouth does not allow to go out.

"Bad English. Sorry."

He picks up the book and point at the second paragraph on page twenty-six. I look for my copy, it says: *"But your name"*.

"Ange! And yours?"

"Edu."

"Where are you from?"

"From?"

"Country!"

"Ah, Brazil."

"I imagined you coming from a hot country. You still haven't taken off your coat."

No answers. Edu. One Brazilian guy with French nose and Italian hair. It doesn't matter where you're from. There's always peace in a strong cup of coffee with someone nice. He smells like summer. He can answer only two-word's questions and after he keeps a smile of white teeth with two yellowed canine. I open the book in a random page and I say in loud voice.

"I do not know much. But there are certain advantages in not knowing."

"I don't know much English."

"I noticed. But I have the feeling that we would have incredible conversations if we spoke the same language."

He looks for a new phrase. Reads and look at me without saying anything. I feel a little regret by having misjudged him. Maybe life brought me to this place, made me endure two horrible coffees just to meet him. Would his doubts be the same as mine? I want to ask if he consider himself an incomplete soul. I look for one good excerpt but before that he points me to a line.

"I shall need the courage to do what I'm about to do: speak. And risk the enormous surprise I shall feel at the poverty of the spoken thing. As soon as it's out of my mouth, I'll have to add: that's not it, that's not it! But I cannot be afraid of being ridiculous."

I desire a way of speaking without using this woman I do not know. What if what I show is not what he understands? I wonder if it is possible to love without words.

"Great coffee."

"Yes, it's great. You're being ironic, right?"

He understands without understanding. I'm pretty sure he's not telling the truth. I

need to be quick and find the right sentence. I need to memorize the book in Portuguese and say that I believe in soul mates and love at first book.

“If I talk I will frighten you and lose you? But if I do not speak I will be given up, and since I am given up it would be like losing you.”

Perfect. Thanks, Clarice. But I decide to do differently. I look at his book and I show the sentence in Portuguese. Page eighty-five, fifth paragraph and sixth line. He reads and frowns in disagreement. He points to the sentence as if he asked *are you sure?* I nod my head.

“This one... about... about... barata?”

“I don’t know what you mean, but yes, this sentence.”

He laughs. We do not need lonely coffee anymore. We can spend hours trying to understand each other. We could even take terrible espressos without much effort. So much of language is unspoken. So much of language is looks and gestures. I’ll show him I can keep him warm.

“Do you want more coffee?”

Someone arrives. Suddenly this is the most wanted café in New York. On a cold day a good place not to abandon is home. She goes in and immediately takes off her coat. A hot woman in a cold winter. Her hair is made of irritatingly perfect curls and she has an annoyingly and warm expression. And as if there were not enough tables she comes to us. No, she goes to him. Intruder and malicious soul. She smells like cinnamon. I heard once that cinnamon is a good solution for bad coffees. I don’t like her smell.

She comes and starts to talk with him immediately. As if I was not there. They are saying something in another language. Clarice’s language?

“Hi, thanks for helping my husband. His English is not good yet, definitely.”

“No problem...”

He rises and almost forgets to look at me one more time. He does it cordially and goes out in her warm hug. Suddenly I feel emptier than this decadent non-French café.

“Another espresso, please. And make it double.”

The boy who discovered infinity

Victor Bonifacio¹

Dear reader,

How are you feeling today? I hope you are doing just fine.

My name is Tom, I have now completed the eleventh year of my existence, and I am about to tell you a story that happened to me a few months ago.

Since I was eight, I've been living on the streets, because my mom got lost from me while taking her pills. She used to spend lots of money with that, but I don't know well what they were for.

But the thing is: since my mom and I went separate ways, I've never ever heard about her anymore. I became homeless, and so I had to learn and live like a wild predator (not that I'm like that, because people say that I'm the "sweetest homeless kid in the world").

I still don't have the age required to have a proper job, so I just live my days taking people's leftovers. Not only food, as you may be thinking right now, but my SpongeBob SquarePants' blanket, for example, is from a family that lives near that not-so-junk-but-still-junky restaurant downtown.

Enough talking about me, I really need to tell you this. I don't know who you are, or what you are doing right now, but if you are reading this, it's because you've been chosen to continue this chain. You shall pass the final message of this story to someone you think is special. I personally think you are special. Better than this, I know you are special. And this story is about being special to someone.

It was a sunny day. The clouds were all in the sky making the perfect place for a young boy to dream about their shapes and actions. I was eating some nice burger I got from the trash near that not-so-junk-but-still-junky restaurant downtown, which I've already mentioned before, when I saw something odd that made me laugh so loud that this laugh ended up changing my life.

There was this minivan speeding fast over the parking lot of the restaurant, and it was coming fast towards the place's main door. For a minute, I thought they were going to enter it and create a new species of drive thru, but then the car just drifted and occupied perfectly a free spot.

My eyes were fixed on the minivan's front door. I was just thinking that Gore, the neighbourhood's gangster, was driving it. I fear Gore. He is always drunk and taking people's money like it was his. I fear what he would do to me if he found out that I had no money, just a silly blanket and some special things I hide in my

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pockets.

When the door opened, I hid myself behind the trashcan but, to my surprise, it was an old lady that got off the driver's place.

"Herbert, I'm so going to kill you, you little bastard!", she said in a really angry tone on her voice. "Get out of this car right now. I can't believe your bladder is malfunctioning again! You have to run to the toilet!".

I couldn't believe my eyes. The old woman just started running out of the car and opened the minivan's door as fast as she could, but it was so funny because she wasn't strong enough to open those doors. I started laughing really hard. So hard that I didn't notice when she started yelling at me.

"Hey! You! Stop laughing and help me here! Didn't your mum teach you anything about how to behave?", she yelled while my smile was fading away and so I started standing still behind the trash can. "I can see you, you little bastard. Come over here. Now!". And so I did.

When I realized what I was doing, I was already pulling the minivan's door, and then I just heard a scratchy voice inside crying out words so abruptly, that only few things were audible. "I can.. believe his... happ... ning... FASTER FIONA!". The door opened for a moment, but then just got closed again (like these minivans do). It was just enough for the old man to see me. "Oh my G..., now there's a fil... boy here to la... at me... Why do you insist on mak... me shy around people, Fiona? I'm NEV... going to have lunch with... again in my life, and I'm just about to live YEARS bey... you!". It was scary because of his voice, and also funny because of the situation itself. I didn't get much of his words, but I felt the rage and the shame on his voice.

When the door cracked open, he started running to the restaurant's bathroom, and a trace of piss followed him. Suddenly, it felt wrong to laugh about it, I don't know why. So I just said something like "Do you think I should go with him? You know, to the toilet? Because you are a lady and he is a man... you know...". "That would be really nice of you... Oh, sorry, what's your name?". "Tom, and yours?". "Fiona. Nice to meet you. Now, give me this horrible burger you are holding and go help him. He gets really sensitive when things like this happen."

I followed the trace of piss down the restaurant's corridor, and along with it, I was just sliding my feet over it to erase the evidences. When I entered the men's room, I heard that weird voice make an awful noise. He was crying. Somehow, I felt a pain really hard in my chest, and so I thought it would be nice to deal with it like it was all OK. "Hey, Sir, well... I know... I think this is hard for you, but I just want to say that all the trace of it is erased. I slide my sock over it and now it's all gone. This can be our little secret... And Fiona's, obviously."

He started laughing. And the funny thing is that it was mixed with his tears, so the noise was even weirder than the usual. "Oh boy, I just forgot how wonderful it is to be a kid.", he said while leaving the toilet's box. "Come on, let's get this trace of piss out of your

socks and sneakers too... Wait, aren't these sneakers too shabby for you to wear? Where do you live, boy? And, by the way, my name is Herbert, nice to meet you." He spoke so quickly that I just stared at him, until I composed myself for an answer: "Well, my name is Tom and I live on the streets. Oh my God, my SpongeBob SquarePants blanket! I just left it by the garbage can! Sorry, Mr. Herbert, I just have to run!"

I started running as fast as I could, my blanket meant so much to me. In the winter, it saves my life. In the summer, it helps me cover my sweat. I just couldn't lose it. But, by the time I got to the restaurant's door, I saw the garbage car passing through and my tears just started to fall down.

When I realized I was crying, both Fiona and Herbert were just beside me. The problem of being so much time away from your mom is that you get too needy. Needy for attention, needy for love. It was because of this that, when I opened my eyes, I was hugging them both.

"Herbert, I am 99% sure that his hamburger was extracted from that garbage we found him. We can't let this poor boy like this! Did he say where his mom is?", Fiona said, worried.

"No. He said to me he was homeless, he lives on the streets! And he mentioned a blanket from that TV Show 'Barney'...", Herbert replied.

"It's not 'Barney', it's 'SpongeBob SquarePants! And my mom and I haven't been together since I was eight, and now I am almost eleven!", I said, while getting off their arms and leaving the place. "I'm sorry for your bladder, Mr. Herbert, and thank you for holding my hamburger, Mrs. Fiona, but I have to go now. It's getting dark and Gore is around the streets..."

"Gore? Do you know that little bastard?", Fiona asked, shaking my shoulders abruptly. "He is always haunting our house, making fun of Herbert and his husband! You boy are going to sit right now and tell us everything about that thief, because the double cheeseburger I just ordered is not going to be eaten by itself!"

So we sat and talked. I found out Herbert has a husband, which is so nice, I mean, it is nice to be loved, isn't it? Also, the three of them plus a bunch of other retirees live in a nursing house, which is where old people gather together to enjoy the most brilliant days of life living in the same place.

After this unexpected (and delicious, and junky) dinner, Fiona said she and Herbert decided to take me with them, so I could take a "glorious and tremendous bath" while they went to the mall to look after a new and fluffy blanket for me.

The journey was kinda fun. We listened to Beyoncé, an American superstar Ethan (Herbert's husband) was in love with and, in his opinion, was the only good thing the 21st century was capable of creating. I hope this isn't true, because I love SpongeBob SquarePants, and I think it is also from this century... But the thing is, I've never been to a nursing home, and it was awesome.

There was a huge front door, and Fiona explained to me that they need it for Amelie,

a very old woman who needed to use a wheelchair so she could walk from A to B without using her dead legs (when I used this explanation to Gregory, the housekeeper, he asked me not to use these words with Amelie, but honestly I don't know why not to use them).

Lots of bedrooms, side by side, were the home of twelve humans that, when you stop to sum their ages, you get 957 years old. The rooms had plenty of space so the people could have their own stuff there. Ethan and Herbert's, for example, had a piano, so Herbert could play it anytime he wanted, and a huge TV, so Ethan could watch Beyoncé videos on high definition.

I don't know how much time I spent there, but I was capable of knowing them better. They are a family. I feel like I needed this so much since my mom and I went different ways. That bath turned into weeks of homestay. I learned about how to prepare a shawarma with Raj, the Arabian refugee that worked there since 2004 (I wasn't even on the universe this year, LOL), Fiona taught me how to plant gardenias and how to make wishes and blow dandelions.

On a sunny day I realized I was getting so attached to them that I forgot about how to live on the streets or how was to sleep with only a dirty blanket (by the way, they bought me a Barney's one, which I loved anyways). The fact is that I started needing them to be with me, and I just didn't want to go away.

In that same day, when Fiona, Herbert and I were searching for some dandelions in the garden, they said to me something that really changed my way of seeing things in the world. They taught me that life is like the act of blowing a dandelion. You think you have it all when you are a child. Your life is complete just the way it is. But then wind comes and blows your safety away, and you are just a small piece of flower flying free in the air. The most incredible thing is that, when you lay again on the ground, you are able to start over and share your knowledge with other land species to grow strong again. And that is one of the purest things life gives us. The power of growing again and again, leaving your footprints as a mark of your immortality.

It's a weird sensation to feel like you need someone, but it has no reciprocity. I felt like this sometimes, like anyone in the world has so much to teach me, but I have nothing to give them back. I felt so lonely in my own loneliness that I forgot that the most important knowledge is how to learn and live with our hearts open for the change. The days I spent there were full of changes, for the better, and I am so grateful that I am capable of erasing the traces of piss they left with my socks, not minding the smell, just because I am able and they are not. It's mutual, you know?

Here's the thing, Herbert died. Yes, it's so sad. I found him dead. Even sadder, huh? Yes. It was a Sunday evening; Ethan was doing some shopping with Fiona, who needed a pink scarf to pair with the purse she got as a gift from Gregory. I was just taking care of the gardenias when I thought it would be nice to ask Herbert to join me on a quick walk through the neighbourhood.

When I opened the bedroom door, I found the TV turned on a show called “Drug Wars”, which was one of Herbert’s favorites. Their bathroom was as dark as the night, and the window was wide open, but the curtains were moving fast, like they were telling me “Go away!”. I didn’t.

Herbert was cold as ice. The first thing I did was to close the windows, so he didn’t feel cold anymore. Then, I tried to call him like a thousand times, but then I realized he was dead and gone.

I’ve already seen dead people when I was living on the streets. In the winter, it was usual to have homeless people dying during sleep due to the low temperatures. But I had never seen someone I cared so much dead.

Until Fiona came back, I just sat there, making him company. It’s useless to say how much pain invaded that nursing home with Herbert’s death. But it was from his death that I learned the most important lesson of all.

On the funeral, I stood beside Ethan all the time. I felt like he deserved this due to the suffering he was going through. It’s interesting how people try to keep strong next to others, such as strangers, family and friends. Ethan didn’t drop a single tear during all the ceremony. I couldn’t say goodbye out loud, because I felt I was going to cry and make everyone worry about me, so I just wrote a note and put it inside his right hand. It said, “Dandelions are not about immortality, as you said to me, they are about being infinite. In my heart, you will always be. Thank you.”

After that long day, we went back home and he saw a dandelion, and started to remember how Herbert used to love those things. “We used to go to a park and spend the day blowing these lovely flowers. His look would fly away together with the pieces of this beautiful creature, and I was only capable of keeping staring at him, in love with those eyes.”

I took the dandelion on my hands and, without thinking too much, I said the things that were on my mind. “You know, Ethan, what I learned from Herbert and you is that life is like a dandelion. We blow them and they vanish, just like our life, which is finite. But the most beautiful thing in this is to notice that the memory of our pleasure while blowing it is the most important thing of all. I think that the love that Herbert left inside us is as important as the memory of a dandelion. It’s forever.”

Ethan started crying and me too. We held hands and went inside, and I was waiting for the next big adventure I would be into, so I can learn from it again and bring it to you.

Months have gone, and now I live with them not as a guest, but as the official gardener of the nursing home. And no, it’s not a job, because I’m not even old enough to have one, but what happened is that Ethan adopted me, and now I’m no longer homeless. Much more than a house, these people gave me love, fulfilled me with joy and taught me

about hope. I like to call myself the gardener because it's the way I thank them for making my dreams fertile again.

Never forget to blow your own dandelions. Blow slow and steady. See it spreading fast and vanish into the universe. So many new dandelions can grow out of that one.

With love,

Tom.

Diversity Drama



I See Fire

Pedro Lazo¹

1

“I’ll do it for you.”

I let myself sink into the couch as Luca stands up, his knee joint cracks the way they always do, and he heads to the kitchen. The sound of the kitchen and his steps are loud enough so that I can pinpoint exactly where he is. From the fridge, he takes another slice of pizza before shutting the door with a thud. Mic snaps open, the hard glass plate tinkles with the ceramic plate, and the buzz of a swarm of bees fills the room for about a minute before the door snaps open again and my brother steps back to the living room.

“There, bro,” he says, placing the warm plate on my lap.

For the rest of our free Sunday afternoon, we eat, and watch TV. I mean, Luca watches TV—I just listen to it. From time to time, I still feel that uncomfortable itch under my skin that makes me shift position on the couch. Even though I know what’s happening, I also know that there are things my ears will never understand like Luca’s eyes do.

Visual clues were never a blind guy’s best friend.

I don’t do the dishes that night.

“I’ll do it, Dad.” Luca offers, taking the dishes off the table.

The weight of my dad’s eyes is like a blanket over my head.

“You know, it’s your brother’s night to clean up, Luca.”

I shudder. I don’t really mind not doing the dishes. To be honest, I hate getting my hands all wet and touching the leftovers and scouring the pots. Since I’m being honest, I also can’t remember the last time I did the washing up.

“Yeah, but Danny hates it. It’s a deal: I do the dishes, he organizes the bedroom. It’s a bigger mess than this sink.”

“Yeah, Dad. It’s a deal.”

Dad seems to buy it. He snorts out a laugh and stands up. The chair’s feet scratch the floor with its stone-y nails over the ceramic, hurting my ears.

“Great. You won’t mind washing after dessert, then.” Dad says.

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After an obscene amount of chocolate mousse in front of the TV, I leave for the shower. At home, I can navigate without the cane once things are at the same spot they have always been for as long as I can remember.

When I enter the room wrapped in a towel, I should've tripped in the bigger mess Luca mentioned to Dad earlier, but I don't.

Things are at the same spot they have always been for as long as I can remember.

Even the mess.

Luca makes sure they do.

2

At school, things are like this: Luca gets close enough to me so he can guide me without actually touching me, except for the stairs, where he gently touches my arm and his fingers lightly press my skin when there is a step up to the classroom. There, he leaves me in my seat, and goes to his own classroom.

Once Luca is gone, Mariana takes his place. She sits by my right side, because I'm right-handed, and she, left-handed. Her face is long, with a thin, upturned nose. Her hair is short, shorter than mine, and thick. She tells me it has the color and smell of oranges, which I can always perceive when I arrive by the doorway. Mariana and I are almost the same height, but we do not have the same eyes or the same body—her eyes are the color of wet dirt, as she said the first time we met, and mine, chocolate. She has a body full of curves, like a running track or a cello, and I have the 'body of a flat, slim table' in her words.

Ever since I met Mariana, I'm dying to play the cello.

When the bell rings after class, I'm the last to leave. Mari walks me to the balcony of the first floor where we sit to lunch. She's reading us this book, *White Nights*. It's a good book and Mari's narration is great. Her voice deepens when she's the narrator and shapeshifts when she's the characters, which makes her reading quite fun. She's used to read to people, so she doesn't mind spending her break time reading to me. It's kind of our thing.

Because this reading is a bit more intimate than what she does at the public library, I get to support my head on her lap, where the smell of orange is the most intense. She holds her book with one hand while the other sifts through my hair, so softly I feel I'm in bed, being rocked to sleep.

Suddenly, we're both laughing at a horribly good male imitation of hers the moment Luca arrives. I recognize his breath and the smell of his perfume and sweat due to the running. He sits by my side, handing me a paper bag with a round, warm, sweet-smelling cookie inside.

"You're welcome."

I grin and start to bite.

“And this is for the fairest lady Mariana,” Luca says, stretching himself over me towards her.

“Thank you, oh kind sir.”

We’re all nibbling at our cookies, me a bit more strongly.

Then, something hits us. My guess is that it’s a book, because right before it hits us, I could have sworn I heard the flipping of pages cut the air. Anyhow, it doesn’t hit *us*. Mari and Luca are fine. I, on the other hand, lose my cookie—which probably rolls down through the balcony onto the patio—and get a throbbing papercut on my eyebrow.

Mari can’t stop asking me if I’m ok, like a broken record that keeps repeating the same part of the song over and over. ‘Danny, are you ok? Oh my God, Danny, you’re bleeding. Are you ok?’

I don’t answer her.

I mean, I try. Anything to make her stop overreacting to a freaking papercut, though I enjoy how her hands slide down my face.

But I can’t.

I can’t find my own voice in the mess within. Lungs hurt, heart beats painfully fast and my stomach doesn’t seem to know the difference between food and its own walls, so it starts eating itself. All because Luca doesn’t ask me how I am. He simply stands up, cursing at whoever threw that book at us—at me.

Mari keeps playing her song on the loop, louder than Luca’s voice, but all I want is her to stop talking and to stop my brother from whatever he’s about to do. I know Luca has a temper. I also know that all the cursing he’s learned, he learned it from our father. And I know I might be overreacting, it’s just that hearing Luca shouting like this reminds me of the time when Dad acted this way. And the memory is painful.

Luca is a reflex of Dad, hurt and out of control because of a man who drank too much and made the wrong choice.

They’re arguing. Monkey in the middle with the new girl, I hear, as a flowery perfume hits my nostrils and the book’s gone. Irresponsible. Dangerous. Disdain leaking through someone’s laugh.

“You hit my brother, you piece of shit! Can’t you see where you throw things?”

“*I can.*”

I close my eyes, even though I can’t see, in the hope that will shut all my other senses. Luca is Dad in a hot, humid summer night, yelling at a drunk driver. Both break into a fight, just like Dad went full force at the man who took Mom’s life.

*

“Looking good, kiddo.”

Dad’s here. His wood-like fingers hold my face up so he can scan it for other injuries. He finds none other than the already band-aided cut.

I’m on a chair outside the principal’s office. I know the place—it has got a water fountain less than two meters by my right, by the corner of the corridor that leads to the school’s reception, and a coffee table a seat away by my left, covered with old magazines that even if I could, I don’t think I’d read.

Dad takes the seat closest to the coffee table. His body crashes into it. He sighs. He should be home, getting the rest of his sleep before going back to the fire brigade tonight.

“Sérgio?”

I turn my face to Ana, the principal. Her voice comes from the front, from her office door. She sounds eager to get this over with, or perhaps just happy to see Dad. Or maybe both.

Dad presses my thigh with his rough hand, then he’s gone.

Luca doesn’t come out.

Minutes later, the receptionist offers to take me back to class, where I forgot my cane.

If tension were something tangible, I could make a sandwich out of it and finish lunch.

At home, Luca and I don’t speak. The only sounds are from the cars on the streets, the constant buzzing of the fridge and the tick-tack of the living room’s clock. Sometimes I can feel Luca’s gaze upon me, and I ignore him.

I feel like I should say something.

3

Two weeks after the fight, I can still feel the cold and heaviness coming from all corners of the classroom. Whispers travel fast but never arrive, and it is as if I were seated in a nest of snakes, hissing all around me, conspiring.

Mari thinks I’m exaggerating. It takes one touch of her hand for my thoughts to become filled with heat and a whole other kind of heaviness.

I rearrange myself on the seat.

Other people shout orders at one another as they kick a football around the court. Sneakers skid superficially, the floor’s screaming.

Not being able to play soccer with the other kids used to get me down. They had a good, (though prejudiced excuse) that, unless I had super hearing to know where the ball would go, I couldn’t play with them.

Luckily, Mari came around.

And primary school ended, of course.

She twitches her nose and snorts every time they ask her to play, which makes me laugh. 'I like sports where I can see them, thank you very much,' she says. She uses me as her crutch—she's making me company. And since the teacher's got zero pleasure in making any efforts to find something for me to do, he gladly lets her stay with me.

"I gotta go the restroom," I say, putting down a braille book she's asked me to read for her.

"Wait. I can't read it without you! Can't you just hold it in till you finish the chapter?"

I laugh. I'm already a few steps afar, the cane tapping me across the way.

"Can't stay away from all this, can you?"

"Just come back to me, you weirdo."

My feet work faster and, in the bathroom, I kind of have a hard time peeing.

"Hey, hey, look what we have here!" I straighten my back and reach for the paper when I'm done washing my hands. "Boys, come check. It's Luca's little brother."

"Hi, Bruno," I say, throwing the paper away. I search the side pocket of my jeans for my cane. "How are you?"

With the cane unfolded, I tap my way out of the restroom. The tip of the cane bumps into a mass—someone's body, judging by the warmth, breath and odor coming out of it. I handle the object to different directions, bumping into other warm masses.

"Now that the swelling from your brother's punch lessened and I can see again, I'm OK."

"I'm sorry you guys fought. He shouldn't've hit you."

"You're right 'bout that one, Danny. He shouldn't've hit me."

Steps. Sneakers squelching as Bruno stops behind me, his tall body sending waves of heat that instantly freeze my spine. Now, his face is next to mine. He's all stubbly, his facial hair pokes me, which makes me want to pull away. When he speaks, it's like holding ice with your hands: cold and burning at once.

"I never knew how terrifying not seeing could be."

Bruno pushes me lightly once, twice, until I'm tripping over my own feet.

I hold onto the cane, trying to gain balance, only to be pushed again, this time more fiercely than I had been. Suddenly, I'm in the middle of a pushing circle. I'm their private inflatable bop bag—whatever force I use to free myself from them is used back against me.

"Having fun, Blindy?" Bruno whispers, close enough I feel his lips moving on my ear.

Bruno pushes me down onto the floor. The ceramic's hard and cold and it smells like piss. I press my hands on the tiles, breathing fast, attempting to control the dizziness

messing with my stomach.

“HEY, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?”

“We just came in here and saw him on the floor, coach. Maybe he tripped on that thing...?”

“Shut up, Bruno. Do y’all think I’m stupid? Principal’s office. NOW!”

Teacher Luciano charges into the room, and I figure the other boys have given him some space on their way out, because he is right next to me on the floor. One of his arms across my back, his hand resting reassuringly on my shoulder.

“How do you feel?” he asks with genuine interest.

“I’m fine,” I grunt between teeth.

“Danny?”

Mariana.

I grab my teacher’s clothes tight to pull him nearer. I know what he sees: dead chocolate eyes wide-open with matching nostrils and shaking lips.

“Don’t let her see me like this.”

“Uh... Mariana? Can you call Danilo’s brother, please?”

I tighten my grasp his T-shirt.

“Not my brother. Please.” I beg quietly, with no success. I hear Mariana’s ‘Coming’, as she takes distance and let my head rest on the floor.

“What happened here, Danny?” When I don’t answer, teacher Luciano starts shooting questions at me: “Did you argue? Did they trap you? Did you break anything? Where does it hurt?”

In my head, I answer them all—no, yes, no, my pride—but in reality, I just nod.

Luca enters the room gasping for air. He’s out of his mind, checking for injuries in every inch of my body. Done that, he flips out, and teacher Luciano needs to stop him before he does something stupid again.

4

There has always been some sort of prejudice against him but I trusted my kids to your school I know Sérgio but most kids are nice to Danilo however we cannot control everyone’s thought yes and I know it must be hard I assure you disciplinary measures will be taken maybe he shouldn’t come to class for the rest of the week as his teacher I don’t think it’s a good idea that he stays home now I know he needs time to recover but routine is very important.

People talk in the principal’s office. Dad, teacher Luciano, principal Ana. They haven’t stopped talking since we came in. The more people come in, the more they talk.

I close my eyes and let my head fall back. Their voices sound like a big mess to

me, each overpowering the other until they sound like one.

Luca's here too. His presence is of an overbearing father, his hands on my shoulder as he quietly watches the topic on the table. Should he stay or should he go? Of course, the 'he' they're talking about changes from time to time—sometimes it's me, sometimes it's Bruno, sometimes it's Luca. Sometimes it's the three of us.

"Dude, relax," Luca whispers.

His hands are on mine now, forcing the fingers I never realised were grasping the arm of the chair so tightly to open.

"Dad?" I mumble. It's with a shocking surprise I hear the void of silence sucking the sound out the place. "I wanna go home."

We bring the void home in the car with us.

Luca doesn't know how to deal with it the same way Dad and I do, so he shakes his legs against the balance of the car, his fingers beating a song of his own creation on top of the car's seat until we get home.

As if it were covered in needles, when we step through the door frame, our quiet bubble is popped.

"We have to move." He says, dropping both our backpacks on the floor somewhere. "We have to change schools."

"Luca, not now."

"Dad, c'mon! We saw what those fuckers did to Danny! They'll do it again!"

"Luca, I said *not now*."

"So when, Dad? When Danny's face is so beat up he'll probably lose another sense?"

The tapping noises of the cane stop with a clash. For the extension of countless heartbeats, no one breathes. Then, I'm struck with the familiar weight of everyone's eyes on me. If concern weighs like a blanket, pity weighs like a hundred feathers—too little to force tears of sweat out of you, but enough to make you want to scream your eyes out.

"*Fuck*." Luca mumbles, quick feet escalating the stairs towards Dad's bedroom and the slam of doors.

I palm the wall for support as I go down to get the cane. Before I rise, I hear heavy footsteps walk around the living room. Dad lands one of his hands at the base of my back. He places a strap of my backpack on my free hand.

"Do you have homework, kiddo?"

Dad eats a few consonants when he speaks. He's tired, I know. He'd just got out of his 12-hour shift at the brigade, he couldn't have gotten more than a couple hours of sleep when school called. His arm hangs over my shoulders in an awkward hug. He smells like fresh sweat and deodorant.

I nod.

"I'll talk to your brother and then order some pizza in the meantime, then. What

you think about that, uh?"

I nod again.

In the bedroom, I kick my shoes off and sit on the bed. Sigh. I can't think. My body's too tense for that.

Upstairs, Dad and Luca argue. They're in control of the house's soundtrack with their yelling. I can listen to their every word from my bed as if I were standing in Dad's room.

"If he could see, you'd treat him differently and you know it!"

"But he can't! He can't see, he can't do this on his own! He needs help. My help."

I open my computer and plug in the earbuds. In the browser, I click on a favorite tab, lower my jeans and work to release the tension with another 'described video'.

Even when I'm done, I still can't think.

5

"Danny? Danny, you're up?"

The room's cold, which usually tells me the lights are off, but it's hard to tell now in the middle of autumn. Luca whispers my name once again and sighs. He's not convinced I'm asleep, but without the warmth of the lamps I can't tell whether the darkness will cloak my opened eyes.

"Are you OK?" He asks, his breath smelling of the fresh-mint toothpaste we share right on top of my nose.

I remain still, chest up and down due to the breathing.

"I didn't mean to... I didn't want to hurt you like I did. It slipped. I only said those things because I'm worried something might happen to you. Can you show me you're listening?"

I'm good at pretending I'm a static mountain of human and blankets, because Luca leaves my side and the room is filled with the creaking of his bed as he tries to fall asleep.

When the creaking dies and my brother's snores claim the room for themselves, I shut myself with the earbuds and computer. I type as quietly as possible while listening to texts three, four times, until I memorise them.

I don't need anyone's help for that.

6

Going to school is shockingly better than coming home on the next couple days. They decided it was best to give Bruno some days off to reflect upon what he did. Luca is

on probation. And I, well, I'm over guarded. There's always someone watching now. Even Mari is on high alert whenever she's with me. At least they're not trying to hide it like Luca and Dad do at home, knocking on doors, lingering apparently carefree gazes, 'how-are-you-doing' me...

It's exhausting, really.

Therefore, when I get home today and Luca seems to forget his routine of concerned comments covered with lightness, heading straight to the couch before turning the TV on, I hurry to the bedroom to check my computer.

"I gotta go to Mari's. We have an assignment." I say, back at the living room. I have my backpack on, a copy of the book she got me inside just in case Luca wants to check.

He lowers the TV volume.

"Fine. I'll take you there."

"Actually, you don't have to. She's coming. She's probably in our street already."

Since he doesn't say anything, I figure he's taking in that I've refused his help for the first time since forever. His silence has my heart pounding in my chest and sweat breaking on my forehead. I run the back of my hand on it before he can notice.

"OK."

The voices on TV speak louder now. He turned it up.

I walk past the door and lean on it for a while. I count to ten, twenty, a whole minute to see if my brother will come for me, maybe to check whether Mari's in fact here or not.

When he doesn't, I unfold the cane off my jeans' pocket and walk down the street. My ears are like those of a cat, high on the air to capture any announcement of my brother's realisation that he's let his blind baby brother get out of the house unaccompanied. Only instead of turning right to Mari's as I was supposed to, I turn left. As I walk—close to the walls as possible—, I check the braille watch on my wrist, feeling the embossed dots marking three sixteen. Supposing it's on schedule, I have a few minutes before the bus comes.

Two hundred meters later, I'm standing at the bus stop. Two minutes later, I'm on the bus. Dad's transport card swipes fast on the machine. When I sit, the engine roars. And before Luca can run down the street, turn left and force the bus to stop with his screams; before Dad can have one of those sixth-sense experiences and call to check upon me; before Mari or anyone can do a thing to turn back time and take me home, we're moving.

I'm on my own.

7

The trip to the subway station is short, but it feels like the longest of my entire life.

When the money collector announces the final stop, I'm dripping sweat, my head

aches and my heart's bumping so hard against its cage I fear it might blow up.

Then, the bus stops. It takes me two whole minutes to realise that I don't know where I am or what to do now. Somehow, it didn't occur to me that I'd have to leave the bus to get onto the train.

I'm afraid that the bus will start moving again if I don't leave, so I stand up. My head's spinning; I don't know this place, I don't know whether I should go ahead or back, so I use the cane to tap around. I hit a wall and several metal canes until someone speaks up.

"Hey, blind boy. You need any help?"

It's the collector.

I'm so thankful I might cry.

"Yeah," I manage to say, clearing my throat so I won't embarrass myself with ugly, desperate tears.

"C'mon," he says, placing my hand on his folded right arm. "Where you going alone, boy?"

"The subway. I... have a doctor's appointment."

"Right."

He sounds suspicious with the way he elongates the 'i', but I don't mind. Not that I've known him for much longer than ten minutes, but he doesn't seem like the kind that cares. While he guides me towards the escalators, I imagine the conversation he'll have with his friends later on. *I met this weird kid today who looked like he was running away. You know the best thing about it? He's freaking blind! That one's not going too far, I tell you.*

Mr. Money Collector leads me to a subway worker. Once I'm accompanied, he wishes me well and says his goodbyes.

I'm not running away, though, Mr. Collector.

Running away implies one is not coming back.

I am coming back.

Hopefully, not blind.

"I have a blind person heading west, he's hopping off at Sé. His car is D219. It's a boy, 1.80 meters tall. He's... What's your name, hun?"

"Danilo."

"It's Danilo."

The woman gives a bunch of other information about me and the car I'm getting into over a radio. She's nice, but too invasive. She asks me where I'm going and if there's anyone waiting for me around there. I tell her some half-truths and she takes them as whole.

We wait until the train comes near the edge of the platform.

Air strong like a storm hits us, followed by the scraping sound of metal as the train approaches. The doors open with two warning buzzes and the woman guides me to my seat.

“Safe trip, Danny.” She says, tapping me twice on the shoulder.

“Thank you.”

“An officer will help you when you get to your destination, alright?”

“Got it.”

She’s gone. The train’s moving fast, which I’m thankful for.

Every second passed is one second closer to finally being able to see, picking my own fights, playing cello...

To being free.

8

The subway’s seat is hard and cold. I cannot help but to wiggle my fingers over its surface. Under it, there are embossed soft cold masses I assume are gum. I bring my hands back to my lap.

In here, it feels like being in a street market: people talk to one another, some try to sell their products, and above all, the constant sound of traffic—here, the high scratching of iron on where the train runs.

On the verge of having a panic attack, I do as doctor Jacqueline taught me. I breath in and count to four. Hold it in for another four seconds. And let go for six.

one...

two...

three...

four...

five...

six...

The train stops, and so does everything else. This happens a few more times before I’m not freaking out again. I’m back at it. A couple more stops and that’s it. I’m going to the Eye Hospital. I’m getting checked. The doctor will stare at a miraculous diagnosis. He’ll schedule the operation for a few days from today and then... then I will see.

My whole body relaxes at my last ‘six’. I lay my back on the backrest and let my head fall onto the train’s wall.

I don’t know why I’m losing it. I got it under control.

With my ears uplifted, I try to make out people’s conversations. Grandma used to tell me not to eavesdrop into other people’s lives; yet, that’s one of the few pleasures a

blind kid has in life, so...

Once the automatic message announces my stop (and I've heard all about some guy's ex-boyfriend, the whole plot of season 2 of Grey's Anatomy and how millennials are destroying our country's politics), I get up and feel my way out of the train.

People usually pass by me like I'm a rock in the middle of a stream—a few bump into me whereas the majority prefers to just go round. I stand by the door for a while, waiting for a subway worker to come pick me up. Maybe the train came too soon.

But then another train comes up. More people come out and this time I'm not a rock in the stream, but a tiny pebble on a sidewalk people don't see and trip over several times.

I can't stay here. If I stay, someone will push me towards the pit and I'll die.

If I'm to see something, I don't want it to be the light at the end of the tunnel.

The station is too loud for me to hear the cane tapping across the floor, trying to find the streaks the lady showed me at Penha. My feet work in slow, short steps. I should be counting to four, but I forgot how to breathe, so I'm counting to one and breathing in and one again and breathing out. There's so much *noise*—the trains, the people, the automatic messages, my heart pumping blood against my ears...

A gust of wind glues my clothes against my body and throws hair over my eyes. I must be going somewhere out if I feel the air, then. I brush the hair out of my face and walk front. The cane is soundless in the cacophony surrounding, but I don't care—I'm trusting my gut.

For a brief moment, the cane disappears and I fall.

That's when someone's arms cross around my chest, pulling me back violently. We crash onto the floor. The man softens my fall, but no one softens his. A painful moan blasts right into my right ear. I freeze.

"Dude, you're heavy!" he gripes in a low voice. His arms let go of me. "Are you OK? You almost fell into the rails."

"My guts were wrong" I whisper. "I thought I was going out."

"Yeah..." The body below mine shakes, gently putting me to the ground, where embossed circles mark my hands. "I'm sorry for the wait."

I raise to my feet, careful not to go towards the pit again. Another train stops, more people get out of it, but we don't bump.

The subway worker touches my shoulder before a cold, metal cylinder pressures my palm. "Is this yours?" I grab the cane and test it. All right here.

"C'mon," he says. "Let's get you out."

“So, who’s picking you up again?”

“My brother. He should be here by now. Let’s give him five more minutes.”

Rafael must have thought someone was going to pick me up ten minutes ago. He actually left, and then came back after a while. We chatted. He told me his name, his age, where he lives and what he studies. He’s asked the same, and I didn’t lie at the time. Only now, fifteen minutes later, he’s starting to get suspicious.

“Right. And you didn’t call because...?”

“Because I forgot my phone at my Grandma’s.”

“Who didn’t bring you here herself because she had something else to do?”

“Right.”

I shift the weight of one foot to the other. I’ve been standing for some time, which hurts. Plus, I have an appointment in less than 20 minutes, according to my watch.

Before, I thought I could get to the hospital alone. Since the bus, I knew I needed help. And Rafael showed himself to be an option. Only the more suspicious he gets, the greater the chances he’ll refuse.

“Why are you here again?”

I sigh.

“I have an appointment in fifteen minutes at the Eye Hospital, which isn’t far. Luca was supposed to be here. I can’t miss it.”

I hope Rafael mistakes the cry in my voice for another kind of desperation.

“Danilo-”

“Danny.”

“Danny. Look, I think your brother isn’t coming. I think you’re on your own and I think you’re lying. So, we can do this two ways: you can tell me the truth or I can hold you in until someone comes looking for you.”

“I’m 17. You can’t hold me.”

“I’ll argue it’s for your own benefit. You did almost fall onto the tracks. What kind of person would I be if I left you walking around the center of the city by yourself?”

When I don’t answer, Rafael pushes me harder.

“I can use the footage of you falling as evidence.”

“This is bullshit.”

“You’re right. It is. I can’t take you. I’m an intern, not a guard. I can’t force you to do anything. But judging from your reactions, I know I’m right. You *are* alone. And if you want to get to that appointment without getting yourself killed, you’re gonna have to trust me and tell me the truth.”

I brush a finger on the watch—ten minutes now.

“I tell you the truth and you help me? Just like that?”

“I like being right.”

“That doesn’t make much sense. What do you get out of it?”

“The satisfaction of being right.”

“Bullshit.”

“Someone needs to learn some cursing.” Rafael’s firm fingers press my forearm. I turn my face to him. “Look, Danny, you have your reasons to lie, I have mine.”

“So you *are* getting something out of it.”

“No one lives off satisfaction.”

10

The path to the hospital is filled with irregular rocks and it reeks of hot dirty water. I keep my hand on Rafael’s inner arm as he walks us through the directions I gave him. He’s wearing something short sleeved, so I can feel his skin, soft and warm.

“That was your whole story?” He asks. Rafael stops abruptly, but I’m used to it—cousins and aunts are never as thoughtful as your immediate family.

“Yeah. All of it.”

“And you can schedule a doctor’s appointment on the Internet?”

“That’s what surprised you?”

“You have good medical insurance, that’s all...”

Cars start buzzing in a group, so we move again. When crossing the streets with Luca, we usually do it slowly, as if he were afraid I’d trip and get hit by a car. Rafael doesn’t slow down. His feet keep a fast pace I appreciate—five minutes to the appointment—, only it gets hard to walk this fast on the crooked sidewalk.

“You forgot something else, Danny.” His voice comes out in breaths; he must be getting tired already. “Being underage, you’ll need someone as your guardian.”

“Actually, I’ve given some thought to it... How would you like us to be family, Raf?”

“Don’t call me Raf.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Just don’t call me Raf.”

I win.

To the receptionist at the Eye Hospital, I introduce Rafael as my older step brother. The woman doesn’t even care enough to check his documents, though she gets a bit too personal on questions like ‘Do you work nearby?’ and ‘Are you single?’. To Raf. Not me, the patient.

“I thought you sounded sure of yourself,” I say while we wait for the doctor to call my name at the waiting area. “You have this confidence-mixed-with-arrogance tone.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Also, when you walk, you care for no one but yourself. Like all the light of the world’s gone and you’re this huge firefly.”

Rafael laughs out loud.

“Are you saying that ‘cause you’re into me?” He says between laughs. “C’mon, Danny. We’re brothers. That’s illegal.”

I punch him on the chest.

“Not me, you ass. The receptionist.”

“Danilo?” A woman’s voice echoes my name through a corridor. I stand quickly and less than a second later, Rafael’s places my hand on his arm.

Rafael’s lips touch my left ear, tickling me as he whispers: “She’s not my type.”

I concentrate on the tapping of the cane. The floor is made of an even material, without intersections between the tiles of ceramic like we have at home. They have the same long streak I found in the subway—two long embossed lines where the tip of the cane goes in a straight line towards the doctor’s office.

“Danilo?” The woman asks again, this time sounding closer. “Hi. I’m Doctor Cristina. Please, have a seat. This is...?”

“Rafael.” He says, a deaf bang coming from the closing doors. “Step brother.”

“I see.”

“I don’t.”

Both Rafael and Doctor Cristina laugh.

“It’s so nice to have someone with a sense of humor. Danilo—tell me, what brought you here today? Your file says you’ve been blind since you were little... Experiencing any discomforts? Did something happen?”

“No, no. I mean, yeah, something happened.” I suck in the air and let go. My fingers have come to life on their own, because they’re fidgeting with the zipper of my jeans. I become aware of the hissing of the air conditioning, almost unnoticeable. “I... I have... I was hoping you could run some tests. Check if my optic nerve is coming to life or something.”

Wood. Creaking. She must’ve supported her hands on the desk between us, letting her body weigh on it.

“And why,” Doctor Cristina asks slowly, isolating every word as if I were a child, “Should I run some tests, Danilo?”

“Because I’ve seen the light. I mean, not *the* light. A light. I saw a light. And blind people can’t see light, can they?”

Silence.

“Danny, when did you see this light?” Rafael asks.

“A few days ago. At school.”

“You didn’t tell me that.”

“Danilo,” Doctor Cristina cuts us off, “how would you describe this experience? Was it more like a feeling or...?”

“I *saw* it. It was blurry, and hard to make the lines of it, but there was a spark of light in my everlasting darkness.” More silence. Rage takes me over. “How can someone with no light perception see light? That doesn’t make any sense, right? So, what if I’m starting to see again? I read online that it is possible for an NLP to see again. So... if there is a chance I might be one of them, I wanna know.”

“If you searched it, then you know it is extremely rare to regain your sight. Even people who undergo medical treatment don’t regain their sight that easily.”

“I’m just asking you to run some tests. I need to know if I can see again.”

Doctor Cristina is silent. I curl my fingers around the cane and keep the lower lip between my teeth. Doctor Jacqueline’s breathing technique seems to lose its power—I don’t relax, if anything, I hold the cane even more strongly until she finally says:

“Follow me.”

11

I think I’m gonna puke.

Rafael’s been oddly quiet. I mean, I’ve met him just a couple of hours ago and he took every opportunity of talking he had. Now, alone in Doctor Cristina’s office, he doesn’t seem like talking.

I’m thinking about going to the bathroom and getting over with this weird feeling in my stomach when Raf mumbles something under his breath.

“What?”

“Do you... Are you OK? You’re pale.”

“Uh-hum. I’m just nervous. Feel like I’m gonna puke. Maybe I’m not OK. I just... I need to know the results.”

“Right. Danny, did you speak the truth? About seeing?”

“Why’s that?”

“Because if you are... You told me you’ve been blind for as long as you remember. But if you’re telling the truth, then...” Sigh. “I have a glass eye. You don’t know it ‘cause you can’t see it, but if you touch it, you’ll know. It’s filling a void. That’s the only thing it does. Aesthetics.” Silence. “If you can see again without a treatment, then could I see with both eyes again sometime in the future?”

“Raf, I...”

“I’m here. Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Where did you come from? I didn’t hear the door.”

“There’s a corridor behind the office. For medical traffic. It’s better for moving patients than using the corridors. Today’s a low day but... you should see this place full. Anyway, Danilo, I have your results.”

I grope the edge of the chair. There’s an uncomfortable tightening in my chest, same as if someone grabbed my heart on their hands and squeezed it. The leather squelches under Rafael’s chair while he straightens his back, shoulder to shoulder with me.

Doctor Cristina drags a chair near us, its metal feet scratching the floor. She sits on it, her sweet, citric perfume fills my nostrils. It reminds me of lemonade and summer days.

“Danilo, the results didn’t show any sign of improvement in your sight. I checked for everything we could without undergoing surgery—”

“Then maybe we should!”

“You’re not listening, Danny. Even if I ripped your eyeballs out and replaced your optic nerve, you couldn’t see.”

I don’t speak.

She sees it as a sign to continue.

“What you are experiencing right now is common with NLPs. You’re going to see light, and shapes and colors, but that doesn’t mean your sight is coming back.”

“Maybe... if we could just run other tests... I’m sure we could find some...”

A lighter hand falls kindly on my shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Danny.”

12

I didn’t see any light.

I lied to Doctor Cristina. To Rafael. To Luca.

I lied to everyone.

Vladimir Lenin said that a lie told often enough becomes truth. It was in a book Mariana read to me once. She argued no one can ever tell the truth all the time, but that we should be careful not to lie to ourselves before we couldn’t see beyond what was real and what was fiction.

I knew I was blind. I’ve been blind my entire life. That wasn’t fiction.

Me seeing something? That was.

I would never see anything. Ever.

Apparently, not all lies can be said often enough to become truth.

“There must be a mistake.” I mumble. My hands are shaking. My heart’s racing. I’m breathing so fast my head’s feeling light. Yet, the fat drop of hot, salty water rolling down my eyes are the anchors that trap me to Doctor Cristina’s office. “I... I came all the way here.

I can't go back with... I can't go back like *this*!"

"Danny..." Rafael tries to pull me close to him with his arms. I slap him away, pushing myself up. "Danny, you have to chill."

"Danny, I know you're upset with the test results. You got some bad news. We don't ever expect that."

I snort.

"Upset? That doesn't even begin to cover it!" I move around Doctor Cristina's office, tripping on table feet and bumping into other objects I don't know. I don't mind. It doesn't matter. "Bad news? Try life-fucking-wrecking news!"

Rafael steps up.

"Danny, why don't you sit down? Tripping around and yelling will do nothing."

"Listen to your brother, Danny."

"Brother?" A derisive laugh leaks out. "Right."

"Excuse me, Doctor Cristina? There are some men claiming to be this boy's family. They came looking for him. With the police."

"Why's his family here with the police if he's with...You're not his brother, are you, Rafael?"

"No, I—I'm a friend."

Doctor Cristina sighs. A chair scrapes the floor, metal and ceramic screaming together. Cristina backs away, her citric perfume following her as her steps fade away into the corridor.

"I thought there was a chance." I sound like a baby bird's first tweet, weak and raspy. I feel like a baby bird who tried to fly, soared long enough to taste freedom and is now spiraling down.

I'm aware of Rafael's eyes upon me, examining me attentively. He's quiet. Even his breath is soundless. My fingers wrap tightly around the cane and I fight the trembling on my legs.

"If you lied, then there is a chance you knew this wouldn't work, Danny." Rafael says, firm but kind. His voice echoes through the office, through my mind, forcing more tears to roll down my eyes. When he speaks again, it is so softly I barely get it. "Why did you do it?"

I tilt my head.

"How can you even ask?" I handle the cane and make my feet follow it to where his voice is. I feel the empty chair next to him and sink into it. All the air slips out through my mouth. "It doesn't matter. It led nowhere."

"I'm not asking where it led, I'm asking why you did it."

"Yeah, Danny. Why the fuck did you do this shit?"

13

Doctor Cristina didn't close the door. This is the first thing I think about when Luca blasts into the doctor's office. He sounds furious. From where he is, I hear the air violently passing through his nostrils and the gum he chews when he's anxious.

"You must be Luca." Rafael tries to keep things civilised by introducing himself. He leaves his seat, probably walking towards my brother. "I'm Rafael."

I hear the sharp noise of the slap right after.

"I don't fucking care." Someone paces towards me. The unmistakable smell of dark chocolate and sweat that characterises him. Luca's hands are on my shoulders now, pressing the bones through the flesh. "Why did you do it, Danny?"

"You wouldn't understand, Luca..."

"Me? Fuck you, Danny! You could've gotten yourself killed! Someone could have robbed you or stabbed you... do you have any idea of the hell you put us through? Do you understand *that*?"

"Dude, chill out."

"YOU SHUT UP! I'm talking to my brother."

"He's your brother, alright. But he's been through a lot already. He doesn't need your shit right now."

"DUDE, SERIOUSLY?" Luca's hands vanish at the same time heavy steps come up. "Get the fuck off!"

Breaths. Strong. Something or someone hits one of the walls. Luca and Rafael must be shoving each other around. I stand up, not sure of what I can do to break them apart.

"Wow! You two, stop it. Now!"

Dad and uncle Carlos shout from the corridor, and all I hear are masses colliding among bumps against office furniture.

"Carlos, hold Luca. You, kid. Go away."

"I'm not leaving Danny."

"He's MY kid. Not yours."

"Dad. Raf's a friend."

The quiet installs itself between us.

"Danny... Why?" Dad is knelt in front of me. He takes my hands on his. The smell of coffee and cigarettes in his breath when he speaks is a punch in the stomach—Dad hasn't smoked in months.

"Why's everyone asking me that?"

"Because I don't get it! Why would you run away to the hospital when you know your condition is permanent? We told you that."

"Yeah, Dad. *You* did. You and Luca tell me everything. You do *everything*. I never

went to a doctor and heard that myself.”

“Then why didn’t you say something?”

“BECAUSE I WAS TIRED. OK? I was tired of being everyone’s problem. Dad can’t sleep ‘cause I’m getting in trouble at school. Luca gets into flights because of me. And I don’t wanna be a problem anymore.”

“And you thought that seeing would change that?” Uncle Carlos asks.

“If I could see, you’d treat me differently. Everyone would.”

“Stop that.” Rafael says. “Victimising yourself, stop that.” He kneels next to Dad. “You told me you felt like a prisoner. But you’re far from that...” Raf’s hand lands on my thigh, soft and comforting. “You left your house, got into a bus, rode the subway and came to the hospital by yourself. What prisoner does that?”

“I had help. That’s the problem. I’m bound to be helped for whatever I want to do. I am a problem. If it weren’t for you, I would’ve died on the rails! I’m not normal. I don’t want to not be normal.”

“You still don’t get it, do you? It’s not about seeing. People with two well-functioning eyes are trapped in their lives. And so what you had help? That got you where you wanted to be! Are you so arrogant that you’d rather have died on those rails than accepting my help?”

“What? No!”

“Then your problem is not your sight. Your problem is lack of communication.” Doctor Cristina cuts in, serious. “I think you and your family should talk, Danilo. You’re a classic case of overprotective parenting, even though it doesn’t come directly from your parents.”

No one talks. A fly could be heard in the reception.

Dad clutches my hands.

“We should go.”

14

Dad gets Rafael’s number for me. He’s a friend I don’t want to miss. Before leaving, Doctor Cristina asks me to come back for more thorough exams, so I understand my condition better, and gives Dad a card with a psychologist’s number.

“For the whole family,” she says in a joke tone, though we know it’s not.

Dad and Luca came in uncle Carlos’ police car, and I’m trying not to feel like a prisoner.

“Doctor Cristina was right.” Dad says after a while. We’re stuck in traffic. Cars honk, as if it would make all others move. Uncle Carlos turns down the music. The whole car shakes, the leather seat creaking under someone’s weight. “Kiddo, I’m sorry. I’m

sorry I let you feel like you couldn't talk to me about what was going on in your head and out of it. Just... Talk to me. We can work things together, OK?"

Dad's hand—the familiar long, rough fingers and palm—squeezes my thigh. I make out a smile in response.

"Aye, kiddo. I'm sorry if I ever made you feel less than you are." Uncle Carlos says. Which is such a surprising thing for the quiet I've known, I don't know what to say, so I thank him for his words.

Uncle Carlos' car moves, gaining speed as we escape the traffic jam. Dad turns back front and I'm alone with Luca again. The difference now is that we both know who should talk next. Dad could have said he rearranged his position in order to avoid getting a parking ticket, to be a better co-pilot, but we'd had enough of lies today.

The radio is playing an old MPB song. I recognise it from the days Luca and I spent with our grandparents. Grandma would turn on the radio in her kitchen while she cleaned the house and Grandpa would hum to it all the way from his bedroom. Above the song and memories, I hear Luca gasping for gasified courage in the air.

"I thought I was helping you." Luca murmurs. "I know sometimes I overdo it, but..." Uncle Carlos has a fit of laughter that almost immediately turns into a fit of coughing. I hear gentle taps I assume are Dad's. "Well, I often overdo it." Dad lets out a guilty laugh he too covers with fake coughs. I smile. "Oh, fuck it, I always overdo it, OK. Happy now? But you're my little brother, I have to protect you."

I reach for his hands with mine. He wraps our fingers tight together.

"Thank you for that." I say. "But I want to protect myself from now on."

A few days ago, inside Dad's car, the silence felt like a life-consuming void. Today, it feels like those hot, dense, humid summer days when we pray for the rain to come and wash some of the heaviness out. Fortunately, it comes.

Entering our shared bedroom in the evening, I feel the soft touch of the flannel blanket against my toes. I crouch and take it in my hands. The springs in Luca's bed creak.

"Hey. I'm sorry. The room's a mess. Here." Luca takes the blanket from my hands nimbly. "Let me tidy things up real quick."

Before he can move away, I grab his arm. His feet sweep the floor as I have him turn his body to stare at me.

"No, Luca. I'll do it myself."

Flight 0611 to São Paulo

Laís Cruz¹

My coffee was half-gone, with lipstick marks all over the edge of the mug, when I noticed an exotic looking girl entering the shop. The shortness of her breath and the restless eyes led me to believe my waiting was over.

“Dina?”, I called her out loud, promptly standing up and waving. She started apologizing for being late as she moved towards me.

“Don’t worry, sweetie, really! I’m so glad you came! It’s great to meet you”, I said, as I wondered how to greet her. Before I came to a conclusion, she looked back and called an older woman in a language which I assumed to be Arabic. The lady then approached us and hugged me hello; so did the girl. We all sat and I ordered two more cups of coffee for my guests.

After properly introducing myself as a senior year college student and shortly explaining about my project, I realized I was only being understood by the daughter. Her mother was kindly smiling, but her puzzled look reminded me she couldn’t speak English nor Portuguese. The young girl, however, was clearly paying close attention and had a juvenile enthusiastic expression.

“Regardless of the interview,” I finally told her, “my personal purpose is to understand your journey, not only as a refugee. Your perspective of it.”

“Yes” - Dina grinned - “I understand. Let’s see...” At this point, I gladly noticed her mother had discreetly opened a book and taken one of the cookies I ordered for them before they arrived. This actually relieved my conscience a little for the trouble of bringing Dina to a meeting with her language teacher’s friend on a cold Saturday afternoon.

“Well, I was born in Damascus,” she said, “and I lived in Damascus with my mother, my father and my small brother.” I hurriedly grabbed my notebook and started taking notes. Her strong accent gave English a beautiful sonority, which I had never heard.

“In Syria”, she went on, “there are lot of schools. There are schools for boys, there are schools for womans and there are schools that it’s mixed. When I was a child I went to school for mixed because my mother chose. But in the high school I went to school for girls -- Al Maaouneh is the name there.” I wished to know the spelling of that, but I didn’t want her to be interrupted.

“That was the first time I decide where I wanted to be”, she continued. “I chose Al Maaouneh with my best friends to study together. We had all the same classes

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together. In the class before the war, we could choose who was our pair to sit, so I sit with Alma every day. But after the war, we had to sit anywhere there are space." Noticing my intrigued expression, she explained. "The war in Syria start 2012, but the war in Damascus just started in 2014. A lot of cities in Syria were not safe, so people leave their homes and they came to Damascus because it was still a safe place to live. This is the reason there are lot of students in my school, because lots of people come to Damascus to live."

I started imagining what it must be like to give classes to a large group of students knowing there's a civil war ongoing. The first image that came to me was not far from here -- I remembered a video I had seen a few days earlier of a crossfire at a public school in Rio de Janeiro.

"After some time," she continued, "Damascus was not more safe. When there were bombs or things like this, I couldn't go out of the house." I was worried about the effect those memories could have on Dina, but she seemed as confident as before.

"We had the same classes of here in Brazil: Science, Math, Geography, English... but not *Português*, of course. And we had classes Arabic, French and Armenian. I liked to learn Armenian because my mother, she is from Armenia and I speak with her in Armenian." The lady took her eyes off the book for a moment, as she seemed to have recognized a familiar word. She beamed at her daughter and got back to her reading.

"So the interesting thing in Syria," she affirmed, "we like to learn a lot of languages. Here in Brazil, it was difficult to find people who speak English that are teenager, like my age. But there are a wonderful thing... because Brazilians, when they know I don't speak good *Português*, they come and they offer help. They say for me *Como posso ajudar, Dina?* And when I say something not right, they correct me, *Ah não, Dina, você tem que falar assim.* Brazilian are very open heart. But I pray to learn Portuguese fast, in the next months." I paused my notes for a moment and glimpsed at her, with an admiring look. That teenage girl spoke four languages and was already learning a fifth.

"My city", she said, "isn't so big like *São Paulo*, but is very very big in Syria. I loved the old buildings there, like our church, and the club with the pool for the swim, and the place my father worked... he can make beautiful jewels. My mother has this." Dina pointed at her mom's left hand, showing a delicate wedding ring with small flowers carved on it. "This is hibiscus," she explained, "the flower typical of Syria. My mother loves hibiscus, we had a lot in our house, they were very big. During summer, the smell was so good. I could smell at my bedroom the flowers."

Noticing our looks towards her finger, the lady stretched out her arm so I would be able to see the ring up close. She clearly had an urge to speak and seemed to be trying to remember a few words. "Meo... marido", she proudly said, "sim." I admired his refined work for a few seconds and asked them to send him my compliments. I wasn't sure if she had understood my words, but she certainly knew what I meant. "Obrigada", she gently replied.

"We had more jewels, but we sold. Just have this ring now. We had to buy the tickets to go to Lebanon, and to Brazil. Very expensive. In December 2015, we went to Lebanon

to take the visa, because you can't take the visa in Syria. Then we came back Syria and sold all the things we can. We stayed two more months because it's strange to suddenly take all the things and go out. It's suspect. After, we just said goodbye to family and we leave Syria."

She gave a deep breath and looked away. I felt like saying something, but I didn't know what. All of a sudden, Riobaldo came to my mind. Guimarães Rosa's most iconic character had really taught me that sometimes people only need to be heard, especially when their voices had been silent for too long. The next second she smiled and looked at the waiter who had brought her coffee.

"Obrigada" mother and daughter said together. I had completely forgotten about my own drink, which was probably cold by now, but it was not a problem at all. While they were taking some sips of coffee and talking to one another in Arabic, or Armenian, -- unfortunately my limited knowledge of Oriental languages didn't allow me to distinguish them -- I had enough time to complete my notes.

"Won't you eat cookies?" Dina asked me. "My mother wants to know how she say *Serve yourself in Português*". I chuckled and answered her mother's question.

"Sirva-se", the woman repeated after me. We all grabbed a few cookies and they spoke a little longer. I was really focused on the conversation but I had no clue of the topic, it was similar to instrumental music to me. The uvular fricatives called my attention and reminded me of Phonetic classes.

"So Syrian people can't go the country they want," Dina returned to her story in English, "just because we are Syrian. This is the reason. But Brazil is sister with Syria. In the consulate of Lebanon, they said that we could come to Brazil, that Brazil is safe and not very expensive. We were very happy because we had no more choice and the people are very lovely. I still remember, we took flight 0611 to São Paulo."

She stopped for a moment, with an unexpected reflexive posture for a 17-year-old. "We see on the TV people with no more choice that travel illegal to other countries. We feel very lucky. It's just a little difficult because my father and mother and brother don't speak English, so I translate everything. Sometimes I don't know some words, but I try to explain. Just the problem was with the RNE, the identity for us. The man that talked to us didn't speak a lot English, so he didn't do right in the documents. I was born in October 1998, but he write 1999. And the name of my mother, he didn't write correct too. In reality, we don't write our names with the letters of *Português* or English. Our letters are very very different in Arabic, so we didn't notice when he write. But now she have different name in passport and RNE, so I have to take my mother to go to consulate to correct." It then occurred to me the amount of responsibility this 17-year-old girl was carrying, the amount of changes she went through in the last years and with so little choice.

"Here in Brazil," she kept going, "I come to school Armenian, the last year of high school. There are not a lot of students in the class, just ten students, so I know all them.

It's private school, but we don't pay because the church Armenian help us, because we come from the war. The consulate Armenian help the church pay for me and my brother. I am very happy when the teachers talk to me in English because the class in *Português* is too fast. And the students are very good to me, but we don't have a lot of conversation because they don't like to speak a lot Armenian or English, just one friend. Her name is Esther and she has family in Syria too, but is not refugee. I feel she understands me."

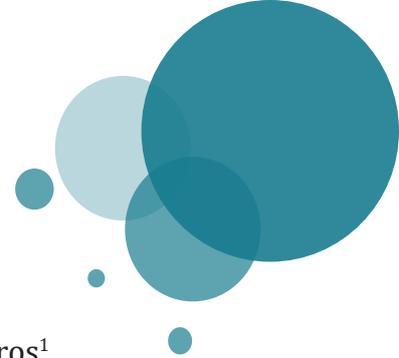
This last comment made me very curious, but I knew it wouldn't be possible for me to be a part of this understanding. Some feelings simply cannot be put into words. They might be described, contextualized, seen, but the actual understanding depends on a state of the soul.

"I am also very friends with my Philosophy teacher," she said, with a cheerful expression, "from Syria. She helps me and she helps more students, I love her so much. I don't understand the classes here, so she tells me how to study, she gives me exercise to practice by computer and she always makes jokes." The young girl dug through her pockets to find her phone. She wanted me to see the face of a heroic figure in her life and I humbly accepted the offer. Her profile image was a group photo with students in work clothes, probably an affective memory of simpler times.

"She know I want to learn to have a lot of information, to be the best I can be. With a lot of information, I will can be a doctor and save people's life. This is very difficult because I always have to prove myself. I am Syrian, lots of people think I am not smart because I don't learn in school, I don't speak a lot in school. When I learn *Português*, I can prove myself. Go to college, be a doctor. This is not a dream for me, it's a plan. I have to try, try a lot to have what I want." Dina's maturity never ceased to impress me.

"And I pray", she added, "that one day I can come back to Syria after the war." She got the last cookie when I finally remembered to check my watch. The interview had already been twice as long as I had promised them when we first got in touch by e-mail.

"Thank you so much for your time, Dina," I emphasized, "it has certainly been a great pleasure to meet the two of you. Please thank your mother for her patience!" As we stood up, her mother understood it was time to go, giving me another sweet smile. Dina hugged me goodbye and thanked me for listening -- it's not every day she has the chance to have a voice.



It Does Not Matter

Ludmila Almeida Barros¹

The most memorable thing that happened to me was giving birth to my only child. I remember all the process before actually getting pregnant. All the trying and failing, the moment when I had to pee on the stick to find out if I was in fact pregnant. Not to mention all the nine months of pregnancy, I do remember every moment vividly, every craving I had. When I reached the seventh month, we decided the name: Jessica. We painted the room pink together, bought all nice girly stuff. All of this to found out, during the birth, that it was a boy. The test went wrong. And there I found my husband and I shocked and desperate for a new name. Jason it was.

Growing up, he was an extremely quiet and lovely boy. He came to be my best friend at a point of my life. I spent so much time with him, and he was, more than anything else, a companion, an adorable companion. The first time I dropped him at preschool he was afraid, and I, heartbroken. However, I just told him “It will be OK, everything will be OK, I will be here when it is over, I promise,” then he just hugged me and walked to the building. I was incredibly proud of him. By the age of seven, I used to drive him everywhere. From school to language classes, karate lessons and everything. He was growing an interest for a bicycle, but he was still too small, and to be honest, I could not let him go, not yet.

A bit later, a couple of years older, he started a new fashion tendency while chilling at home. He used to wear some big and long shirts, and eventually nothing on the bottom. Just like a dress. This went over for a year. And when he was reaching thirteen years old, just one month before his birthday, his father yelled at him. He felt humiliated.

My dear husband, Paul, was a minister at our church at that time. Actually, we got to know each other there when we were teenagers. His father was the previous minister, and the legacy ended up on him. However, he was satisfied to fulfill his destiny. We dated, got engaged and married all by the book. We did every single thing to please our parents and that small religious congregation. And by the time Jason was thirteen, during the event I just mentioned, Paul was at the highest point of his faith and the church work.

During the afternoon of that day, one of his friends from church dropped by our house and caught Jason wearing that huge T-shirt and said, “Oh Lord, Jason, you look like a girl in a dress!”. Paul was undoubtedly embarrassed and when his friend left, he just kept yelling at Jason that he was “a nobleman and

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his son could never look like a girl in a dress". He got mad. He didn't beat him, Paul was never this kind of person and father. And he also knew I would never allow it.

I thought about trying to calm him down, saying that that way of dressing was harmless, inoffensive. However, I was not sure anymore.

From that day to the end of his junior year in high school, everything was peaceful. He was a regular and ordinary boy. He went to his friends' parties, had some girlfriends, got in the basketball team and most importantly, he was going to church on a regular basis. Despite his 'normal' life, something happened. One day I came home from work earlier and I caught him wearing one of my missing bras.

He didn't see me, but a bit later I tried to start a casual, relaxed conversation with him.

"I know you are a teenager now, but we never talk anymore, I miss my little boy."

"Come on, mom. Cut it off! I am here, what do you wanna talk about?"

It was surprisingly easy to have those long conversations I used to have with the younger Jason. We talked a bit about everything of his life. I got an update of every part of his high school crazy life. However, after a long time there, I could not reach the point I wanted. So I decided to go straight to the point.

"Isn't there anything you wanna tell me? Something you had never told anybody, like never ever?"

"What are you talking about, mom? What else do you wanna know about me? I told you everything already!". His laugh brought me so much joy at that moment.

"Son, I knew you were special since the day you were born. I've told you a hundred times the story of how we were told you were a girl and on the birth all that mess happened and everything you already know. I have some thoughts in my mind. But I just need YOU to tell me, let me know. I really need to know how you're feeling inside. I wanna help, honestly. Do you trust me?". He did not reply, he was confused. "Jason, I saw you earlier today," he changed his facial expression, some kind of deep sadness I had never seen in his face before. "I saw you wearing my bra."

He started crying so hard that I could not hold myself. He began saying some stuff here and there after some time and I stayed there, just holding him in my arms. "I don't know what is happening," but that first response broke my heart. If I closed my eyes now I would hear him saying that over and over again, while whimpering. After he calmed down, he opened up to me. He was having a hard time trying to hide this feeling inside all these years. He told me that that strange thing inside him was there even before the "T-shirt-or-dress' incident".

Yet, he did not know what was happening. He could not recognize for sure what that was.

"You are gay. That's it, isn't it?", I tried.

"It is not that, I mean, not only that. I also have this upsetting feeling when I look myself in the mirror. I don't see myself there. I hate this body I have."

After that, we spent the whole afternoon talking about a new word he had found on the internet, and how he may have identified himself as a *transgender woman* now. The first time I heard that from his mouth it sounded like a swearword. He stayed there trying to make some sense of what that meant, and also trying to convince himself of that. I could see in his eyes that he was not sure about it either. We stopped talking when his father arrived. We both went upstairs and got into our bedrooms. I entered the shower. I really would like to say, from the bottom of my heart, that I was a brave mother, that I stuck with my son's inner conflicts since the very first moment he told me all those things, that I promised to support him no matter what. But I just entered there and had my tears blend with the pouring water.

We did not talk about that issue again in months. We just continued living our lives normally. I regret it. I feel like I wasted my precious time with him. However, during this time, I made some research myself and I got scared. Not for me, but for my husband. I knew he would have a hard time accepting or even understanding it. Being a man of the church had narrowed his mind, he was more open-minded and easy-going when we were young, but then I wasn't that sure anymore.

So that wasted time took almost half a year, his senior year. And he was getting crazy about going to college. He was sending applications to every well-known university in the country. He was aiming high, he used to do that a lot. We saved money for his tuition, so we encouraged him to try for the best. However, another thing happened just some months before his high school graduation.

I was preparing dinner when I heard him arriving with his girlfriend. This new one was such a sweet girl, the first time she visited us was just by the end of their junior year. Just after the bra incident. Her name was Melissa, she just shouted a 'Hello, Mrs. Bennett' and they ran straight to his bedroom, I was not able to see them. I finished cooking and went there to call them. I knocked on the door and entered, just to find her putting makeup on his face. I asked what was going on. They stuttered trying to find an answer when he gave up and turned his face to me. I felt the tears coming when I saw his face covered in a huge bruise, his cheek and eye was a mix of black and blue.

She told me the story. They were acting in a play for the Drama Club, and they exchanged genders, she dressed like him, and he dressed like her. And at the end of the day, when they were leaving the school, a group of boys decided to catch Jason unadvised to beat him up. The taller one just punched him in the face. Jason fell and she tried to help staying in the middle of the fight. It worked and they just left. But the damage was already done.

"Just because you dressed like a girl?," that was the only thing I could say.

I just stayed there, looking at the bruise. I asked if they had warned any adult there, he told me he was too embarrassed, that he asked Melissa not to tell anyone either. He also begged me not to talk to the principal, or to his father, or anyone. I agreed. He was able to cover that with makeup, even though I let him skip some classes. He had dinner in his room the whole week so his father could not notice. Just by the time the bruise

disappeared, he received a letter from the university he wanted to go. He got accepted. We celebrated going out to dinner. That night, he shared more news than that.

He opened up about his situation to his father. I remember that dinner very well. He started by saying that Melissa was never his girlfriend for real. That they did that so their classmates stopped messing with him. While he was telling all that I was able to feel the anger boiling up in my husband. He was quiet, yet, and he was devastated inside.

"I'm a girl, and I know that now. I was never a boy. I've never felt comfortable within this body. I hated every time I had to look myself in the mirror. So I decided not to take it anymore. By the time I move to my dorm in college I'll start being myself." That was his monologue, I listened carefully, amazed by his courage, but also afraid of it.

"And what 'being myself' means?", his father broke the silence just to ask that.

"I'm going to be a girl."

"And what does that mean?", he raised his voice, "You're going to wear a dress? Put on make-up? Are you cutting it off?"

"If I have to."

"If I have to?", he repeated, "If I have to?", he was dazed, "You know everything, eh? You know the world and everything in it, right? You're so sure of everything, I envy you and your conviction. I've gone through all my life accepting that I know nothing about this, about human life and the nature of God. But I look at you right now and...", he did not finish.

We ate all the food and left, without saying one more word. His father went to our room and locked himself in there. I went to Jason's room before following my husband.

"Do you remember that old story about when they got your sex wrong in the exams?", he nodded his head yes. "I never told you one detail. I had already chosen a name for you. I mean, a girl name". His eyes lit up.

"Which name?"

"Jessica."

The day we drove him with all his boxes to his new home was a deadly silence. All the three of us stayed in that car just speaking the necessary words, nothing more, nothing less, just the essential. I was utterly excited and proud of having my only baby going to a good College. My kid was following his dream of studying numbers, mathematics, physics and all those things I had never understood in school. If I were to say something about my kid was that he loved to study. He could spend hours reading a book or studying on the computer.

We helped him set up everything he needed. All the documents and all his belongings in his private dorm. His father made sure he had a private one. I was not sure why, and, actually, it did not matter to me. From the moment we arrived, my husband stayed away from the most part of the time, it was sad, but it got me closer to my baby.

We were chatting like girl friends, laughing and discovering things together. By the time we finished everything, his father just gave him a hug and wished him “good luck in this new adventure” and walked to the car. But I stayed there for a little bit more.

“I’ll miss you, mom. I’ll really miss you. I’m excited for this new... chapter? But I’ll miss talking to you every day,” he hugged me tightly.

“It’s obvious that I’ll miss you more, Jason!”, in the moment I said ‘Jason’, he grabbed me by my shoulders and replied.

“Not Jason, not anymore. Please. Call me Jessica for now on, ok?”

‘Anything that makes you happy, Jess,’ she hugged me again.

We kept texting each other every now and then. During the dinners alone with my husband, I started calling her by the new name: Jessica. After some time he did not bother anymore. Everything was settling down, he began accepting Jessica’s situation. I had always said that distance increases love. He even started searching about it and learning all the hormones she could take and the social issues about the matter. I was extremely proud of my husband again. He came back to being the man I fell in love with. Then Thanksgiving arrived, sooner than I could realize. I made sure Jessica was coming and I cooked a great meal for the three of us. Anyhow, I was not expecting the number of surprises that day was holding.

The atmosphere was not the lightest, but it was enough for us to talk nicely. About everything. Jessica spent hours telling how things were different in college. People would never bother her for wearing skirt or dresses. She told me later, privately in the kitchen, that she decided at the last minute to come ‘as a boy’ to not upset her father.

“You’d be surprised by how much your father has... grown,” I just said that while washing the dishes.

Then we gathered in the living room. We had just sat on the couch when he started talking.

“I gotta tell something and I’m going to seize the opportunity of having both of you here,” my husband was serious. “I’m leaving the church, I mean, the position of minister.”

“Why? You love it so much.” Jessica was not as surprised as me.

He hesitated, but eventually spoke up.

“Some people from the congregation found out about you,” at this moment I felt like I was not in the conversation anymore. They were having their moment to undo any misunderstanding. “They asked for explanations about it. About how I could let something like this happen in my own house.”

“I’m so sorry, dad. I didn’t want to cause any trouble, I mean...”

“But I told them that my daughter couldn’t be a shame for me, that my daughter’s happiness was more important than anything else. I told them that I love you and I’ll support every decision you make.” He laughed softly, “They got mad and said that if

this was my final opinion, for the good of all, I should resign from my position.”

Jessica was already crying when he finished. She went to him and sat on the floor, holding his legs. She looked up and the next two sentences made me the happiest mother alive.

“Did you just call me ‘daughter’?”

“That’s what you are, isn’t it? The exam was right all along, Jessica. You were always my little girl.”

I relive that moment every time I get sad. When that weekend was over we had a warm goodbye. I was already telling her to come back for the holidays, but she was going to travel with some friends from college. So I was making plans for the Easter. I wanted to have my daughter close, the closer the better. Her father agreed, “So Easter it is!”

Easter never came. By the end of March, we were told that our daughter was beaten up to death on a cold Thursday night. After some random fraternity party. At the funeral, I got to meet her first boyfriend. He told me what happened. They were to have an exam the next morning, so they decided not to stay so late at that party. So they left earlier than the rest of the people. They went walking to her building, he was just going to drop her in her dorm. He seemed to be a very respectful boy.

But just one block away from her building a group of men approached them. In the first moment, they were just shouting some random offenses. He told that Jessica got angry, but they did not say anything back. They both were really scared. The street was completely empty, so they started walking a bit faster. Her boyfriend was crying deeply in the moment he started describing those men’s next actions. The group got angered because they were running away from them, so one of them got mad and ran to beat Jessica. They beat him too, but the mad one did not stop at all. The rest of the group had to take him off her already dead body. They ran away. The police did not arrest any of them.

My daughter was killed by a group of men just because she was dressed like a girl.



An Encounter

Martina Zardo¹

It was close to 8:00 p.m. when the sun started to set and Alicia Reyes found herself wandering around the hallways of Katherine Morgan's house. As she finished climbing the steps towards the second floor, she noticed something had involuntarily changed in her demeanor. Although she'd experienced similar feelings, she could not name the one that was taking over her in that moment. Her mind felt like a paper boat on a wild flow – the lightest and fastest it had even been. Everything her senses could capture suddenly became fascinating: the reflection of the bright orange Miami sunset shining on the surface of the picture frames on the walls, the smell of smoke that followed her up the stairs, the soaked tips of her wavy brown locks caressing her back; the bitter taste of alcohol in her mouth, the muffled sound of the heavy bass line in an overplayed hip-hop song, the smooth feel of the beige-colored carpet sliding under her bare feet as she dragged herself slowly to the end of the hallway. Every image, every sensation and every feeling that would normally go unnoticed in that simple scene seemed *magnified*.

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A completely different universe was set as she stood there by herself. The shouts and conversations and the splashes of water in the backyard pool seemed to come from a different world dimension, as if she was actually listening to the party sounds from under water.

Eyes closed. Deep sigh. She chuckled at her own bliss, awfully aware that if anyone were to find her in that position, they would assume she was at least a little crazy. Her eyes fluttered open again.

For a moment, she debated going back out there. Out of a tiny window to her left, she could see everyone in their bathing suits or less, taking shots or drinking beer from plastic cups, dancing, making out, smoking pot, playing games, all without noticing her inquisitive gaze.

Alicia liked being an observer. She had the power of squeezing the purest form of pleasure and meaning out of the most trivial things in her life - the smell of the jasmines that grew beside her abuela's house; the face people make when they're trying to solve a complicated equation; really long bridges in classic pop songs; the color yellow. And these are just some out of the infinity of daily details that elicited a tingling sensation in her heart, that was even embarrassing to explain.

And so, being in that hallway by herself and letting her head be consumed by those ephemeral, blissful experiences, turned her wandering looks into a hopeful one. She could sense that what was about to happen, whatever it was, could possibly change her life. She was corny like that.

In her defense, though, she could actually feel it. That is, she could feel it in the numbness of her dangling fingertips on her sides and on the bottom of her feet. And in the growling of her stomach. Come to think of it, there was a fair chance that what she actually felt wasn't the desire for adventure after all. Maybe it was just a really bad craving for pizza rolls.

Still drawn by her curiosity (and sudden hunger), the 18-year-old reached for the handle of the last door of the hallway - a light pink one, unlike the other plain white doors she'd passed by until that point. Her mouth fell the instant she set foot in the room: It was big. Bright. Colorful. Vibrant. Peaceful. The adjectives came to her as she studied the elements of her surroundings. Hardwood floors with a giant, fluffy white rug spread in the middle of it. One of the walls was completely covered from top to bottom by a series of bookshelves packed with a true hoarding of all kinds of books. The other one had a few posters and edgy paintings hanging on it, and the other two were painted the lightest shade of orange. A queen-sized bed was pushed up against one of the orange walls, neatly made with a matching orange duvet that made it look like the coziest, most comfortable place in the world. Also laying on top of the bed was a guitar - a fact that made Alicia squeal with excitement.

Forgetting all about the grunting of her internal organs, the young Latina sat on the edge of the bed, balancing the curve of the light brown instrument on top of her skinny thighs, right below the hem of her shorts. Taking a deep breath, she started lazily strumming her swimming-pool-wrinkled fingertips across the strings and let her eyes fall shut. Not knowing what song she was actually playing, Alicia hummed to herself, letting the amplified creative impulse guide her mind to a potential new piece. When she found the right chord progression, a wide smile crept on her lips and she opened her eyes to look for her phone inside one of her pockets so she could type it down. Instead, she met a green-eyed stare.

Gasping and jumping with surprise, Alicia nearly dropped the instrument in her hands.

"Jesus Christ, Lucy!" she brought a hand to her chest "were you standing there the whole time?"

"Hi, Alicia". The dark-haired girl had an amused look on her face, her shoulders brushing the doorframe slightly as she giggled at the other girl's shock. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you", she held both hands up in front of her torso in self-defense "and, uh, no, I just went to the bathroom at the end of the hall because the one downstairs is a mess and I heard some noise coming from here", she explained.

Alicia's face was a bright shade of pink that matched the now faded light coming into the room between the curtains. She stared at the girl for a moment. Then started to laugh it off on the next.

"Well, I'm so sorry you had to hear that mess of a song".

"No! It sounded pretty cool, actually" Lucy noted, looking at the other girl from

head to toe as she carefully put the guitar back in its original place and standing up. Alicia was only a few inches shorter than Lucy, so their eyes were pretty much on the same level when she made a move towards the girl, having paid zero attention to the compliment about her music.

“Do they have anything to eat downstairs? I’m starving” she blunted, hopefully.

Lucy examined her for a second. Her eyes glued to Alicia’s wide brown irises; her eyebrows mashed together in concentration.

“Alicia, are you high?” her tone was low, although no one could hear them from where they were - and the guests obviously couldn’t care less if they did.

Alicia knew that this was coming as a surprise for Lucy, though. She could see how amused Lucy was with the fact that she’d smoked for the first time by the playful grin on the older girl’s face. She sighed deeply; almost rolling her eyes, but couldn’t help but giggle at the girl’s reaction.

“Yeeeah” she confirmed, mid-laugh. Lucy laughed along, taking the smaller girl’s hand and swinging it by their side.

Ah, and, yes, Lucy knew her well enough to know that this was in fact her first time.

It was safe to say they were friends. Close friends. As you can probably tell, Alicia, being herself, didn’t have many of those. Because she tried to see the best side of all things in the world, she was nice and sweet to everyone, of course. But she was not nearly popular or close to being an extrovert, so she wouldn’t actually reach out to people on a regular basis, which narrowed her friends list down to 4 people: her 3 best friends from middle school and, well, now Lucy.

They’d been going to the same high school for 4 years but never really talked until they’d been assigned to be partners in chemistry class during lab sessions. A little ice breaking during their very first class over 3 months ago was all it took for them to click. And then, not much time passed by until they got to the point of texting each other until 1:00 a.m. on a school night, giving each other looks when someone said something stupid in class, making funny faces at each other from across the cafeteria during lunch time, sharing Skittles while watching *Friends* after studying together for a whole afternoon before their chemistry tests.

There was some pretty bubbly stuff too, but Alicia was mostly convinced she made them bubbly; that she turned them into a bigger deal in her mind than they actually were in real life.

Stuff like Alicia holding Lucy’s hand tightly when she got nervous before a test, even when she had to be in her own classes instead of Lucy’s.

Stuff like making cranes out of gum wrappers to give Lucy, knowing she kept each and every one of them in a tiny tin box inside her locker.

Stuff like hearing all about Lucy’s heartbreaking coming out story and how her father, who was a pastor, hadn’t talked to her ever since he found out.

Stuff like telling Lucy all about her first kiss with a boy she really liked from her

mother's church behind an ice cream place, and how their friendship was ruined forever after that.

Stuff like Lucy introducing Alicia to her popular friends like Kathy, and making her feel welcome around them instead of nervous and awkward.

Stuff like spending hours making playlists for each other with music that they thought the other might like.

Stuff like Alicia playing Lucy songs that she would only let her cat listen to; and Lucy sharing with Alicia the art pieces she wasn't brave enough to submit for school projects.

"*That's just regular stuff*," Alicia told herself repeatedly. She tried to put her feet on the ground when it came to love. As corny as she was, she was still afraid of getting hurt, of being deceived by her intense nature and fall for someone who wouldn't reciprocate her feelings. So she could not admit to the butterflies in her stomach how all of this "regular stuff" made her feel... How she was feeling now, seeing Lucy's green eyes squint adorably as she smiled.

"Sooooo, how does it feel?" she mused, raising an eyebrow at the girl.

Alicia tried to contain the buzzing in her mind for a moment. Her half-shut eyes studied the ceiling as she dived deep into her thoughts. She shifted her own weight from the tip of her toes to her heels, in the same rhythm as Lucy swayed their arms.

"Light" she slowly nodded at her own answer, smiling brightly at the girl. "Is this... normal?"

"I'd say so..." Lucy mimicked her smile. "Hey, what are you doing in here, by the way?"

Alicia stopped swinging to concentrate on the answer again.

"I felt like exploring" she shrugged.

"That is also normal, I guess" Lucy giggled once again.

"And then I got suuuuper hungry" Alicia concluded, making the girl in front of her erupt in laughter this time.

"Okay, first:" she let go of the girl's hand, raising one finger at her "that is definitely *absolutely normal*; second:" she raised another finger, "you've already told me that," Alicia laughed, realizing Lucy was right and she'd been so immerse in her own dimension she'd forgotten she had said that before. "And, third," Lucy took her hand in hers once again, "Kathy always keeps pretzel m&m's under her bed, so we have the cure for your munchies".

Alicia squealed with excitement as Lucy pulled her towards the bed. She sat once again on top of the orange duvet as Lucy reached under the bed for three blue-colored bags of candy and tossed them in her direction. Alicia immediately tore one open and tossed 2 m&m's at once inside her mouth. She closed her eyes and hummed contently, feeling the crunchiness and the mixture of salty and sweet flavors of the snack as if they

were the most carefully crafted meal on Earth.

“Lucia Velazquez, you’re an angel,” she mumbled as she chewed, her eyes still closed.

“Oh, don’t thank me, thank Kathy” Lucy corrected her, and then, realizing how dark it was getting, turned on the light on the nightstand. She paused, looking back at Alicia “Actually, don’t thank her, she’d probably kill me if she found out we’re eating her comfort food... should we close the door?” she blurred out, not even waiting for an answer and running quickly towards the bedroom door, shutting it quietly behind her and turning to look back at Alicia with wide eyes. Alicia laughed out loud, realizing just how cute she could get in about any situation: when Lucy was either scared, worried or confused, her facial expressions were identical to a cartoon character’s and it was so damn cute.

“We’ll just buy her some more on Tuesday after gym, then” Alicia shrugged, popping another piece of candy into her mouth. Lucy pondered her sentence for a moment, and then relaxed her features back to normal, making her way over to the bed.

“Yeah, good idea” she gave her a side smile and reached for the bag of candies, taking a few pieces for herself. She then noticed the speakers beside Kathy’s bed and an idea seemed to pop in her head “can I put a playlist on? It seems like this” she gestured to the anxious girl in front of her and the two bags of candy on her lap “might take a while”.

“Please do, I love your playlists!” Alicia said, a few pieces of chocolate flying out of her mouth when she shouted, oblivious to that of the fact that other girl had just made fun of her eating habits. She did love Lucy’s playlists.

When the dark-haired girl plugged her phone to the speakers and pressed *play*, Alicia immediately recognized which one it was. They had made it together one night about two weeks ago, in Alicia’s living room. The rule was to add all of their favorite songs that were calm and had a vibe to them at the same time, but they couldn’t see the other one’s song choices at that moment, and would only find them out later, while listening to the playlist. Needless to say, it turned out to be Alicia’s favorite playlist.

With a tiny shriek of content, Alicia let herself fall on her back onto the bed, keeping her knees up to rest her feet on top of it, and stared dazzled at the ceiling.

This. This right here was the magic she was hoping for.

Lucy chuckled once again at the girl’s delightful childish manner and laid down next to her.

Their bare shoulders brushed slightly as Alicia tapped her foot on the mattress to the rhythm of the first song. It was one of Lucy’s songs, but she’d learned all the lyrics to it by now. They sang together in a low tone, sometimes alternating between who would sing the leading parts and who would sing the background vocals and giggling at the different ranges they would use for effect in the most dramatic parts.

By the end of the second song, Alicia had finished the first bag of candy and Lucy reached for a small blunt and a blue lighter she kept in the back pocket of her shorts and lit it promptly. She took a few long drags before she offered it to Alicia, who just shook her head.

“I’m stoned enough, but thanks” she laughed, observing how Lucy’s eyes seemed even greener now that the surrounding of her irises were slowly turning red. “And it seems like you are too, already!” she pointed, nudging playfully at the girl’s side with her elbow.

“You’re right, I am” she coughed a bit as the smoke of her last drag came out of her mouth, and set the blunt to rest on the nightstand, laughing.

The song that played now was an instrumental tune, an interlude from one of their favorite albums. It was slow and tense, and it matched the everlasting buzzing in both girls’ minds. They stayed in silence for a moment. Lucy closed her eyes, inhaling deeply. Alicia turned on her side to look at her.

“Damn, I missed feeling this...” she paused for a moment, and then opened her eyes to look at Alicia. The younger girl felt her stomach drop. *She looked so beautiful right then*, she thought. Mid-sentence, sleepy eyes under dim light, her messy black locks half-wet, spread all over the white pillow, her plumped pink lips half-opened, her smooth, light-brown, sun-kissed skin half-covered by her tank top.

Then, suddenly, Lucy’s expression changed completely. She went from thoughtful to confused and amused in a span of two seconds in that cartoon-like way, and started to giggle at the girl again.

“How the hell did you get chocolate on your forehead, Reyes?” she said, raising her thumb to wipe the brown stain off the girl’s face. Alicia laughed along, just shrugging in response, but almost shuddering at the sudden contact.

“That just happens” she waved it off, as the other girl was still pressing her thumb to her forehead. “You were saying...?”

“Ah, yeah” Lucy drew her hand back and started playing with the tips of Alicia’s hair, studying the girl closely as she re-gained her train of thought “It’s been a while since I felt this...” she looked back at the younger girl’s eyes “light” she said finally, mimicking what Alicia had said earlier. “I missed it”.

Lucy smiled one of her best half-smiles. Alicia smiled back, biting her lip ever so slightly so the girl wouldn’t notice she was trying not to combust. She worried about how loud her heart was beating and wondering if Lucy could hear it over the music they were listening to. She knew she was just talking about getting high, but she couldn’t help giving another interpretation to the girl’s words. It had been a long time since they’d gotten to spend time together like this, and Alicia wondered if *that* was the feeling she’d been missing.

As if on cue to get those thoughts out of her head – or just to intensify them – the next song of the playlist started to play.

The track’s name was fallingforyou, by The 1975.

Alicia rolled her eyes before shutting them and letting her head fall back.

“I love this song” she mused; then sighed. Lucy still played with her hair.

“Me too. It’s in there twice, you know?” she commented. Alicia looked back at her, wide-eyed.

“Is it?” she asked, genuinely surprised she hadn’t noticed they’d both put the same song in the playlist. Lucy nodded at her, her smile fading slowly as she moved her hand from the girl’s hair to her cheek, caressing her smooth skin with her fingertips so softly it made the girl shiver at the contact.

Matty Healy’s low voice started to come out of the speakers.

What time you coming down?

We started losing light

I’ll never make it right

If you don’t want me around

I’m so excited for the night

All we need’s my bike and your enormous house

You said some day we might

When I’m closer to your height

’Til then we’ll knock around, endlessly

You’re all I need

Lucy’s eyes were endless. A galaxy of different shades of green and blue mixed together. Alicia was never so brave to stare at them for as long as she was doing now, afraid that she would feel exactly what she was feeling in that moment.

Don’t you see me now?

I think I’m falling; I’m falling for you

Don’t you need me?

I, I think I’m falling, I’m falling for you

And on this night and in this light

I think I’m falling; I’m falling for you

Maybe you’ll change your mind

I think I’m falling, I think I’m falling

In a sudden spam of courage, she carefully draped her arm around Lucy's waist and mimicked her caress on the girl's back. She tried to control her own breathing in hopes that her heart would calm down a little and she wouldn't shudder as Lucy's hand drifted to the back of her head. The tension between them was so thick, Alicia felt like grabbing it between her hands. She couldn't break the silence, though.

But Lucy did.

"The thing about this song is" her voice was low and raspy, her gaze firm on Alicia's brown orbs, "I never know if I'm actually feeling these things or if it's just the music".

Alicia's breath got caught up in her throat. They'd driven each other closer without even noticing, so much so that their foreheads almost touched, and their legs were almost entwined.

I'm caught on your coat again

You said, "Oh, no, it's fine"

I read between the lines

And touched your leg again, again

I'll take you one day at a time

Soon you will be mine

Oh but I want you now (I want you now)

When the smoke is in your eyes

You look so alive

Do you fancy sitting down with me? Maybe?

"M-maybe it's both" Alicia stuttered, her voice only above a whisper as she watched Lucy's eyes divert from her lips back to her eyes. The younger girl gulped, noticing how Lucy's stare wanted desperately to tell her something, something she'd known in the back of her mind this whole time, and was only too scared to admit .

But the song did.

You're all I need

According to your heart

My place is not deliberate

Feeling of your arms

I don't wanna be your friend

I wanna kiss your neck

And so did Lucy.

"Yeah. I think it is" she blurred out, still fully immerse in the girl's eyes before closing her own and pulling Alicia impossibly closer.

Don't you see me?

I, I think I'm falling; I'm falling for you

Don't you need me?

I, I think I'm falling; I'm falling for you

Their lips collided slowly at first.

Alicia felt like she was going to pass out for a second. In the next second, though, she could feel everything as magnified as she had felt before with her surroundings.

And on this night and in this light

I think I'm falling; I'm falling for you

Lucy's fingers were carefully caressing her hair at the nape of her neck. Her own hand was now exploring the smooth skin of the girl's back under her shirt. The taste of chocolate and smoke of the girl's tongue as it collided with her own. The trembling of Lucy's moan against her lips when she dragged her nails slightly onto her skin. The sweet smell of Lucy's hair as she directed her kisses to the girl's neck. A whimper coming out of her own throat as Lucy sucked on her pulse point ever so slightly. Lucy's erratic breath mixed with her own. One last gentle kiss upon her perfect lips.

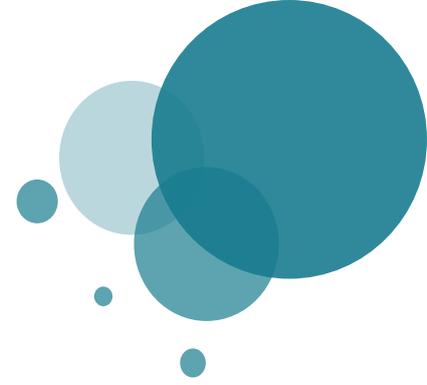
Maybe you'll change your mind

The song was over, and so was their moment.

Every feeling Alicia had pushed away, burned, locked inside the deepest coffins of her mind had burst out of her in one kiss. She opened her eyes slowly to find a blushing Lucy only mere inches away from them. It didn't matter how many laughs they'd exchanged along the weeks they'd known each other for, or the ones that had marked them during that party – the laugh that came in *that particular moment* was the very best one. It proved they could carry on. It proved that Lucy had also struggled to admit to herself she was undeniably falling for Alicia, but neither the struggling nor the days of hiding feelings mattered to them anymore.

All that mattered was that they knew the tune would play again so that moment could be extended. And they would live it, again and again. Not for the four minutes and two seconds that the song would echo in that room; not for the whole hour of the playlist they had made unconsciously filled with love tracks. But for however long the songs would match their feelings and light their hearts up. For an everlasting encounter.

Family Drama



Family Portrait

Caíque Furlaneto Saraceni¹

The moaning wouldn't stop.

She glanced at her watch only to see it had almost ticked all the way over. Her head ached and she had been there for about an hour. His suits, ties and even his jerseys were all meticulously organized by color – which, frankly, she admired. She had never been able to keep her closet quite as organized, it used to last for about three or four days. Sooner than later, everything would be tossed all over her bedroom, mocking her inability to get ready in less than ninety minutes. The door was half-open, which let some of the lamp light in.

“A family portrait!”, she overheard.

Peggy lifted the wooden frame up as she analyzed the picture. Her other hand had held the sheets that covered her body up until she let go of the linen to caress his face on the photograph with her index finger.

“Oh God, put that down! I completely forgot that was here. I hope my grandma didn't see that. God!”

“Beau, why are you laughing so hard?”, she asked. Both Peggy and Beau couldn't take their eyes off of the faces in the frame that now laid on his hands.

“I'm laughing cause I'm happy”, he answered.

“I had no idea your family was that beautiful. Is that your grandmother in the middle? The one in the wheelchair?”

“That's her, alright.”

“What about the other ones?”, Peggy asked as he sat on the bed.

“Well, these are my brother Harry and his wife. My grandpa is right behind the wheelchair. The one sitting by my grams is a friend of hers, Madrigal. She's been helping my grandmother for the past twenty years, ever since she stopped walking. They've been friends for as long as I can remember. God, I hope Madrigal didn't see what we've just done, either!”

“Will you stop that?”, Peggy let out as she brought both hands to her face. “You're making me blush”.

“Well, you know I love it when you blush.”

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Beau couldn't help but notice Peggy's eyes darting from face to face on that photograph, landing on the brown-haired woman that held his arm. Anybody could've seen this one coming.

"She's so pretty. Ex-girlfriend?"

"Who? Ronnie? Yeah, I guess she is pretty. She has always been my favorite *cousin*".

He tried to persuade her into staying a little bit more by gently scratching her thighs under the sheets and sliding the photograph halfway through the bed with his other hand. Peggy grabbed his fingers, placing them on his own leg, as she got up and quickly got dressed. Although in passionate hurry, she had carefully folded her clothes afraid they'd get wrinkled. The only thing hurry had misplaced were her shoes.

"You know I have an early day tomorrow", she said as she brushed her dark hair and reached under the bed.

"You know, elves hid your shoes", Beau winked.

"Then I guess I'll have to go home without them", she mocked as she headed towards his half-open closet to see if that's where her loafers had landed when she kicked them off.

"Oh, I wouldn't go in there if I were you", he said. "I'm dead serious. It's just really messy. Plainly immoral"

Although he tried his best to conceal it, Peggy couldn't help but think something was off with the way he'd said that.

"Well, lucky for you, I like it a little messy", she shrugged.

"I mean it, Peggy. Don't go in there"

He sounded serious. He got up and started limping towards her as chills ran up and down her spine. She thought she'd heard some heavy breathing coming from inside the closet. He slammed the door shut.

"When am I gonna see you again?", he asked as he leaned closer to her and gently kissed the back of her neck.

"I'll call you".

Her voice was shaky. One couldn't quite tell if it was Beau's fingers doing the trick or that eerie vibe she got from that goddamn closet.

"No sign of your shoes, huh?", his pout let out in between kisses.

Peggy shook her head. He handed her some slippers and out the door she went, shoeless and all. She didn't mind that much, for she was no Carrie Bradshaw and, besides, her intuition kept on telling her to beat it – not because of that eerie vibe or Beau's noticeable mixed-feelings towards that stupid closet, but because something was telling her she'd overstayed her welcome. She found it funny that his slippers made her limp almost half as much as he did – which would make for an interesting walk home, at the very least. That night, Peggy took the stairs instead of waiting for the elevator.

Had she stayed longer, she would've noticed silence took over Beau's apartment just for a few seconds after he locked the door behind her. Footsteps could be heard from inside his closet – and those were no loafers. His eyes were on the door he had slammed shut as that pitter patter of footsteps sounded closer and closer. By then, Peggy had already slipped his mind.

“God, I thought she'd never leave”, Veronica grinned as she laid on the unmade bed and spread her hands around the sheets. “That was pretty darn close, wasn't it?”

“Hell yeah. You should've closed the door behind you, little voyeur”.

“And what's the fun in that, huh?”

Beau went a little far and put his body on top of hers, caressing her face with his fingers. As she closed her eyes, he seized the opportunity and slid the strap of her dress down her shoulder.

She opened her eyes and let him. As he reached for the other shoulder, Veronica got uncomfortably close to his ear, as if she was going to bite it. Instead, she whispered. “I wouldn't want you to sprain that knee of yours, darling. And cover that up. I really don't have to see that”.

She put both hands against his chest and pushed him, as to gain space to get up.

“Tell me something, Beau”, Veronica let out as she went towards the kitchen counter and lit up a cigarette. “Since when are you so worried about what Madrigal sees or doesn't see?”

“Oh shut up, Ronnie, will you?”

“I mean it”, she was laughing. “I didn't know you were so fond of her. What? Did she use to tuck you in or something?”

“Ronnie, that's disgusting”. Beau fell back on his bed and put a pillow against his face. “God, the image of that is making me sick”

“What about me, Beau?” Ronnie's dress straps were just where he'd left them. “Would you mind if I tucked you in?”

She was getting close.

“Not at all”. He reached for her cigarette. “You're really something, did you know that?”

“I'm charmed, alright”

“You know, she thought you were really pretty. She couldn't take her eyes off of you when she saw the picture”. Beau stared at the cigarette. Her lips had left a lipstick stain on it.

“I know, I heard her. I was very flattered. Almost let myself out of that closet of yours to say thanks”

“You wouldn't have dared”. He was laughing again. For as long as he could remember, he was always laughing with Veronica.

“Beau, can I ask you something?”, she whispered.

“Anything”.

“You told her you wanted to see her again. What’s up with all that crap?”

She got the cigarette back from his hands.

“I even gave her my real phone number”, Beau let out with a cryptic smile.

Veronica was laughing out of shock. “What? Are you being serious right now? That goody-two-shoes?”

“You haven’t even met her, Ronnie. You don’t know that”

“Oh please, her name is *Peggy*”, she mocked. “Loafer-wearing Peggy blushed because a photograph of grandma saw you two having sex. Give me a break”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re jealous”

Beau was up again and limped his way towards her. His years as a blue-eyed quarterback turned him into quite a ripped man and he knew – and took *advantage* of – how much that was appealing to women and men alike. His looks weren’t exactly repulsive.

“I’ll admit”, Veronica whispered. “I am sort of used to sharing you with Madrigal. Only Madrigal”

“By the way”, she continued, “your darling Madrigal called earlier today while you were bringing the cattle home”

“You mean picking up Peggy?”, Beau squinted.

“You know what I mean...” she lowered her voice and smoked on her cigarette. She really was beautiful. “Apparently Memaw’s birthday is coming”. Veronica was smiling.

“Grams hates it when you call her that”, he said as he limped towards the small bar in the kitchen. “I’m fixing myself a drink, would you like something?”

“No, thanks”, she replied. “I’ll just have a sip of yours”

Their eyes met for a minute.

“Anyway”, she continued. “The old lady wants us to go all the way down to that farm of theirs to celebrate. Apparently you don’t turn eighty everyday”

“Eighty?”, Beau looked puzzled. “She ain’t eighty yet”

“How the hell am I supposed to know how old that hag is? She looks eighty anyway”. She grabbed the glass from his hand and practically drank the whole thing he had fixed for himself. Veronica had very shaky feelings when it came to her grandmother. They have never got along. Ruth was always very demanding with the three grandchildren she had raised, but everyone knew she was always harder on Veronica.

“Ronnie, you’re talking crap. Don’t say that”

“You know what I don’t get?”, she ignored him. “If they’re supposed to be so rich and all, why do they still live there in that dump? It’s literally in the middle of nowhere”

“It’s a beautiful house”, Beau let out as he put the whiskey away.

“No description needed, Beau. I’ve been there. You know what I mean”. Veronica was getting impatient. “I’ve never got why they wouldn’t just move to the city. That farm they got going on can’t be nearly as lucrative as all their investments in the city”.

“Do you know what *I* don’t get?”, now it was him who was ignoring her. “Why did grandma ask us to come this time around? She never gave a damn about her birthday. When we were growing up, she wouldn’t even let us buy her a freaking card”

Veronica leaned on the kitchen counter in order to get really close to him and slap him gently on the face.

“Maybe she’s letting go”

“Ronnie, don’t say that”

“What? Don’t sound so shocked, honey, it’s only natural. Ruth’s not a kid anymore. She’s been working extra hours, if you really want to know what I think”

She knew that she could say basically anything to Beau. Not that she measured words to talk to others, but she knew for a fact that he would never judge her. Even when they didn’t see eye to eye – which happened quite often.

“Beau, do you think that’s true?”

“Do I think what’s true?”

“Is she dying? Because if she is...”

“Veronica, what do you mean?”

“It’s not like grandpa will be lasting any longer. Have you ever heard about those darling old couples who just can’t stand to live without each other and then, you know, the most tragic thing happens and they end up dying one right after the other. It’s touching, really. It really is”

“You’re sick”

“I’m not suggesting we kill them or anything like that. God knows I could never do that”. She stopped for a second. “Do you think I’d ever be able to do that?”

He didn’t even have to think about it.

“I know you’d never do that”

She gave Beau a shy smile and looked down for a second. All of a sudden, she felt sad as they stood there in silence.

“You know...”, his voice echoed. “I’m not telling you this is what I want, but I do know what it’d mean”

Silence took over again.

“Let’s just go to sleep”, Ronnie said. As she walked towards the bedroom, Beau grabbed her arm. His voice wasn’t echoing anymore – not in the room. In her head, however, it was a different story.

“Do I have to sleep on the couch tonight?”

*

A week later, they set off at dawn.

That farm house had been on their family for generations and it looked beautiful from afar and even prettier when you pulled up on the driveway. The picket-fence always smelled of fresh paint somehow and there were lots of people working everywhere. From the outside, the house felt like a home. For a moment, the dark side of quietness took over, as peace was nowhere to be seen. As Veronica waltzed through the corridor of trees that led to the front garden, she wondered whether she'd feel any different this time after she walked in. Beau was limping behind her and right after him ran a worker of the farm, carrying their bags. From a distance, they could all see a woman standing by the front door. They couldn't make out whom or what until they'd walked past the pathway of roses Ruth always made sure was perfectly arrayed.

"You know, when we lived out here, the grass outside my window always looked dead", Ronnie left out.

"That's impossible", Beau replied. "Grams has always watered it religiously"

"Well, it felt dead to me"

The woman standing by the door was the opposite of dead. Her smile shone white and bright, from ear to ear – perfect Southern beauty queen.

"Oh my, look what the cat dragged in. Veronica, I don't think I've seen you in ages", said Mary Louise. Her blonde hair was painstakingly put together in a high ponytail and she was wearing a little white dress, covered in lace from chest to thigh. If she were a drink, any witty bartender would name her Dirty Virgin Mary. Spitting image.

"I wouldn't say ages, dear", she replied, as they went in for an awkward hug. One could cut the tension with a knife if they felt like having a blood fest. Lucky for Beau, he was always up for a party.

"Well, well, well – the prettiest girls in the world come together for a hug. Polaroid moment, for sure", he teased.

"Oh, I should have figured the two of you would ride together"

"How are things, Lola? How's the mister?" Beau replied, as he gently pushed Veronica to the side, as if to make room for himself and the cane she'd suggested he brought.

"How very Brick of you to show up with a cane, imagine how that'd be", she said. He was the one hugging Mary now. Veronica just watched.

Behind Lola, the huge stairwell that led up to the bedrooms made its majestic entrance. This was one of the few things Ronnie always loved about that place – it made her feel like she was trapped in *Gone with the Wind*. Mary's voice cut through.

"Everything's fine. Your brother's in the library".

Except that things were not fine and Harry was nowhere near the library. On his

way over, Beau had spotted his older brother talking to a much younger man, who, upon closer look, proved to be Lars Smith. His family had been working for Ruth ever since she and Clarence got married – which was true to most of the staff who ran the O’Riley’s farm. What struck Beau as odd was that Lars wasn’t even supposed to be there, since the last time he and Madrigal spoke she told him the boy had run off to the city to finish his studies and, hopefully, become a doctor. Beau had his suspicions – which were confirmed when, as he went to the kitchen to say hello to Madrigal, he spotted Harry and Lars on their way to the guesthouse.

Meanwhile, Veronica decided to skip pleasantries and went straight upstairs to her bedroom. As she looked out the window, she decided to ignore the sad attempt at happiness her cousin made by luring the gardener’s offspring to the guesthouse, and chose to focus on the grass instead. Funny how they say it’s always greener on the other side – for Veronica O’Riley, no matter the perspective, the grass in that house always felt dead. It felt dry when she was a kid, running up and down the garden with her dolls. It looked brown when she was a teenager, having picnics with Beau or whatever boyfriend she had at the time. It felt stiff years ago when she left – never to return, with the exception of the occasional Thanksgiving visit every two or three years. She was sure to feel lost in the meadow later that night, downstairs for whatever birthday bash Lola had planned. For now, however, she just wanted to sleep.

Her eyes were darting from side to side, trying to make an image out of those blurry shapes. It was pitch dark, but she knew that place like the back of her hand. If she lifted her right arm, she knew she’d find his silk ties and, to the left, his suits were to follow. She felt perfectly safe. It was dead cold outside and she didn’t have a jacket on – just her nightgown and some socks she had borrowed from the third drawer on the left. On the other side of the door, everybody else was sleeping. All of a sudden, she heard the bedroom door open. She felt an urge to peek through the gap between the doors of the half-open closet, but something told her not to move.

“Veronica”

Chills ran up and down her spine and, helpless, she just sat there. Somebody tiptoed their way to the closet and stood there, in silence. She could hear the heavy breathing as her heart raced inside her chest.

“Veronica”

A stream of tears ran down her face as she saw the shadow of that figure slowly walk away from the closet door, approaching the bed. Silence made room for screaming, as she brought her hands to her ears to try and keep from hearing all that yelling.

“Veronica!”

A shot was fired.

She opened her eyes and saw Beau, standing by the door. He looked worried.

“Bad dream, kiddo?”

She nodded. Drops of sweat were dripping down her back and she had lost the color in her face.

“You’d better get in the shower or you’ll be late for dinner.”

*

Mary Louise faked a proud smile as she watched the O’Riley matriarch get ready for her birthday dinner. Lola’s mother stood tall by her side, helping Ruth from her wheelchair to the stool by her dresser and then back to her wheelchair, chanting some bizarre Southern song.

“Madrigal, would you be a doll and get me my pearls?”

“You look lovely, Ruth”, Lola let out as her mother nodded, marching quietly towards the safe behind the flower painting on the wall.

“Why, thank you, darling”, she replied sheepishly. She was getting a bit tired of pretending to get along well with Lola – who, quite frankly, didn’t give a damn how Ruth looked. Anyone who sat with Mary Louise for a quick dinner or for the 5-o’clock tea she always made a fuss about (something about her British father – holding on to her roots and all that crap) would see her as a pitch-perfect Southern wife. Her house always smelled like cookies were in the oven and God would never allow her to be seen with her dyed locks down: the taller the hair, the closer to Him – ribbons, ponytails, high buns and hairspray galore! Lola was always pageant-ready.

“Such beautiful pearls you got there”

Lola’s eyes shone. Her mind went back to when she was a little girl, watching Ruth wear the exact same pearls as she accompanied her mother to those dinners she threw then.

Mrs. O’Riley nodded. She knew every time Lola said she looked lovely it was her pearls and diamonds she meant.

Beau walked by the door and smiled as he made eye contact with his grandmother through the mirror. He went into his room and unpacked the gift he’d bought her: a tiny music box he had made, just like the one she used to have when he was little. Ruth never found out, but Lola had smashed it broken on the floor many moons ago, at one of those aforementioned dinners.

Downstairs, the staff ran back and forth from the kitchen – making sure everything was in its place. Clarence and Harry sat, in perfect silence, on the living room with cigars they had just brought in from the guesthouse. As Ruth made her grand entrance down the elevator, Veronica walked down the stairs trying to shake that dream away from her head. Beau followed. As the other members of the family joined Mr. O’Riley and his grandson in the living room, the air began to grow thicker. Lola joined her husband, Madrigal held on to Ruth’s hand and strolled her wheelchair whereas Veronica and Beau watched Lars Smith barge in through the garden door, apparently oblivious to the whole ordeal.

“What is *he* even doing here?” Lola asked her husband, firmly grabbing his thigh.

“I ain’t one to interrupt a party”, Lars let out before Harry could answer, “but I just needed to come by and give Mrs. O’Riley a big ol’ birthday hug. I bought ‘er a present – brought it all the way from the city”.

The package he handed Ruth held the ugliest pair of gloves ever seen by human eyes – and she truly loved him for it.

“They’re lovely” Lola let out as Ruth mouthed the words mockingly – to Veronica’s amusement.

Having accepted the invite to stay for dinner, Lars Smith now sat between Beau and Harry at the big table in the patio. The night was warm and the moon shone bright, its light reflecting on Ruth’s jewelry just strongly enough to make Lola unaware of Lars’s hand caressing her husband’s groin right next to her. Ruth rejoiced as she watched the scam take place – she longed for the day her grandson would move on from the life of appearances she had, too, once dwelled on. Meanwhile, Clarence O’Riley examined yet another cigar at the other end of the table, nodding along to whatever conversation this or that cousin strived to have with him. His wrinkled, shaky hands kept him from being able to bring the lit cigar all the way to his lips. Ruth giggled loudly as Clarence’s dirty finger nails desperately tried to hold on to his cigar; compliance making room for the frown in his face.

Ruth now laughed so loudly the whole room stared at Clarence, which was enough to turn his frown upside down. However, it sure did not feel as though he was laughing at himself. As Mrs. O’Riley’s head tilted up and down with laughter, Lola made an unconscious decision to dart her eyes from all the glittery light for a moment, noticing, for the first time in a long while, just how doomed her fate as an O’Riley was. As most members of the family gathered inside for coffee and a slice of birthday cake, Beau and Veronica decided to take a detour to the guesthouse. He held the bottle of scotch and she provided the glasses, both snatched from the bar by the great entrance of the house.

“What was all of that between Harry and Lola?” he asked, breaking the silence.

“How long do you think until they call it quits?”, Ronnie winked.

Before entering the guesthouse, they took one last look at the big O’Riley farm. On the second floor, two lights were on – which struck them as a bit odd. It was Ruth O’Riley’s own personal rule that rooms were off limits to guests, even in family gatherings. As Beau tried one too many keys to open the door, Veronica’s eyes sat there on the third window on the left. She saw the silhouette of a woman.

Ronnie grabbed a cigarette.

It seemed as though an altercation could happen at any time in any of these rooms. As their extended family drank and giggled in the patio and in the living room, the shadows she had recognized as couples in both windows were putting on the most rewarding show. Their arguments were so articulate; the gestures grew stronger and stronger. Upon second glance, she noticed the shadow of a wheelchair in one of the windows. Through the other window, a little while later, she saw the shape of a high bun.

“Hey, Ronnie. Come in here”.

Beau sounded worried.

She didn't even have to come in all the way through to realize what he was trying to show her. Harry's hunting equipment had been tossed all over the floor and one of his pistols was missing.

As they tried to make sense of what had happened, a loud shriek cut through the air. They decided it'd be best to come back.

The closer they were to the main house, the louder the giggling. Downstairs, everybody swayed and made small talk, as the farmworkers – including Lars Smith's father, whose son was nowhere to be seen – double shifted their way through the chairs, making sure everybody was wined and dined. As soon as they set foot in the patio, another shriek came cutting through the laughter as sharp as the edge of a knife.

“No!”, it cried.

A shot was fired.

Bittersweet Day

Paula Fioritti da Silva¹



Nina was so excited about their trip next day she couldn't even stay in bed. She was jumping around her room, singing and laughing with joy. Nina was happier than she had ever been in her life; it would be her first time in a big amusement park, and it was also her fourth birthday.

Her mother, Shirley, was also extremely happy to see her only daughter in such a mood. It would be good for the kid to have some fun; she deserved it. The vibe in their house wasn't really nice in the last months. Even though the couple tried their best to spare their child they knew she felt it – when they argued, Nina often hid inside her wardrobe, crying, waiting for her parents to stop yelling at each other.

Shirley and Jack had been married for seven years now. At first, they were a great couple and almost never fought; everybody used to say they were perfect for each other. However, things started to get really difficult last year when he had to leave his job. The company where he worked asked him to move to another country, and Jack was certain that Shirley would agree with it, but she didn't. It was their first great fight. Since then, they never really stopped fighting.

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*

Jack worked as a programmer in a multinational company. He started working there before he met Shirley; he had already achieved a good position inside the company when they got married. Shirley had always been supportive, even when he spent hours working late, because she knew how important this job was for her husband. That's why Jack thought she would be happy for him – and not exactly for them – when he received that offer.

The company's proposal was for him to move to India.

"You are kidding me, right?", asked Shirley when Jack told her what his boss had said to him that day. She even laughed a little, but stopped when she realized he was being serious.

"What's the problem?", replied him, already sounding grumpy, "That's a really great opportunity for me! Don't you understand how much I can grow inside the company just by working there? It will be only five years; I'm sure you'll enjoy living there!"

"What?". Shirley was almost yelling. "Jack, you can't be really considering taking me and our little daughter to the other side of the world! What's wrong with

you? Our life is here, in Canada! We don't know anyone there; we don't even know what the weather in India is like!"

Nina was playing with her toys inside her room. She had never heard her parents yelling at each other before; that was completely new to her. The little girl was so scared that she entered in her wardrobe and started to cry, waiting for her parents to become friends again. She stayed there for at least thirty minutes, until Shirley found her with her eyes red from crying.

*

It happened almost one year before that night. Nina was already used to the sound of her parents' arguments, but she still hid when they yelled really loud. It's understandable that she got scared to hear them fighting when she was almost asleep the night before their trip to the park – she thought it would be cancelled.

The little girl didn't know what to expect when she went to bed. Usually she would wait for her mom to give her a kiss and she would also beg to hear just a short story to help her falling asleep, but not this time. Nina was brave enough to turn off the lights without her mother's help - except for the penguin-shaped flashlight plugged in the socket beside her bed, which lit up the room just a little bit. She pulled her blanket over her face letting only her eyes out. Even though she thought she wasn't sleepy, Nina started to snore silently just a few moments after closing her eyes.

On that night, Nina had an odd dream. She was running over a very green field covered with small pink flowers. At distance, she saw a big tree. There was a black-haired woman wearing a long light blue dress and a white hat. Nina didn't recognize her, but she smelled a really sweet aroma coming from the woman's direction. The girl walked through the flowers and approached the woman carefully.

"Hello Nina, how did you find me?", said the woman with a smile on her face.

The girl remembered her father telling her not to talk to strangers, but the big cherry pie in front of the lady was really persuasive. With a low voice, she answered:

"I found you because I'm a good explorer. And I'm also hungry." Nina didn't know if she should look at the woman or the pie. Cherry was her favorite flavor.

"Join me, sweetie. You can eat the dessert while we talk. Don't you know my name? We've met before."

Nina suddenly remembered everything about that woman. Her name was Eva and they were already good friends in the girl's dreams. But Eva usually appeared in Nina's nightmares, to help her when she needed the most. The kid felt safe next to her, so she ate her pie with no guilt at all.

"Your parents were fighting again, weren't they?", asked Eva.

Nina's mouth was full, so she just nodded. In fact, she didn't really have to reply because Eva already knew the answer – the lady could read her mind. With such a friendly tone in her voice, Eva explained that her parents loved her and they would still celebrate her birthday. The last thing Nina could remember before waking up in the next morning was of hugging Eva and feeling hopeful again.

*

Jack entered his daughter's room at 8:00 a.m. to wake her up but stopped at the door for a moment to admire her while she was still sleeping. "She looks like an angel. Even though I wanted so much to keep my old job, my baby girl makes it all worth it". He tried to be as careful as possible in order not to scare her, so he entered the room almost tiptoeing. Jack sat on the edge of Nina's bed and called her. The girl opened her eyes slowly, as if she didn't want to wake up.

"Hey, big girl! Don't you want to enjoy your day with us today? C'mon, let's go to the park!" said the father.

The amusement park wasn't so far from their house, so they didn't have to hurry and could enjoy their breakfast – a big cherry pie, exactly like the one Nina had eaten in her dream. She was so happy that she was laughing for no reason. Jack took a lot of pictures while the little girl was eating, because her face was covered with the pie's red filling. The family was having a great time together.

*

After a forty-minute drive, they got to the park. Nina was so excited that she couldn't stop talking. Her parents weren't really paying attention to everything the girl was saying, but Shirley thought it strange when she heard Nina saying that she wanted Eva to be there with them.

"Who is Eva, sweetie? Is she one of your school friends?", said the mother.

"Yeah, she's my friend. She is...", but then Nina saw the big Ferris wheel and changed the topic of their conversation. "*I have so many things in my mind that I can't even remember the name of my daughter's friends*", Shirley thought.

*

It was a beautiful day of July; there were almost no clouds on the bright blue sky. Nina's blond hair was shining in golden tones. They entered the park hand in hand; the little girl was between her parents. Jack and Shirley exchanged glances from time

to time, both looking very happy to finally have a good time together. The couple had previously agreed that they would do anything for their daughter to make the most of her day; their baby girl deserved the best birthday ever.

After a few hours playing in all the children's attractions, the girl wanted to rest a little. Her cheeks were already red from running and jumping through the park. Shirley suggested that it was time for lunch and Nina accepted promptly. They bought some sandwiches, French fries and soda. Nina was amazed; her parents never let her eat so much junk food in just one meal. She ate all the fries and drank her beverage really quickly.

"Daddy, I'm still thirsty. I want orange juice now!", said the little girl. She was perspiring on the neck.

Jack picked up his daughter and walked to the snack bar. Shirley stayed there eating her hamburger. She looked at them and felt comfortable, with a warm feeling inside. "*I hope we can stay like this forever*", she thought. While they were away, she checked her phone for the first time since they got into the park.

After about ten minutes, Shirley saw Jack coming towards her. She became afraid immediately and her heart started to beat really fast. Jack was pale and there were tears running down his face, but the worst part was that Nina wasn't with him. Shirley's mouth was dry, but her eyes were already wet.

"Jack, where..."

"I lost her", he answered in a really low voice. He seemed to be carrying a hundred pounds on his shoulders. Shirley was shaking. She tried to talk, but her voice failed. So, Jack spoke:

"She was right there with me, I don't know what happened. I was holding her hand! Then I drop it, because I needed to catch the money for her juice. When I realized... It was only one minute, I swear! I don't...", and then he put his hands over his face and started to cry.

Shirley was so stunned to hear it that she couldn't react properly. Her head was already full of horrible ideas; she started to think about all the bad things that could have happened with their little girl. When she thought about never seeing Nina again, she sobbed.

"If we had gone to India, none of this would have happened", said Jack in a low voice, as if he was just thinking out loud.

"I can't believe you, Jack!", she answered aloud. "How can you be so selfish all the time? Get your priorities right! Everything bad that is happening with us is your fault! You know what? You can go to India, or to China, or wherever you want to. I just beg you to stop ruining my happy moments with my daughter! And if I never find her again I won't ever forgive you, I swear it!"

In a low but angry tone of voice, he replied:

"She is not only yours, Shirley. She is my little girl too and I'm pretty sure I love her

as much as you do. This kid is my whole life; do you really think I've done it on purpose? I'll never forgive myself if she doesn't come back..."

*

While they were arguing, their little daughter was wandering lost through the park. Nina was confused; she didn't know where to go or what to look. She had never seen so much colorful things around her at the same time; she thought it was beautiful, but also disturbing. It was too much information for a four-year-old girl to handle by herself. She was just about to cry when she heard a familiar voice:

"Hey Nina, what are you doing over here?", asked Eva. She was standing next to a big carousel. It was bright, with a lot of lights and it had a joyful instrumental music playing in some loudspeakers. The carousel was full of kids; they all seemed to be having the time of their lives.

The girl's eyes started shining with relief to see a familiar face. With her finger inside her mouth, looking younger than she really was, Nina replied:

"Hi, Eva. I can't find daddy. I don't remember where he is". She looked like she was about to cry.

"There's no need for you to be afraid, sweetie. I'm here with you right now, okay? But tell me, how did you end up here?"

"I saw a big pink balloon and I wanted to see where it was going", the little girl replied, "but then I looked back and I couldn't find my dad, so I started looking for him."

"Oh... You told me that you are a good explorer, right? So it will be easy for us to find your parents together! First, don't you want to go on a walk with me?"

Nina really wanted to run back to her parent's arms, but she started to smell another sweet aroma – this time, it was cotton candy. She remembered how happy she was in her dream and she accepted it. The girl felt as if nothing wrong could happen to her if she stayed with Eva.

*

Jack was so nervous that he wasn't thinking properly, he was just walking in circles trying to clear up his mind. Then he saw a security guard and ran over him to ask for help.

"Please, you have to help me! I lost my daughter; I don't know where she is. She is only four years old, please, I need to find her!". Jack was talking so fast that it was hard for the guard to understand him.

"Sir, you have to calm down. What happened to your kid? Where were you when

she went missing? I need you to tell me everything so we can go look for her.”

Jack tried to talk calmly, but he failed. He was feeling completely scared; it was like Nina had just vanished.

The guard directed the couple to the Guest Relations hut of the park. Shirley and Jack did their best to provide all the necessary information about Nina’s appearance so that the park’s security staff could search for her. After collecting their answers, the attendant spoke on the loudspeaker.

“Missing girl. Attention, everyone. There’s a missing little girl in the park. Her name is Nina and she is four years old. She has white skin and curly blonde hair in a ponytail. She is wearing a striped blue and white T-shirt, jeans shorts and red sneakers. Attention everyone, there’s a missing little girl in the park. Her name is...”

Shirley couldn’t stop crying. At first, she didn’t want Jack to get near her, but after twenty minutes of so much despair she surrendered. They hugged each other as hard as they could, in a way they hadn’t done since they started fighting over Jack’s job. He smelled the fruity scent of Shirley’s perfume and realized how much he missed it. And then he felt terrible. *“I can’t believe our daughter had to go missing for us to reconnect again”*, Jack thought. Shirley smiled when he started to caress her hair.

They stayed like that for some minutes. Then she told Jack to go back looking for Nina; she would stay there in case their daughter appeared. It had been almost forty minutes since Nina was missing. Shirley was desperate, but she was trying her best not to freak out.

*

After a while, she saw in the distance a black-haired woman walking hand in hand with a child. She was wearing a long light blue dress and a white hat. Shirley couldn’t see right because they were still too far away from her, but she felt in her heart that little girl beside the odd-looking woman was Nina. Shirley’s legs were shaking so much she wasn’t able to walk towards them, so she just stood there. When they got close enough for Shirley to be sure, she put her hands over her face and started to cry. Then she fell to the ground, unable to stand.

“Mommy!”, yelled Nina. Shirley opened her eyes and saw her kid running in her direction with her arms open. They hugged so hard that Nina felt smashed. Shirley looked around, but the woman wearing the long light blue dress wasn’t there anymore.

The mother was about to question Nina about the woman, but she heard on the loudspeaker a firm voice saying:

“Mr. Jack Brown, your daughter was found. Attention Mr. Jack Brown, your daughter was found. She is already with your wife at the Guest Relations hut.”

As he heard it, Jack started to cry; he knew he needed to see his daughter to really believe in what he was listening. Jack has never felt as relieved as when he saw Nina in Shirley's arms, both sitting on the ground. Then he joined them and the family stood there for some time, just enjoying the moment.

"Who brought her back to you?", asked Jack.

"It was a woman, but I... I don't... Jack, I'm afraid I didn't see her face. I can't really remember, but I think it was a woman wearing a long dress and a white hat", Shirley replied, looking confused.

Jack started to question it, because he thought it was a strange outfit for someone to wear in an amusement park, but then Nina interfered:

"I was with Eva! We were celebrating my birthday!", said the girl, raising her arms. She was smiling.

Her parents looked at each other trying to understand how their kid could already feel so close to an unknown woman, but all their discomfort was put behind when Jack hugged them harder.

"Let's focus on the good part.", he said, looking tired. "We are together again, our baby girl is safe and happy, we don't have to worry about it right now. We can discuss this another day, right?"

*

On their drive back home, Jack was thinking of how much he would lose if he had decided to go to India without his family. He finally accepted that he could be happy in his new job. He also understood that he couldn't blame his wife for disrupting his career; it was his decision to stay in Canada after all.

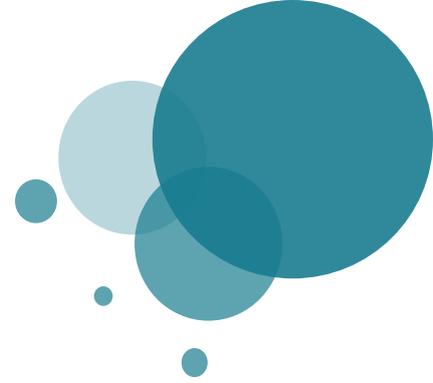
Shirley was full of thoughts as well. For her, it had been a crucial day. She realized that they had to keep trying to save their relationship. They deserved to be happy together as a family after all they had been through. But she was also a little intrigued about the woman who saved Nina. She couldn't stop thinking about that woman. *"Eva... I know I've heard this name before, but I can't remember who said it. Well, I guess I'll have to find this out later"*.

Jack and Shirley were not talking to each other in the car; they were too busy talking nonstop inside their own heads. But even if they were silent, they were living this moment together. They felt much more united now than they were feeling the day before. Despite all the bitter moments of the day, they were feeling a really sweet taste right now - as if nothing else in this world could break them apart. From time to time,

they would look in the mirror just to check on their little girl sitting in the backseat.

As for Nina, she fell asleep during the ride. The swing of the car always made her sleep easily. She had another dream about Eva. This time, they were not under the tree's shadow eating cherry pie. They were in a big carousel, still celebrating the girl's fourth birthday.

Historical



Monster in the Closet

Amanda Zimburg¹

There is always something behind a door. Maybe it is something exciting, like a mystery, the notion of a new adventure waiting for you to unravel its loose ends. Maybe it is something comforting, like your loved ones waiting to smother you in their warm and gentle embrace after a long day of work.

And opening a door, no matter what's waiting on the other side, is cathartic; there's a tangible past and future, who you were before and after an entire new universe was revealed beyond a threshold, at the mere motion of your fingertips.

Unless, of course, you are constantly and hopelessly stuck on the moment when everything is still closed, uncertain and still. Unless, of course, you are a monster hiding in a closet.

You hide and you lurk, and you only come out at night. How must life be for one such creature? Are they more than disfigured heartless beings? Is there a reason why they must hide from the rest?

Think of a female if you believe monsters to have genders, and think of her as young, if you believe monsters age. Think of her loneliness if you believe monsters to have feelings, or think of her at all if you believe a monster is worth a second of your time.

Her world was shattered, reduced to incomplete glimpses of what her monstrous eyes could catch and to misplaced sounds of what her monstrous ears could capture. This meant she never quite understood what was happening outside, because, of course, we can't understand a whole if we only have unlinked puzzle pieces.

However, staying locked in suited her just fine, for although the outside world seduced her with the idea of novelty, it scared her to death with the idea of being seen. If her job as a monster was to leave her closet and spook the souls she encountered, she was certain she was quite terrible at it, because for some reason she was a lot more scared of them than they could ever be of her.

And she knew there were people outside the closet. She heard them sometimes, speaking, laughing, crying, breathing in new possibilities every day.

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"Mommy!" a soft, muffled voice says. "Mommy, there's something here in my room".

"Don't be silly, sweetheart. I'm sure it's simply the wind."

"No, it isn't, mommy. The wind blows. It goes 'whoosh'. I hear noises, like crying. It's a monster! Mommy, daddy, please save me from the monster!"

"There are no such things as monsters, love. And if there were, they wouldn't be here. You are a nice kid, are you not? You do your homework, brush your teeth, pray every night?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then you have nothing to worry about. Bad things don't happen to good people, sweetie. But just so you are sure, let me check under the bed."

"Be careful, mommy."

A small pause. A few noises.

"Just as I suspected, only your shoes and backpack. No monster in sight to harm you, not now, not ever! You stay good, and nothing bad will come your way."

"Oh, I will. I will be good, and you will always be there for me, won't you?"

"Of course, my dear boy. Now off to bed with you. You have school tomorrow."

"Fred doesn't have school tomorrow."

"Fred doesn't have school anymore. Just you enjoy it while you can, love. Time will steal it all away much too soon."

Stuck in the closet, she often wondered how people outside were able to feel so much, all the time. How could they take in an entire world without losing their minds, when the notion of leaving her closet chilled her to the core? She envied those people too, but of course she did. She was a monster, and if given the chance she would take and take from them until there was nothing left but dust. That's what monsters would do anyway, which is why they must be sent away, must be locked in, must be separated from the rest.

Or even be kept a secret.

She thought it was the grown people from outside who gave her food, perhaps out of fear of being eaten or out of fear that something might happen to the little ones, if hunger sang too sharply on the monster's stomach, a melody of chaos and nothingness. And maybe they were right. The monster couldn't quite picture herself feeding off their blood and bones, but that could be because she was still far too young, or because she was indeed being fed, no matter how poorly. Or at least she thought she was. *It thought it was.*

"This is starting to become difficult, Ada. Every night he comes here, claiming to hear noises." It was the male, strong baritone with a raspy voice that said it.

"Children do this all the time." It was the grown woman now, the monster was sure of it. *"Their imagination runs free, and their sense of logic isn't quite constructed."*

There was a pause before the man replied. *"You and I both know there is something in there, though. I'm worried what will happen if we keep it there for too long."*

"And you'd rather we give into this mess? Get rid off.... We can't do that, Bernard. It's dangerous."

"And putting our family at risk, keeping that thing here? We can't keep playing hide and seek just because you've decided to take one as a project, give it our food, put it under our roof. What do you expect? It's not really living, sealed in, away from the rest of them. Maybe it'll be a good thing to give it back."

"Don't lie to yourself. We did a good thing. We are doing a good thing."

"How good will it be when people find out, Ada, that we have been hiding.... in our own house? Risking our lives every day, risking the sanity of our youngest kid? Listening to those noises, it's gonna do stuff to his mind, you know? Do you want him to be put under electric shock, Ada? Will you stop then?"

"Don't treat me like I'm the one being irrational here."

"Then stop acting irrationally. We can't keep this up for much longer."

Was there more to life than this? More than overhearing whispers, more than loneliness, more than not even being able to cast a shadow due to absolute immersion in complete and utter darkness, without a single drop of hope? If there was then it wasn't for her. It wasn't for *it*. Because that was the life monsters deserved, not a crumb more.

Whatever there was outside, it was reserved for better people. Real people, who deserved to bathe in sunlight, who deserved the smell of rain over grass, who deserved to feel the wind cooling off their sweat like soft kisses given by nature itself. Whatever it was that was left outside, and the monster had no idea what that was, whether it was fresh air, rich aromas or even, if one dared to dream, the sweet illusion of love, it was locked away, beyond closed doors that the monster couldn't, and wouldn't, dare to break.

Of course, it wished to know more, sometimes. In the most absurd of days, it could picture itself outside, the taunting ghost of dreamlike memories threatening to rise to the surface. *A girl. A home.* What was there? Was there more? Why did her mind trick her in such a cruel manner?

Oh. Because it was a monster. Cruelty is nothing less, nothing more, than what ran through her veins. Silly questions.

After all, a monster only needs to know two things. First, they must hide and they can't be seen, because they will be killed on the spot if that ever happens. Second, they are abominations, twisted, heartless, and maybe their life of seclusion is a well-deserved one.

"We are taking care of Mrs. Hilkeberg's cat this weekend, son."

"Oh no, daddy! I hate that mean cat, it spits all over. Must we really?"

"It's not that we must, but where will it stay if we refuse to have it over? The Hilkebergs are great neighbours and so kind to us."

"Can't it stay with someone else this time? Maybe if no one wants it, it means it's a bad, bad kitty that has to be alone for a while."

"Maybe. Or maybe it spits because it can sense you want it to go away. Every living being becomes angry when it doesn't receive enough love. The world is angry right now, angrier by the minute. We need to spread our caring in whichever way we can."

“Even if it means petting a mean, funny smelling cat, daddy?”

“Of course. It may be an animal, but it has a heart, and it has feelings, just like me, or mommy, or your brother. And that means we must treat it like an extension of ourselves, and take it in, even if it means enduring some kind of inconvenience.”

Sometimes the monster felt it would not be able to endure another lightless day. When such moments came, those deep, tormentous memories took on the best of her, and guided her to another time, another body.

When she still lived in a small space, but there were other creatures with her, too many for such a tiny home, and still they all appeared to love her, give her kisses and hugs and looked at her as if she were the most important being in existence. She couldn't give them names, but she remembered being happy, could remember that painful urge of wanting to grab on to someone and not ever letting them go, of being important, of mattering, of living.

Laughter and happiness are all her mind can produce when she lets it trick her into humanity. Herself, a girl, worthy of caring. Those around her, those mysterious half faces that surrounded her brain and her heart, they cared for her, and she for them.

Whatever they were, whatever she was, that was love. Of that much she was absolutely certain of. She missed them so terribly and so dearly, she allowed herself to whimper, and to whisper meaningless names, dancing around her tongue.

Those creatures, she wanted to reach them, wanted to touch their hardly formed figures, but they were all hazy and blurry in her head. When she closed her eyes and forced the wheels in her brain to spin, she could only remember looking up to bright, yellow, pointed figures where she imagined eyes should be.

So that's the definition of being a monster, then. Being able to love, and care, and hug, and kiss, and wish, and hurt. But also having a yellow mark, one that other humans did not.

Noises that seemed to come from everywhere, and pulsed all around. Harshly, completely. Breaking, knocking, ripping everything apart.

Boom, crash, click.

“Seems to be okay for now, captain. All in the clear.” said a voice, new, rigid, and it spoke funny too, with a different accent, like a foreigner.

Were they looking for her? Would they set her free?

“For now, yes. Just as a reminder, though, do remember of the consequences of hiding things from us. Any sort of betrayal is punishable by death, whereas cooperating means rewards.” It was also someone new and angry, so angry.

“We are well aware, sir. If we see anything out of the ordinary we will report it first thing.” The woman. She was scared just like monsters are scared, and she wanted to hide, too.

"As you should. Loads of boys off to that big cold excuse of a country to finally bring it into our new world. But how is it that we can conquer new untermensch when there are still some rats hiding here, in good old Krakow?"

"Yes, sir, of course."

"We bid you farewell then. Heil Hitler."

"Heil Hitler."

Do monsters have hearts? Because the one in the closet heard something beating, could feel something vibrating inside it. Was it cowardice? Was it an instinct to go out, and haunt, and kill, and burn the world to ashes, and let it bleed to death?

When it misheard the people outside laughing, it didn't laugh back. It wasn't supposed to make noise, but even if it could, it wouldn't know how to do so. What is the difference between a smile and tears falling off of you, wrapped in loneliness? What is the difference between time passing by and death approaching you? It is not a question a monster can or will ever be able to answer.

Did it really have memories of gentle hugs and caring eyes, or were those things stolen from another girl? A girl so young and full of potential, a girl that was now destroyed and stripped away from everything, anything, so very alone and afraid and empty. That girl never even had a chance, and now it was gone, given to the monster in the closet, a creature so vile, so very vile, a creature that would attack children, a creature that would terrorize a loving family, haunt their dreams, keep them apart, kill their hopes. And all for nothing, in the name of hatred.

And the creature was terrified of everything, of noise and life and the people outside, but it was most afraid of looking in the mirror, and what would stare back when it did.

It didn't deserve to live, even a half life hidden in darkness's sweet embrace. For it was a monster, after all.

Right?

Steps and steps and steps, running and kicking.

"No!" a voice, agony itself, cried.

"Stop this madness, Ada. I'm giving it to them."

"It's just a little girl, Bernard. You know her, and you knew her mother as well as I did."

"Her mother is gone."

"Don't you say that! Don't you ever say that!"

"I don't care what kind of promise you made her, Ada! You are risking our children's lives to keep your word to a dead woman! A dead Jew, of all things!"

"She was my friend. Our friend! How could you? How can you? She is but an eight year old girl, Bernard."

"Please control your wife, sir." Accented voice. Cold, like ice itself.

"Ada! I need you to stop being irrational and listen to me. This charade was doomed from the start. Be grateful they are letting us walk away with our lives! Lord knows you've done your fair share of sin, keeping one of them here, under our roof! This was my wife's idea, sir. I had no clue."

She laughed, and it was madness.

And there it was, the same sound of confusion and uncertainty from before.

Boom, crash, click.

"Send her away!" accented voice, gasping for air.

Yelling, she was yelling. It was the woman.

"Here, sir. A false wall behind the closet on the youngest's bedroom."

Steps, close, so close now.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Boom.

Crash.

Click.

And it opened.

He looked like her, the terrifying man that brought her back into the world of the living. He looked just like her, except she trembled with fear, and he wore blood on his sleeves and smelled of death.

And it hit her.

A train.

A door.

And as she was locked in once again, with people just like her, humans, living beings with tear-filled eyes and sorrowful souls, she realized, finally, sadly, angrily, something a part of her knew all along:

That the real monsters were the ones outside.

Deep Water

Kátia Mayumi Torikai¹

The sun started to appear in the horizon, creating pink shades in the sky. There was a cool breeze, which made me shiver. Breathe in. Exhale. The smell of morning and salty water invaded me, immediately making me feel more relaxed, more alive. The waves were crashing loudly, resulting in white foam, and my feet felt the water. I didn't even notice I was walking towards the sea; that wasn't a conscious decision, I just felt naturally attracted to it. The water was cold, but that didn't bother me. I could hear the laughter getting more distant. They were my friends and I loved them, but I needed some time alone. When I was a kid, my biggest dream was to be able to fly. For obvious physical reasons that wasn't a possibility, but I always felt like flying while swimming. I enjoyed the feeling of the water flowing in my skin, the slowdown of my movements and my heartbeat, that deafening silence which blocked the people and the exterior chaos. Sometimes swimming could be really peaceful, and sometimes it would make my thoughts go too loud and suddenly I'd be feeling too much and then I'd scream underwater and as crazy as it sounds that would make me feel better, even though no one would listen.

Slowly I swam until my head was the only part of me which was out of the water. Lost in a flow of disconnected thoughts, my mind suddenly fixed in my uncle, and I wished that didn't happen. My uncle died eight years ago, and even though some of the things that occurred that day are blurred, others are as vivid as if they had happened yesterday. That day, I had been feeling extremely sick. I couldn't stop vomiting and couldn't keep anything in my stomach, one of those viral diseases, I guess. So my mom and I were at the hospital and I was on a drip, when she received a phone call. I looked at her expression and I instantly knew something was wrong. She started weeping. I didn't look away from her but I could feel all the nurses and patients in the room staring at us.

My uncle had drowned. I'm not sure exactly why I didn't feel sad at that moment, I just managed to make a sad expression in solidarity for my mom's grief. I don't know if I was too sick to process the information, if I'm naturally good at blocking traumatic things or if it's a combination of both things, I just know I didn't instantly acknowledge he was dead, because she didn't use that word. Maybe he got into a coma or just passed out and she got scared, but everything was fine now, it had to be.

The realization came slowly throughout that night, while all our family gathered and went to my grandma's house to tell her that her son-in-law...To tell

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her what happened. Then all of us went to my uncle's mother's place, and even though she cried copiously, I knew that, like me, she was expecting someone to tell her that salvation was still possible. We stayed there for hours and I can't remember the exact time she understood there was no hope, because I was still feeling nauseous and emotionally and physically tired, so I slept leaning on the couch's arm. On the morning that followed, the funeral took place. That was when I understood. That was when I finally cried, because until then I'd been in a state of numbness, barely processing what was happening around me. I saw him with his eyes closed in that stupid wooden box among those useless flowers and he didn't look as if he was sleeping. People didn't say he rested, that he was at peace now, because he was too young and no one knew what to say. Not that I would have cared. Hours later, my eyes hurt, my face hurt, my heart hurt.

Even after all of this, I hoped for months, maybe years, that this had just been a horrible nightmare. That one day my uncle would just appear on our doorstep during dinner, smiling and announcing it had all been a great mistake, a terrible misunderstanding. And every time I remember this isn't going to happen, it's like that first realization all over again. The pain softened, but at the same time I miss him more deeply as the years pass by.

He was just the best. Using today's internet language, he definitely could be considered a 'cinnamon roll'. He was such a nerd, and sometimes he would patiently spend hours on the phone while I attempted to describe what was wrong with my computer and he tried to fix it. He loved watching *Mythbusters* and I loved watching cartoons, so we would 'argue' to see who would have the remote control in their power, even though I believe that deep inside we kinda liked to watch each other's programs, as I would giggle at his impersonation of Jamie and he would laugh at the cartoons' childish jokes. He took food very seriously and would teach me small tips like softly shake the Pringles cans in order to see, through the sound, if the chips were broken at the bottom or not; dunk a cookie in milk for 5 long seconds, so that way the cookie would be very moist but not enough to break. Another thing I remember we did every Saturday morning was to walk around the supermarket and, while my aunt and grandma were buying groceries, we ate any free sample of food we could find. Also, in my city we have this annual Italian party where they serve this marvelous pasta which we loved. Once he decided he wanted to learn how to make that exact pasta, and then he bought lots of them, asked the volunteers who helped at the festival, and started making several experiences with spices and different brands of tomato sauce. One day I went to his house and he, secretly proud of himself, prepared the pasta and I swear it was the exact same taste of the original. He recreated that to perfection.

But... I realized I was starting to forget some things. I remembered the sound of his laugh but his voice wasn't that clear in my head anymore. I remembered his dimples but I couldn't remember what he smelled like. And that terrified me. I mean, I had already physically lost him, and now he was slowly disappearing from my mind as well? I know we must have that feeling of gratitude because even though for a short time, I still had the chance to meet him in my life, but at the same time it seems so unfair. I'm aware it must sound egotistical but I wished he could have been there when I graduated from

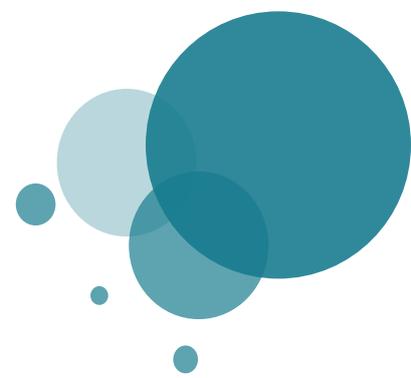
elementary school and high school, and when I entered college. I wished I could've seen his smile go wide and his eyes go bright with genuine happiness before he could hug me like a proud parent. I also realized that I am the only person who didn't know a life before him. Since I was born, since I am aware of my own existence, he had always been there. It makes me wonder if that makes me miss him deeper than the rest of my family, and that makes me feel even more miserable. At the same time, it makes me feel incredibly blessed.

I didn't realize before but I suddenly felt self-conscious about the fact that my eyes were aching and then, I did something I hardly ever allow myself to: cry. It wasn't a desperate, full of sobs kind of crying, but silent tears wouldn't stop coming, blurring my vision. I inhaled deeply in order to calm myself down, and when I opened my eyes, I just saw this gigantic wave coming too fast. Too late I noticed I'd been dragged by the flow, farther away from the shore, and my feet couldn't touch the ground. Fuck. I barely had time to take a breath before the wave engulfed me. I have never felt the water so violently, it hit me like something solid. This disoriented me. I couldn't tell where the surface was anymore. I just swam as fast as I could towards one direction, hoping to be the right one. After some despairing seconds, I began to think I definitely wasn't right: I never reached the surface. I was starting to believe my life was honestly doomed when my head emerged above the water. I didn't even allow myself to feel relieved, as I saw another wave approaching. I just turned and swam quickly, headed to the beach. My arms were aching but I barely noticed. I didn't stop until I felt my legs were touching the sand under me. I stood up and the water was slightly above my knees.

I know it is stupid, but at that moment I was so furious at the water. If it wasn't ridiculous and pointless I would've kicked and punched it. That fucking thing killed my uncle, nearly killed me. But...

I inhaled and exhaled deeply in order to recover my breath, my composure, and maybe my sanity as well. Another memory came back to my mind: me, four or five years old, splashing water and laughing to my uncle, who was holding me. Me, in my swim noodle, kicking the water clumsily as he encouraged me. My uncle using the garden hose to create a delicate rain that would always make me scream because it was too cold. He taught me how to swim. We would spend hours in that swimming pool because that's where we felt comfortable. And even though this could be considered a tragic irony, I still felt the urge to go back to the water. Because sometimes I have this unexplainable need to isolate myself from others, to swim underwater and just block everything and everyone else, to feel the water flowing through me in order to feel more complete. Because it's not only where I reencounter myself, but also where I reencounter him.

It might be a bittersweet feeling, but the water feels like home.



The 86th Day

Beatriz Ramos¹

At first, I could feel everything.

I could feel the crisp wind slashing through my bones and muscles while walking to school. I could feel the inviting warmth from the sun amongst the heavy and daunting clouds of winter. I could feel the indifference of people on the coffee shops and the confusion on my colleagues' eyes as I walked down the hallway to my 8:00 a.m. Geometry class. I could feel the panic every time I felt my eyes filling up with tears and the despair in trying to swallow the irrepressible urge to violently cry as I silently approached my desk at the far right corner of the classroom just next to the crummy window.

But today was already the 86th day.

The 86th day since I last laughed; since I could last look people in the eye for more than ten seconds; since I last felt rage or joy or despair or fear or sadness; since it last mattered if what I was going to have for dinner was actually something I enjoyed and since I last had plans and aspirations for the future. Eighty-six days had passed since I could last remember who I once was. Eighty-six days had slowly dragged on since my own name, Olive Bolderhausen, sounded like a foreign word and tasted bitter in my own mouth. Since my parents were the safe harbour I always thought them to be and since my entire life seemed as distant as a childhood dream.

And I had decided. I had decided that I've had enough. I had decided what I had to do and what I had decided was the only choice left for me.

I was beyond the point of saving and I was beyond the point of wanting to be saved.

I was once a dreamer, an artist.

A blank canvas was the bearer of my soul, and before there was nothing but watercolors and a whole variety of blossoming and blooming flowers. I was bouquets of gardenias, a garden full of light-pink roses, shy yet bright yellow daffodils in the corner of a park and chirpy daisies in a tiny vase up on a window sill.

I didn't have any sad stories.

I was Olive Bolderhausen, daughter of the happy and wealthy Christopher and Margaret, who met on a Thursday night over a martini, senior in high school, former best friend, good daughter, obliging granddaughter. I wasn't lonely, I wasn't

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bullied, I wasn't a survivor of a terrible tragedy or some heartfelt trauma. I was nothing but ordinary.

Until one day I woke up, eighty-six days ago. The number itself doesn't matter, I just mean to say that it's been one hell of a long time.

Nothing had changed. I had gone on a hot chocolate date with a cute guy from school the day before, I did all my homework and planned for the week ahead – it was only a Tuesday – sang my favorite songs and had rotisserie chicken with a side of roasted potatoes for dinner, next to mom and dad. I went to bed, dreamt of nothing at all and unconsciously cuddled with my extra pillows.

Then what happened?

Nothing happened. Nothing had changed. I woke up. And I was off. Puff. Just like a light bulb, that suddenly and without notice burns out, I disappeared.

I thought it would go away. I thought it was a case of PMS or maybe not wanting to go to school because lying in bed is much more comfortable. Something normal all of us feel in the morning when we reluctantly get ready for the day ahead.

I put on my favorite white, oversized sweater, I had my favorite breakfast, toast with a fried egg and a side of blueberries, I kissed my parents goodbye and wished them a happy day, I said 'good morning' to strangers as I attempted to smile, I passed by my favorite coffee shop and bought my double-shot espresso flat-white and I even passed by a bakery to smell freshly baked *pains au chocolat*. But my favorite sweater felt like a restraining, uncomfortable suit. My breakfast tasted like cardboard. My dad's smiles and cheek kisses made me inwardly shrug and my good wishes weren't real. My 'good mornings' were meaningless, my favorite coffee tasted like bitter and dirty water and the smell of pastries right out of the oven had no appeal to me anymore.

Everything meant nothing.

I felt anger, I felt rage, I felt cornered, like a wild animal suddenly trapped in a cage. Day in and day out I felt crazy and delusional. Day in and day out I felt like I was constantly gasping for air. Day in and day out I would just avoid my parents and rudely dismiss my friends. With every passing day, I grew tired. I grew discouraged and hopeless. And that eventually led to feeling nothing at all.

Now, as I stood up on a lonely subway platform, deep in the metropolitan incessant life of Chicago, I was nothing but a leafless, flowerless tree, hanging dark, dry, barren and low in the midst of that ever so familiar Christmas spirit of December.

I felt nothing. The joy, the gratefulness, the cheer, the laughter, the warmth from the fireplace and family gatherings, the happiness of children leaving the shops with toys, the happy anticipation of gifts, the familiar smell of a home cooked meal, the boundless spirit of giving... None of that mattered, and I didn't care.

As I walked through Grant Park, I was at peace. I knew it had to be done. Despite my mother's anguish and my father's disbelief, despite the sadness and emptiness that would forever scar their lives, despite my family's ruined Christmas, I needed to do it. I needed to

erase the possibility of a future; I needed to unburden myself and feel some relief. I wanted oblivion, I wanted to disappear.

It had been 86 days, and the thought of living through and getting to the 87th was impossible to bear.

There was no hope in the future. No hope in screwing up and learning in college, in falling in and out of love for the wrong people, in laughing so hard your stomach hurts the next day, in petting a puppy, in travelling, in ticking things off your bucket list you never thought you'd have the guts to do it, in eating more than advisable, in understanding what everyone says when they talk about a soulmate, in going to the beach and breathing that salty air, in having a family and living that perfect, boring life.

I had just gotten to the pier and my bones quivered and trembled with the piercing, ice-cold rush of wind near the water. There was me and maybe other people aimlessly looking at the beauty of the city during its Golden hour; I didn't notice them, though. I looked at the water, at the sea; I looked at death, and for the first time in what seemed like forever, I felt something: I felt a slight tingle of joy.

There was hope in death. There was a chance, a possibility. As I listened to the rumbling of the waves against the concrete walls of the pier, I was looking at my destiny square in the face; my fingers were numb against my pockets, my back curved even closer to my clothes and my breath seemed like smoke coming out of a chimney. It was painful, sharp, struggling, for one to try and kill one's self in winter.

As I compulsively shivered under the light-green sweater my mom had given me before I left home in the morning, as my entire body felt sore and numb from the cold that trespassed through the light fabric, I felt the sudden urge to step away. I felt the strange urge to try again, to be there for the 87th day, to go back to that therapist who had said I had nothing but an old case of 'not feeling the weather.'

I thought about my mom and how she would have to take sleeping pills so she wouldn't hurt as much. I thought about my dad, who would suffer in silence and have a void deep within his heart. I thought about my funeral and how my grandma would have to be supported by my aunts and uncles as she walked to see me, pale and lifeless, and as her bony hands trembled with the cry that came from her fragile chest; the bouquet she would be holding on to would fall as she couldn't support herself. And every Christmas from then on now would be doomed: because Olive Bolderhausen killed herself on the 15th of December by jumping in the ice cold sea.

I stepped back and walked away from the edge of the pier. I hurt, I fought to breathe: I would live to see the 87th day. I would live to ask my mother what was for dinner, I would live to cry alone in the shower, I would live to feel like a coward, I would live to look myself in the mirror and feel utter disgust, I would live to meet my father with a hug when he came home after work and I would live to have to make this very same decision every day.

I am a piece of charcoal. I am the untold story, the unhappy ending, the melancholic soundtrack stuck on repeat, the somber melody, the hurt, the cry of anguish and despair trapped deep within your gut, the lonely, sleepless night, the dead-end street. And I live on.

minutes, five minutes, almost like an Olympic swimmer, seven minutes, eleven, thirteen minutes. I cannot breathe during prime numbers when my phone vibrates during the night and I'm asleep I still cannot breathe, guess I struggle with sleep apnea, I wake up in the middle of the night without the REM sleep I should be getting, so I was submitted to a orthognathic surgery, septoplasty, they opened a hole in my throat but even after that I cannot breathe because when my phone vibrates, I cannot breathe as I'm afraid it's an earthquake, or a call from my parents asking if this month I'll finally be able to pay my rent without their help. My thoughts are liquid, sometimes pasty. I just want to be like everyone, act like everyone.

I want solid thoughts. Ommmm. Actually I should want no thoughts at all while meditating, I suppose. How could anyone make that happen? Isn't thinking an inherent characteristic of the human being? That's what makes us humans, what differentiates us from other animals. I could bet money that my cat meditates way more than I do, what else could she be doing while falling asleep, rolling her eyes like that? What if *I* develop lazy eyes that make it look like I'm annoyed at everyone? That would *not* be completely untrue... Ommmm...

No one has ever taught me that but as I grow up I remember more and more of the ballet classes I used to take as a child. Shoulders back, long neck, stomach in, head tilt, elbows up, arms out, legs straight, resting bitch face. Walk like a pretty ride horse. No looking back, just aiming at your plans.

Ommmmmm-those perfect plans you made while learning how to use a computer at 10, or learning a second language at 12, or taking advanced classes before high school: History, Chemistry, English. Prep courses. SATs mock test. Lots of them. Hundreds of mock tests. University. An expensive one. That generates an enormous college loan. It is gigantic, I had to use one of those online calculators to know for sure. Had to get an internship to start saving money. And babysit. And work some shifts as a waitress. And walk dogs. Had to buy lots of concealer to get those dark circles covered, because nobody would take me seriously without it on my face. Because I haven't slept in four days. Because I'm not eating healthy. Had to buy oats, flaxseeds, antidepressants and coconut oil. There are more delivery dates than I can count. Coffee pills. Palpitations. That must be because I'm too sedentary. Joined a running program. Had to join some random yoga class to relax my mind. Bought that new mat, the professional one. I swear I was going to start attending those classes today but I already had something scheduled. I just cannot remember what it is. Maybe counselling, orientation, therapy? Taking medicines that keep me from losing my own mind. Which I cannot control. Which is not mine anymore.

Time's up. Oh yeah, that was the *most relaxing* experience I have ever had.

Splendour in the Grass

Guilherme Terreri¹

March, the 14th

I thought I saw you at that cinema we used to go to. The one partially made of stone at ground level, with its navy-white walls and grey glass windows. How beautiful it looked when we used to go there, the strong pillars on the inside and those little wooden tables with big umbrellas by the cafe. I thought I saw you at that cinema, but it was only a lookalike – it made me think of those times when we would skip classes just to go there. I remembered that one day in particular, when we went there after spending the day by the beach. We sat together in the last row of seats near the projector, the least conspicuous seats we could find. The noiseless room was nearly empty, it must have been one of those late sessions, a very late session indeed. The giggling and the exchange of glances, our arms would then be intertwined. I think it was one of those times before one of my trips (or was it one of yours?) because of your tight grasp on my arm. There was the usual exchange of whispered words and our bodies as puzzle pieces from the clay, our eyes as mirrored images and when we kissed they were perfectly aligned. Our attempts of silent kisses - which you could never get right. The thrill, the tension, my heart beating fast, I could see that you were the one for me.

“Be my first.”

“Be my last.”

I was afraid we would get caught. “You only live once”, you’d say. You would talk me out of my insecurity. Your voice was this ocean sound; your tones controlled my tides. I don’t know why I remembered that specific day when, despite me being shy, we did it. *Crimes and Misdemeanours*, wasn’t it? Frankly, “I remember you well” in our *Chelsea Hotel no 2* moment.

Well, he was nothing but a vision trick under the warning light. I had rushed into the movie theatre. Some thunder and a shudder, it had started pouring outside. I had this stupid white t-shirt on, wet by the rain and mostly transparent by then. I entered in order to shelter myself from the rain. It took me some moaning to finally turn my head towards the front entrance, then his eyes met mine. He was this tall, weary twentyish lad, holding some soaked wet newspaper and a brown shopping bag. He had a cap on, securing in place locks of dark brown hair the same colour of what some might have called his “beard”. He was close, close enough to be your ghost and it took me no longer than five minutes to see myself standing right beside him. I was drawn to him like I had been drawn to you. Like a moth to a flame... only I am to blame.

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They removed the benches that used to line by the entrance walls forming a corridor up to the cafe. I had my hips leaned against the wall, my hands on my knees and I guess I must have looked miserable with my wet hair. He did have this hot air around him, a person who has run a couple of miles usually does. He spoke to me. Something trivial, I believe... the weather maybe? Something impersonal and detached from any link to ourselves. He smiled at me, I got nervous, he laughed. A few more minutes passed and we engaged into some less prosaic topics: his interests in International Relations – which is his undergraduate course, if I’m not mistaken; his taste for Eastern Culture – he has read Kazuo Ishiguro, would you believe it? I caught him peeping at my wet white t-shirt. Then we talked about cinema, about wet clothes in movies, about nipples. This and his undergraduate dilemmas, which I am no longer entirely able to grasp. Everything was going well, but my chances turned to toast when, over coffee, I asked him if I could call him your name.

*

April, the 4th

I thought I saw you at that club in... ~~Jardin Botánico~~, Gavea. That one named after some numbers, I believe. We once went there for a gig. Yelle was playing that night, and by the third or fourth song, she winked at us, at you – to be more precise. She grabbed your hand and said that she wondered how come the boys were so handsome in the city. Of course it was all in French and we could barely distinguish one word from the next. Well, I could barely understand her, by that time you must have been nearly fluent... How little did we know what the future held for us.

The image of our very tacky hairdos - you with the pompadour and your black-dyed hair, me with the side bang in that hazelnut colour. Do you remember the jokes we used to tell on Aretha Franklin and our fashion statements? Your faded blue jeans and that never-stupid-white t-shirt (I still sleep in it sometimes – up to this day).

I was struck when I first saw you face to face. You could never keep your eyes open when you smiled, maybe it was those James Dean eyes, or the Marlon Brando side smile, I’ll never know. You used to poke fun at me for looking like someone who smoked at breakfast, and also for looking a bit like a “lesbian Nancy Sinatra”.

We’d go out every night, and we’d both stay up till the morning light and we’d sing “here we go again”. On weekends we’d drive for 6 hours so that we could dance somewhere else.

Like this one time when we got to my brother’s city and you pulled up in a gas station, waited for me to get out of the car, changed your tone, lowered your cap till I could no longer see your eyes and came up to me like:

“Heard you’re new in town... want someone to show you ‘round? Well, no one knows this place quite like me.”

“Well, I don’t hang with the crowd.”

“Where I go we’re dressing down. I’ll take you where the music plays for free.” Side smile.

There was this other time we rented a flat in that neighbourhood where the streets are named after birds. We spent the whole day having sex and trying to decide which venue to attend. We slept and woke through it many times until we finally made up our minds on a party downtown, in a 50’s Hotel – full of pictures of Old-Hollywood stars on the walls. Elvis was just beside Sophia Loren. We were high on something, just standing there, framed in time, staring at those pictures. Then we rushed to lock ourselves in one of the stalls in the men’s restroom. We were there for so long the security had to remove us from the party, it sucked anyway but we were never being boring.

Some days later we changed our laptop backdrops to this photo, where Sophia is sitting on Elvis’ lap and he’s got his hair all messed up, her arms around his neck and ... they looked so happy, didn’t they? Without exchanging words on the topic, we felt the same, we captured the same image and we decided on making it ours. It is thoughts like these that catch my troubled head when you’re away and I am missing you to death.

Well, I thought I saw you in that club, and believe it or not, it hasn’t changed much since our days. The spinning glass door still makes its victims on the way to the dancefloor, and the outside far exceeds the inside in both fun and freedom. I thought I saw you - all dressed in black, huddled up in one of the wicker couches, I went over for a closer look. I sat on the chair behind it, placed my Bacardi on a coffee table and kissed whoever was sitting there. He was close... and he held me very tightly, this kind of kiss when teeth collide. It started raining mildly and after some time kissing, I was awfully polite to ask “Please, can I call you his name?”

I’m not sure whether he heard me or understood me quite well, but there was no reply. I offered him a ride home and he accepted it. “This place sucks”. I elongated my lift to his home, I was so pleased to hear him speak, those mumbled words in between cigarettes, and a story about nearly drowning in the ocean once, when he was a kid – the reason why he has a tattoo on his left right shoulder (the one beside the car window). He took off his jacket in order to show it to me. His shoulder blades were just like yours. His tattoo is this wanderer in a beautiful diving armour, being held by an octopus. His voice is a low dull sound which reveals in half concealing. He’s afraid of drowning. He doesn’t talk much. He often makes pauses in his speech but he looked me in the eyes throughout the entire conversation. I had time to tell him about *Melmoth the Wanderer*. Our talk was mostly made up of bits and broken sentences falling into place. They both dazzled and dizzied me, I let the lift go the long way round. I couldn’t believe that this guy from two weeks ago was there, in my passenger seat. And you were there as well, somehow.

I smelt your scent on his hair and I kept my shortcuts to myself.

I’ve just gotten home. It’s 8:00 a.m.

*

April, the 9th

Today I had a call from Wendy's mother. Wendy has passed away this morning. Mrs. Madsen could not get in touch with you. She has asked me if I have any number through which she could get to you. I told her I don't.

I told your lookalike some things about Wendy and about you too. He asked me if I had ever fallen madly in love after "this guy". We talked some more after I parked the car in front of his house, five days ago.

"How do you feel when your hurt is over?"

"Scalding like the sunset in Sarasota; happy like a twister over Oklahoma; clear as Wendy Madsen lying in a coma."

But what's the use of saying? He knows nothing. I resent him for his age.

I've cried my eyes out today. I've asked a friend to take over all my evening classes and I've sent some e-mails cancelling the appointments I'd have today.

Meet me in the morning.

Wrap your arms around me, tell me that it's over.

Now that you have found me.

Walk me to the river, see the willow bowing.

Carry me to the water, now that we are drowning.

*

April, the 13th

I saw him again yesterday. He was at Fosfobox, that very, very little club on the back of a building I once lived. I've got mixed feelings about this one. You must know why. Our first kiss took place there. 4 hours nonstop. 4 hours of closed-eyes-dancing in the dark while we kissed. I used to think that that's how the ancient tribes in Europe met their soul mates. I kept thinking about us and about the Celtic, the Vikings. It was as if on that day some sort of ritual had taken place. The stare, the touch. A mating dance. I used to say our souls met in this very ritual, eternal through time, a ritual in which the wind and the sea are wed in one. We were bound for eternity. You were burning up, I was cooling down. You were up, I was down. You were blind. I could see.

I saw your lookalike downstairs, close to where there once was a bar. Two years after you and I had broken up, I went there with that jerk I was dating after you. And you guys met, he was holding my hand, you were drunk with one of your friends and it pained me so much to see that look on your face. The disbelief in your eyes: How could have I dishonoured our wedding ground?. It was during that time when we used to think fate

would bring us together again, after the rehab. He tried to mess with you, you punched his face and we were expelled from the club.

Well, there I was, standing on sacred ground once again and waiting for the band to start – the band in which a friend of yours is still playing. Your ghost was there and this time he had a broken arm. He didn't see me, and for some time I didn't want him to. I was feeling bad that he was there, as if you might appear, out of the blue, uninvited. I was afraid of ruining our chance again. Of course, you didn't show up. You could not have, you would not have.

The show started, I had drunk too much that night and the place was so crowded one could barely walk. He saw me. A freeze frame of his eyes in the strobe light, sweat dripping down from his brow while he moved as a feline towards me. He didn't say "Hello". He said something about the song. That he had been thinking of me. Something about a trip he had taken to Prague. He had lived there for a year or so, in an exchange program. He told me about his friend who played in the band. I had difficulty making out his words from the band's deep drum and base. It was so loud for me to hear him speak, let alone answer him. He was close – so close that the walls were wet, and I was so drunk that I really couldn't engage in any sort of conversation. So I held on to my glass and looked at him, trying hard not to evade from eye contact. You once told me never to show fear in the face of strangers. I wanted him, even though I thought of you, I wanted him badly. He did most of the talking this time, unlike you ever done. I nodded, here and there and laughed at the lines I thought must have been jokes. I laughed at everything, mostly. I was desperate. He pushed me to the wall and we kissed. The guys were playing a cover from Kassabian, or Lana del Rey. *The Goodbye Kiss*:

"Doomed from the start/We met with a goodbye kiss/I broke my wrist/It all kicked off/
I had no choice/ You said that you didn't mind/'Cause love's hard to find/"

I was looking at him, as steady as I could and he stopped kissing me. He got his cell phone to type: "NO, you CAN'T call me his name". We left the club. I was not driving, neither was he. "Would you fancy a walk?" He asked. "Yes", I said. We walked through the streets of the club's neighbourhood; we took the street in which I once lived – Santa Clara, where you spent more time at than at your own place. He told me that that was his stop. I shivered. It was not the same address I had taken him to the other day. It was close to the building where I used to rent an apartment when you and I started dating. I started feeling sick, you wouldn't stop crossing my mind. "Would you fancy going upstairs?". "No". "Would you care for some water?". "No". We parted different ways. But he is much too clever, and so he added: "*See? No words can save this, you're broken and I'm pissed*". I didn't turn back to reply.

*

June, the 23rd

It's been a while now since I've last seen him. Lately, I've been feeling quite strange in regards to our meetings. How stupid we were not to have even exchanged phone numbers. Maybe we've taken it for granted, like you and I did. Maybe we were afraid, I was, at least, afraid of feeling for him what I've felt for you all these years. Afraid of opening up. Since I last met him, I've been to places, I've met people... I'd even venture to say I've told some of my friends about him. Today has been especially difficult for me. Blame it on T.S. Eliot's *Burnt Norton*.

I have this feeling, the strangest feeling, that when we first met back in that old movie theatre... I feel as if the windows to my intimacy had finally been unlocked, as if all that damp and mouldy air had been renewed into a new breath of something. As if my *Bell Jar* had been lifted and I could finally experience what it was like to feel once again. I'm never smart in love. I usually let the bad ones in and the good ones go. But here I am, chasing some kind of stranger, just to try and make it different this time.

Today has been the third day in a row in which I go to some crowded place and, without noticing, start walking against the flow of people, hoping to maybe see your face (or his face) amongst the crowd. As I write down these words I contemplate the thought that I might have lost it. As if having you constantly on my mind wasn't enough, now I happen to have the two of you.

Tell me where your hiding place is. I've been to that first house where I took you when you accepted the lift, I was afraid to ring the doorbell and be mistaken, or maybe I was afraid of being right but finding you unwilling to talk to me. I've also been to the building we walked to after that band. The doorman told me nobody by your name lived there. Damn it! I don't even know if I've gotten your name right. I'm worried I'll forget your face or mix it to my memories of him.

And I've asked everyone, friends who go to the same places we went, some of the girls who were with me in Gavea... I'm beginning to think I imagined you all along.

*

August, the 8th

I saw your brother at IBMEC. For the first few minutes I was so thrilled I made no move. I wanted to make sure it was him who was really there and not you. Who would have guessed that after all this time, he would be at the exact same place I used to go with you. He was down by the café, on the phone with someone. I thought I might get closer and maybe let him see me and come to talk to me, out of his own will. I didn't know what his reaction would be, if any. He was on the phone with some other guy, a lover it seemed, they were having an argument. The next time that I recall my own reflection was on its way to greet him. I was thinking of all the excuses I could use. He didn't look much like you from the side, but his profile could not lie the fact he knew I was approaching his throat.

He hung up and looked right at me. I froze. He stood up from where he was sitting and came over to stop right in front of me. We were a couple of inches apart. We didn't say a word; we kissed. He tasted of a cigarette you used to smoke, he's much better at kissing, though.

I saw your brother at IBMEC on the phone with a simpleton. And when I saw that he was on his own I knew he'd understand. We talked endlessly, about things that really mattered. He told me about your father's passing away and why he had moved into the city, he told me you're still living abroad and have no intention of moving back whatsoever. With folded hands we occupied the bench like nothing would ever get us out of there. He said he knew who I was, from the first time we met 5 months ago. He told me I had seen him before, when you and I started dating. It was in a bakery, in your hometown. I probably hadn't seen him, and you didn't care to introduce us. He said he didn't know how to tell me who he was. He knew we would never get it right had we known who we were. He said that I acted cold most of the time, that he thought of me as absent and empty-eyed. Uninviting but not half as impossible as everyone assumes I am. He said he had fallen in love with my pain. He knew he could do much better than you did. He knew my smell, he knew me well and I need to tell you that he was close to somewhere you had never even gotten closer. He skipped all his classes and we must have talked for about 4 hours. This time the ritual was different and the nomadic tribes had finally settled in. I had my insides shaking to a point I thought I would melt down. I despised myself for my age.

I told him I was in love with him, to which he replied: "I'm really not supposed to, but yes, you can call me anything you want." And I did it.

He's still asleep, on the bed right behind my writing desk.

That's all; I don't even think of you that often.



First times

Isabela Batista de Lima¹

The sun will rise soon in this endless city. Thousands of people will wake up and do the same things they do every day, following a routine, getting ready for work, leaving home to be back at the end of the day to eat and sleep, and do the same over and over again for most of their lives. I've always done the same, ever since I graduated and started living by myself, living in the world of adults and beginning my journey to be a complete person who lives like the others. Not today. No, today I'm breaking this circle, today I quit the life I shared with all these people for fifteen years as an exemplary kind of man who works in a great company and lives an ordinary life, repeating my actions over and over again constantly.

"Dear John Smith,

Your employment with Basco Company will be officially terminated on March 15, 2017. Unfortunately, recent investments of the company resulted in the implementation of a work force reduction in our office.

We want you to know that this is not a statement about your work for this office. You have been an exemplary employee and a model of dedication for this company for fifteen years.

Please contact us if you need assistance during your transition."

What hypocrites. Of course I need help after you throw me out like a useless dog. Fifteen years! Fifteen years of stress, extra hours of work, weekends lost in useless meetings, dedicating my life to my job, and when the letter arrived and I thought they had finally recognized my efforts and were offering me a well-deserved raise, they fired me.

It's been already a week since I've received this letter, by the hands of a new intern of HR. A fresh employee, ruining the life of an old employee with a smile on the face, slowly stabbing my heart. One week has passed and I, as the dagger went everyday deeper, started to assimilate what happened and what today means to my life.

Outside, the full moon shines and makes me company through this long wait, and clarify my thoughts in the moments I need the most. I already predict what awaits me in a couple of hours, all those eyes that will follow me in the office, all the sadness hiding the laughter of those who lied to me. The moonlight touches

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my arm and softly draws the paths I can take, each one of them carefully planned in the last hours, here in my couch, while remembering all that the job has given me in the past years. Looking around I try to think of everything I have accomplished. At the corner of my eye I see the magnificent bookshelf I've been improving since I moved here, with beautiful copies and classic books. A second look goes further and the dust layer reveals the last time I touched them. New china all wrapped up with the original plastic destined to amaze my visitors and show them the great amount of money I make. Well, the money is now gone right now, and those visitors I have never had – not even my own family came here in all these years. Across the room, my beautiful Les Paul paints the wall, bought with hard work as a teenager, perfectly completing the decoration since the day I've moved here, and not a chord has echoed after that.

I used to love playing, reading and being up all night planning my bright future, but at some point, and I don't remember exactly when, I stopped each of these things and traded them for an extra hour on the computer and a poor meal in front of a shitty TV show. That's fun, right?

Now I can hear some steps upstairs, which means it's time to stop thinking and prepare myself to face this nightmare. I do all the usual procedures, putting my clothes on and brushing my teeth, but this time really slowly, after all, I'm not exactly thrilled to get there. I pick up my briefcase and prepare to leave. My feet won't move, but with the courage I have left, one step opens the way to go.

As I go down the stairs, on my way to the car, I decide to, for the first time in all these years, walk all the way through this robotic jungle to that monstrous building that awaits for me still. One look at my always punctual watch tells me I still have enough time left, and today I don't feel like arriving early as all the other days, so I go straight to the street, stop and stand on the sidewalk while breathing this great polluted air that can only be offered by a big city like this.

My feet start dancing down the streets smoothly by the sound of a frenetic rap played by the mouths around me. Sometimes I miss the compass to avoid all the garbage blooming on the street or to follow the car rhythm to safely go from one side to other. At every corner I see a nest, people grouping together to get the coffee that will help them get through the day, magically turning them on, mechanically fueling their system with courage and submission.

I stop for a moment, surprised by the existence of a little park, a few blocks from home. Was this here before? I see a gigantic tree in the middle, with thick roots spreading like a monarch controlling its realm. When did they construct this? Judging from this long reign, I realize the constructed ones are us. Such a kingdom must have taken decades to be fully grown, silently expanding its frontiers to the ground. But the stupid two-legged animal came here and planted their concrete seeds, creating a wall to limit them.

Hundreds of years of expansion doomed in so little time. Therefore, time itself seems to be meaningless. Well, it makes me feel a little better to know that I'm a nothing in the universe timeline, and so are these insignificant people around me.

Time really is something that makes you think. All these years I've been running, desperate to make everything on time and keep following people's rhythm, when I should have let this all go and have walked to this park, enjoying all the time we still have in our lives, because this time will only be meaningful to us.

"Get out of the street, man!"

I can't believe that guy ruined my reflection. As if his life meant something, right? I suppose I've gotta go now, all time in the world can't avoid what's waiting for me. I restart my walk, but today I can see all the secrets I have missed in all these years, all the places I have ignored and all the feelings expressed by the people.

Every step leads me to a single place, and finally I see myself in front of the place I've always worked, this majestic skyscraper soaring above the city, imposing its authority to all below it. This giant always made me obey him, but now that he doesn't have control over me anymore, I can see things differently at last. His reflection at one car's window shows me his insignificance, such a small figure compared to all around. It's funny how when you see things for what you think will be the last time, you're actually seeing them for the first.

A deep breath helps me cross the glass revolving door and join the herd of people towards the super modern elevator squeezed in a twenty-people box, I land in the Information Technology floor.

Brown desk, black chair and a simple computer; there isn't much in my work station. I've never appreciated photographs or flowers or anything that could distract me near sight. I remember my first day: I brought the portrait my mom gave me to decorate my desk, her, my dad and me on my last birthday. Sorry mom, you've always supported me, but I had to remove that. Right now I wish I hadn't.

I'm trying to figure out how I spent so much time in this boring place, especially because I never really spoke with my other colleagues. All people here seem to be as concentrated as I've ever been, but the difference is they really can separate their jobs from their lives. At first I was always invited to parties or to just drink something in bars, but like twenty declinations after, they stopped asking me. And believe me, I don't blame them.

In the middle of the morning most people stop a little to get a cup of coffee or go to the toilet, but never me. Now, this landscape of screens faces me and kicks me off the chair. I cross the room to get this damn caffeine, and my spine freezes with all the looks towards me. I knew it. Thank God I haven't become friends with any of them, I can feel the poison in the air, they are all happy with my disgrace. My hands can't hold the mug anymore, it's shaking so violently as my head hurts. My boss walked out his office. He's smiling at me. Is that a fucking joke?

I sit down again and look at my computer. I look but don't see a thing, I just see the possibilities walking in my head once again, blinding me for some time. My eyes gradually closed, and a clear green form materialized and the vision becomes certain.

Pause for lunch. Everybody starts getting up, some get their meal under the desks, perfectly prepared the night before, nutritious and healthy; others head to the elevator once again and go get a soulless meal in a shitty restaurant. I've always bought something to eat across the street, each day in a different big fast-food franchise, never really caring about my health or things like that. Worry about stupid things that could drag my head away for work? Of course I didn't want that, right? I say this, but I used to bring meals in the first months. In fact, I've always enjoyed cooking. Now I bet my cholesterol is high and I'll have lots of health problems in a few years caused by so many burgers.

Today I choose a fancy Italian restaurant next to a record store. There are many people dressed social here, waiting calmly for their expensive pasta. I can bet they are all from high positions, because the only ones who care about their short lunch time are the stupid low employees.

A nice waitress brings my spaghetti, and I keep rolling and rolling while looking at those people. The storm in my brain gets new proportions. I can't let things be like this, they can't just fire me; they haven't even justified this. No, I won't let them get away with this, they will pay me with more than money, they will pay for having chained me at my best years and now letting me go in a tank of sharks.

I finish my delicious meal and go back there. Well, now I'm kind of excited to see how far I can go. I sit at my desk once again and ignore these strangers around me. My hands stand over the keyboard just waiting for the right commands. Do they realize they pissed off the person who knows everything about this company? I've been always cleaning up their mess; they can't even access a normal website without getting a stupid virus.

All this access never truly explored. Their database is my home, and I can surf with no difficulty. These big corporations always hide something, and I will find out all their secrets, and even if they don't have something I can use, then I'll just create a scandal.

Now I can say time really flies when you're actually enjoying yourself. This job hasn't offered me such fun since I started working here, so I almost feel sorry for leaving. I see people standing up and saying goodbye to each other. Some pass by me and whisper some comfort words "I will miss you", "I'm so sorry you can't stay", "I'm sure you'll get another job soon".

All my hesitation just left with them and those empty words. Just leave me as you always did. I know nobody cares. Finally I will be free from this cage. Animals only see they are pets when they escape, and that's what I did. I should be the one thanking. As I walk out the building, my eyes hope to find the light of a bright future, but there's just the despair. What will be of me tomorrow? What will I wake up to? Why do I think so much about liberty when actually I'll have to be stuck in all of this again to keep living?

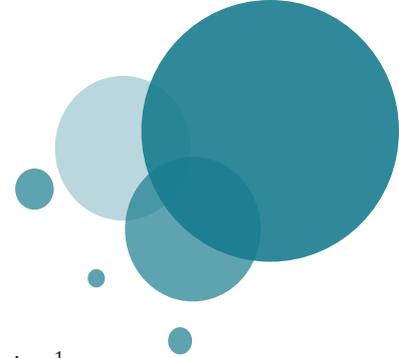
I hear some noise behind me. Someone is calling my name. I turn around and see my now former boss desperate to reach me.

“Wait! Thank God I found you! The HR has made a huge mistake about the names of the people who had been fired; they were looking for another John Smith, you see, I think there are four or five of you there! You were not supposed to be one of the dismissed ones! You are such a good employee, but none of us thought something could be wrong! Please forgive us, let’s go upstairs and solve this, please.”

Wait...

I can almost see the irony flakes, falling on my cheek like a punch of reality. I stare at him, trying to see a joke. It isn’t there. My engine starts running, my head works like crazy, and the tree burns to ashes. What can I say?

“Well, fuck.”



To Denver!

Jéssica de Melo Santos¹

Today was going to be different! As soon as I woke up and looked around my bedroom filled with boxes, I felt it: the fresh breeze of what was about to start; the excitement in a new beginning.

I leaped out of bed, got my robe off the floor and calmly walked to the kitchen. Bubble wrap, tin foil and an array of different newspapers were found everywhere. The house was chaotic in the midst of the kids' toys scattered all around the living room floor, their half-empty bowls of cereal on the kitchen counter and an open tub of peanut butter with a spoon in it, my late snack from last night, at about four in the morning.

Change was messy, but messy was fun, I thought as I quickly poured myself some coffee in one of my kid's sippy cup and leaped back to my bedroom, fully enveloped in my own bubble of joy and hope. I suddenly caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror: I was youthful, I was happy, and my whole demeanor showed that change was the only thing that was to keep me going. I proudly smiled at myself and went on with my chores – I emptied our bathroom, dumping everything in one box and simply labeling it with an eyeliner I had in my makeup bag,; went through all of the kids' clothes and put them neatly in place, scrunching them together and mindlessly dumping them inside a suitcase and then had to close using the weight of a chair; and finished wrapping our cutlery to perfection with the exception of those seven wine glasses I accidentally broke. No wonder I use my son's sippy cup or my daughter's plastic Belle cup.

I then went straight up to my bedroom, the one place where there were only boxes, but nothing really inside them. I sighed, already defeated in face of the challenge I had ahead of myself: to fully and completely look at everything I had ever collected in these thirty-two years, look at them straight in the face, and deal with them. The screw-ups and all.

I went inside my closet and took down the first box of memorabilia: my childhood box filled with pictures, little baby clothes that hadn't seen the light of day in decades, some torn apart toys and even a pacifier. Looking at the slightly stained beige baby pull-ups or at the half decapitated creepy doll, I could almost see what I would want to remember: a happy household, a caring father, a house-warming hug or even the smell of good, warm food for dinner. It was almost real; but in reality, there was no father around, and my mother didn't have any money to buy us any food to cook, and there was never enough time to give me or my sister

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a hug because she was too busy dealing drugs across the street, and my stomach growled late at night because all I had that day to eat were some chips a friend of mine had shared with me at school.

I closed the box and moved it to my bed. I looked at it through a blurry haze and followed to another box in my closet. This one adorned with a fun and colorful collage of different celebrities from the magazines and some glittery, tacky feathers. There were my teenage years, my high school box. Those years when I really didn't pay any attention in school because it wasn't 'cool', those years when I would use my mother's old makeup to look pretty for the boys, those years when I filled my bra with paper towel until I finally had boobs, those years when I'd have to lie to my mom about my sister staying over at her boyfriend's house, those years when I saw kids from my school over at my house buying from my mom, those years when I had to pour vodka and gin down the toilet and replace it with water and pray that my mom wouldn't notice the difference, those years when I had my first drinks at house parties with my friends and those years when I had my first boyfriend, and when I first had sex.

There were old tokens: a few bits of paper with words "I love u" and "BFFS", a small teddy bear from a fair, the first pad I ever bought, the few books I was told to read in school and the card for my very first job, an assistant down at the local Library. I smiled at it while reminiscing about how much I actually hated that job back then. I guess I just wasn't used to an environment that was so calm and quiet.

I left it there, half open, and went in again for the third and last box.

This wasn't my college box, as I didn't have any money to actually go to college. This one wasn't overfilled with fake memories or bedazzled with the intensity of youth; this one was somber in its nakedness. It was plain brown and silent: this was my 'twenties' box. There were two pregnancy tests, a little white dress and a nail. Very much like the first box, I could almost create a whole new story of my wedding and of my marriage, one I had attempted to hold on to and fix for the past twenty years: the white dress I wore for our small ceremony at our local church and for the lunch offered to us afterwards; my two children, Christopher and Alysha, and the nail he used to hang our very first family picture on our brand new house.

When actually I got married when I was eighteen, straight out of high school, and we had our relationship legalized at the city council and celebrated over at one of his friend's house. I was pregnant, and we were going to buy a house and be happy. And I was going to leave my mom and I wouldn't have to worry about what I would find every time I came back home.

I had found what everyone looks for in life: I had found the love of my life, someone I would start a family with, and I was about to find happiness. Only I didn't know he was an addict; only I didn't know he was a dealer; only I didn't know he would cheat on me every week with his friends' wives; only I didn't know he would spend all of his money on gamble and on his vices; only I didn't know he would steal from jewelry stores every gift he had ever given me for Christmas, anniversaries or birthdays; only I didn't know he would be

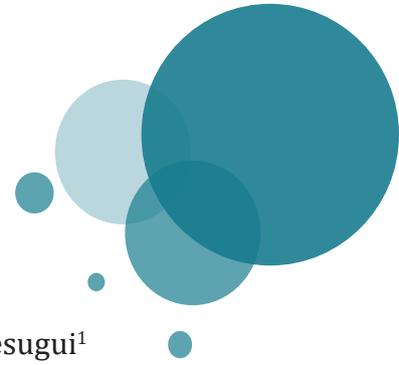
violent and try and hit me with a chair after he saw me talking to a man at the grocery store, or drag me down the stairs holding my hair or pierce my thigh with that old nail I still had in this box; only I didn't know I would lose my baby when running from him after he came home from a binge.

The police found him two years ago during a search on the neighborhood. I was granted divorce and full custody of both of my kids, who I hope are young enough to remember little if nothing of their father. And that was what he gave me.

I got up and looked at all of them: my boxes, my life, my mistakes and miseries. And I felt at peace; ready to let them go and to embrace something else, embrace something better, embrace the unknown, happiness, start with a clean slate in Denver. And what was in Denver? Nothing. And that was exactly the basis of its appeal. No history, no memories, no traumas. Only the chance to give up of all the past and start anew as if fresh out of the womb: excited, optimistic, and full of hope.

Hypothetically

Mari Uesugui¹



Wednesday night, 7 o'clock. She gets off her car and slams the door shut. It's a melting hot evening, mosquitoes' party night. The parking lot is at its limits, just as much as her own patience for today. It took fifteen minutes to find a single spot and this might be the worst spot one could ever find: the entrance to the store seems half a mile away and the post lightings are miserably disappointing, not to mention this huge SUV whose reckless owner might knock her fragile wing mirror off but...

Despite her terrible mood and the long distance and the fiery-tropical weather and the bloodthirsty insects... She manages her way through the parking lot to the entrance of the market and, as she gets closer, the indistinct sound of hundreds of voices and the narrow corridors bursting with a myriad of heads and shopping carts make her whole being falters while she wonders what the hell all these people are doing in a grocery store on a Wednesday night but...

She takes a deep breath, maybe the last huff of almost-fresh air in her life, and venture herself on the wilderness. No shopping cart, they're nothing but a nuisance: she's better off relying on her own arms to carry things around – a decision she regrets as soon as a sloppy man bumps his cart into her stomach. She is in a battlefield without a shield. But it's not worth going back now. So she struggles her way, squeezing through the overpopulated corridors and confusing aisles by herself, avoiding stubborn yelling kids, dodging staggered old ladies who can't decide which soup to take, and attempting to safeguard herself from the wild relentlessly sweaty teenagers while trying to find the few things in her shopping list. Her strategy is clear: get everything as fast as possible and go home. Fish, parsley, mustard, and rush to the checkout line, it can't be that hard. Except that...

She gets to the condiment aisle just in time to see a girl with a curious hair taking the last five bottles of mustard in the shelf and she can't imagine any scenario where a teenager would ever need that amount of mustard besides some secret cult to the almighty mustard god, and even that couldn't be so important as to deprive other people from buying mustard to their special dinner but... She notices a stock of mustard on the top shelf, somewhere five inches away from her reach and she's seen enough comedy movies to know that climbing that Everest in a herculean campaign could only lead to a large-scaled domino effect, so she seeks help from some tall guy and after some small talk and some fake smiles, she can finally check one of the items off her list.

Not far from there, the greenery section is a huge inspiration to start growing her own vegetables at home so she can mishandle the plants by herself instead

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of leaving this job for a dozen of strangers at the market. Getting closer, she catches the glimpse of "SALE" written on a poster, which translates as "ugly but cheap" in this section and she acknowledges the chances of finding anything that isn't half-destroyed are the worst possible and she just thrusts her arm in the middle of the multitude and takes the first parsley leaves she can.

At last, she guides her way by the damp smell of seafood. The attendant is strangely cheery for someone who spends the day being watched by so many rows of staring dead fish. She orders a salmon and the price on the display leaves an emotional bruise but there's no giving up now, not after all of this. She just grabs the fish and focuses on heading to the checkout lanes as fast and smoothly as possible to end this hell's job, even after she realizes the fish's plastic bag has a hole in it and her forearm is all fishy-sticky and...

As expected, the checkout line is stupidly long and there are only two newbies working on the registers and the prospect of waiting for another half an hour behind all these people is infuriating and she wonders what has happened to her life, what has made her end up in a situation like this in a freaking Wednesday night? When did everything become so disturbing and troublesome? Why can't she just go home and have a nice meal with her family?

That was all she has wished for... but instead...

The screaming kids get louder: a boy is pulling his little sister's ponytail. Their pregnant mom pulls him by the wrist, "Stop being such a mean boy!". Behind them in the line, a teenage girl who stealthily slipped some unpaid goods into her bag reproaches Pregnant Mom for yelling at her son, blaming her for being a terrible example to her child. Behind her, a clueless old lady with way too many soup packs in her cart accuses Stealthy Teenage Girl of being disrespectful toward older people, what a terrible generation! And behind her an annoyed woman carrying a leaking fish in her unskilled arms feels even more annoyed by all those fools fighting for ridiculous reasons delaying her dinner when...

Behind her, she hears a heavy sigh... "I just want to go home and have a nice meal with my family"... and she turns around to find a familiar face: Some Tall Guy who got her mustard and she didn't even thank for and...

She gives him a shy smile, she knows how he feels. She understands what it is to be eager to get rid of this mayhem, to rush home and forget the troubles in the world, to prepare this damned fish it took her so long to get, to dine with her family while discussing the crazy events of the week which seemed terrible at the time but sounds pretty funny now, and then to relax watching some silly TV shows until her son sleeps on her lap and she's too afraid to move and wake him up, so she just stays there for a while longer smiling because she realizes it was completely worth it to go to that chaotic market and bear with all that trouble just to prepare his favourite food and see the most precious little boy happy.

She understands what it is to be stuck in here.

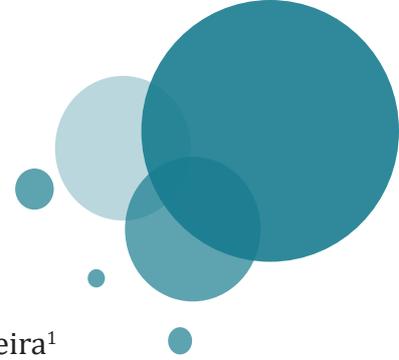
And after all, who wouldn't?

Probably, Mean Boy just wants his mother's attention, because she's been so busy with these papers and those folders and that baby in her belly. And maybe Terrible Example

Pregnant Mom is getting divorced and trying to keep her children away from an abusive father, which is why she has barely slept lately and lost her patience too quickly today. And who knows if Stealthy Disrespectful Teenage Girl With a Curious Hair isn't the eldest of five and had to give up on her studies to work on a low-paying job selling hot dogs to support the siblings her parents are too drunk to care for. And Soup-Enthusiast Old Lady might be spending every single penny of her retirement money on nursing her dying husband whose daughter won't even pay a visit to...

And who'd have guessed that Moody Unthankful Woman With a Leaking Fish hasn't gone home for three days in a row, so a big life-changing project could be finished at her firm, and on the way home, she still has to put up with her claustrophobia issues in this crowded market to buy three miserable ingredients because she feels sorry for being absent for her son the whole week and that, despite the lack of sleep and all the stress she has had to bear in the last 72 hours, despite the ridiculously long time it took to get to the store and find a spot in the parking lot, despite the melting hot weather, the mosquitoes, the chance of a knocked off wing mirror, despite her fear and all her inclinations to see the world as a personally annoying and unfair place... She still takes the chance to shift her perspective from her particularly unbearable world and forget about herself for a second... *Her* terrible day, *her* terrible job, *her* terrible life... And wonder about these other people's lives and...

Of course, none of what she wondered was likely to be true, but none was impossible either. It was just a matter of what to consider.



The Glare on the Glass

Natália Grandi de Oliveira¹

Finger. It seems like the more you repeat a word, the weirder it sounds. Finger, finger, finger. Tom has been repeating this word to himself for the last three minutes.

“Don’t take too long in the shower or we’re not going to have enough hot water for the rest of the week!”

So predictable. That was his wife, Pam. While Pam was worrying about the same old things she has been worrying about since the beginning of time, Tom was too focused on his own hand, trying to figure out how the word “finger” was invented. Finger... sounds a little bit like fine. Fine, thin, long. Fingers usually have these qualities.

“And while you’re there, scrub that stain off the wall, would you?”

That stain. It had been there ever since the water pipe broke when they were traveling and it flooded the whole thing. The dark wooden walls of the bathroom weren’t the greatest achievement or a reason for an architect’s pride. It was humanly impossible to get rid of the mold. It was encrusted in the walls and the termites had been there for so long that they were probably dearer to their neighbors than Pam and Tom.

Their bathroom was so poorly designed that Tom could hardly stand in the corner of the stall. The ceiling was shaped diagonally, just enough to fit the shower and a head below it, but if one intended to step away from it, bending was necessary. It was like one of those campsite chalets you would go to on a weekend getaway with your loved one - but it was not at all romantic, especially because of the smell. Wait, the stain. How did she expect him to scrub it off?

“You can use that baking soda in the cabinet below the sink.”

Well, thank you, dear. That house had so many things to be fixed. Ever since they moved there four years ago, it had given them nothing but trouble. Fix the floor, paint the walls, change the toilet cover. All chores had to be done by the man of the house. What a burden it is to have such a standard weight on your shoulders every day, reminding you of what you’re not, but what you’re supposed to be. At least what people tell you you’re supposed to be. Oh look, a little fly. Hopefully the cat can take care of it later.

Bending away from the shower to wash his hair was so annoying. While Pam talked and talked to herself expecting an answer from him on the other side of the door, he just stayed under the water stream, feeling the drops on his

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shoulders and his hair. As the water ran through his body, he watched the hair on his arm sticking to his skin. He tried to grab the drops with his fingers. Fingers. Fly, cat. Stain.

No, no. Clear your mind, Tom. Shower time. Peaceful time. Alone time. But am I really alone in the shower?

“Bloody cat! You ruined my slipper!”

Focusing on anything for more than 20 seconds was an achievement for Tom. After all, there were so many distractions all the time. When he was at home, Pam wouldn't leave him alone with his thoughts for long; Margot, the cat, would start bothering him somehow; the neighbor would start playing the drums at 6pm every night. With each passing moment, his thoughts wandered far away. With every drop, his wish of not being Tom anymore would get stronger and stronger, to the point where his own reflection seemed like a stranger to him. Tom was a little bit shocked with the feeling he had after seeing his reflection on the glass of the stall. It seems like the more you stare at a face the weirder it looks. Has this always been my face? Have I always looked like this? Is this really all that I am? After staring at his reflection for a while, his face looked funny to him. Almost unrecognizable. On the first 10 seconds, he recognized his nose. It was an inheritance from his Italian bloodline; his mother had the exact same nose and the apparent snottiness that came with the feature. His eyes were as dark as charcoal, resembling his grandmother's eyes. She had penetrating eyes that seemed to hide so much history and pain. Having the same eyes, Tom felt like he couldn't open up to people just the same.

That dimple on his chin, that little touch of sweetness and grace, it came from his father's side of the family. Tom always hated that. People would put their fingers on his chin to mention the dimple and he would always answer with a “yes, I'm aware of that”. He wouldn't allow himself to acknowledge the sweetness that was asleep inside of him. The thorns on the outside were his solution for a world that seemed to dismiss the softness and fragility of the rose petals.

This face. There is so much history in every feature. Every blemish, every wrinkle. But still, it doesn't feel like his “temple”. It doesn't feel like Tom belongs in this skin. Why limit himself so much by this little carcass, insignificant to the world and to himself? He was tired of putting up a frown every day to befit what other people thought Tom was. Every time he tried something different, he would be corrected by people that expected Good Ol' Tom to be Good Ol' Tom. Once he tried wearing a French beanie on a cold day. “Oh, Tom, that is so not like you”, people said. “Leave that to the youngsters, you're too old for that”, he heard from a colleague at work. And then he took it off. But why? Why did he let himself be influenced by what others expected of him? Why wasn't he able to do what he wanted?

Tom was washing his body and lathering his arms. Fingers. He was reminiscing about a time during the previous week when a butterfly landed on his finger. He had allowed himself to be in the moment by watching its movements and grace. The thing is, Tom had always hated butterflies. He had always cringed at the mere sight of a butterfly

and to the thought of it coming near him. It was probably because of what his grandmother had always told him since he was a kid. She said that butterflies released a type of dust that could make you blind. Because of that, Tom developed an unreasonable fear of butterflies and could never be near one without his heart starting to pound.

But it was different that time. The butterfly came near him and it looked like it was feeling out the environment, saying hello. It went away. Five minutes later, it came back and landed on his finger, and instead of acting instinctively, Tom stopped for a minute and let himself be present in that moment. He forgot about his old fears, his past, his prejudice regarding butterflies, and merely allowed himself to enjoy the moment. Its traits were perfect. It was orange with fine black lines that contoured its shapes. It was in perfect harmony with the environment. And so was Tom at that moment.

“Tom, can you leave the shower already? I need help with the dishes!”

Peace. That’s what he felt after letting go of his fear and enjoying the butterfly. He was trying to remember how he felt and how a simple feeling like that was hardly ever present in his daily routine.

Tom turned the shower handle off and let that peaceful feeling sink in for a moment. He slowly slid the shower door open, watching the movement as his reflection faded from his view. He pulled the floor mat closer to the stall and stepped on it while reaching for the towel. He started to dry his skin off and feel every bit of what he called Tom. What people knew as Tom. But he didn’t feel like Tom anymore. Every inch of skin the towel touched felt like a tiny box he put himself in, which didn’t have any holes that would allow him to see the exterior world or even breathe. A box he had made for himself. A prison he had held himself captive in for apparently no good reason.

He grabbed the blue robe that was hanging behind the bathroom door, put it on and hung the towel. His slippers were symmetrically placed next to the mat. Pam would always leave his things in the same place, right where he needed them to be. He never really appreciated the little things she did for him. Feeling clean and refreshed, he held that old rusty knob with his wrinkled hands and opened the bathroom door. Pam was sitting in front of the stone kitchen table. She had made dinner while he was in the shower and had already eaten by herself.

“Jesus, you were taking so long I thought you got taken by the flush. Are you done wasting all of our water?”

Tom couldn’t do anything but stare at Pam. Just the same way that staring at his face for too long made him question his identity, he looked at Pam and couldn’t see his wife anymore. He saw a face, yes, a body and an attitude that was just like the Pam he had been married to for seven years. But he saw that she was also stuck in a little box she made for herself and wouldn’t allow herself to get out of.

“What are you staring at? You’re freaking me out!”

And while she said that, she stood up abruptly, pulling the tip of the towel, which got snagged in her clothes, dropping the dirty bowl on the floor.

“Oh my lord, look what you’ve done! Take that goofy look off your face and come help me, quick!”

The tiny pieces of the porcelain were scattered all over the floor. Tom immediately bent down to help Pam gather the little pieces. She quickly went away to get the broom and the dustpan.

“Move away, move away. I don’t need you getting hurt! Go, move!”

Tom stood up and watched her sweep as she huffed and puffed, complaining about the situation. That was the first time he realized things happened, and they weren’t necessarily his fault. They just happened. The funny thing for him was observing Pam’s reaction to something so simple and silly. He kept on staring.

“What’s wrong with you today? Did you inhale some weird fumes while you were taking the shower?”

Why did she get so upset over little things like these? No, don’t get him wrong, he was not judging. He was just analysing her feelings for the first time ever. Seven years of marriage, and it seemed like he never really paid attention to the things she felt, only the things she said. And considering the way she had always acted, Tom’s anger seemed justified. He was angry because of the way she acted towards him. At least he had thought so until that moment. But that equation had stopped making sense.

He knew this feeling. She was feeling useless. Like a victim. Feeling like the world was against her. And finally, Tom had something else to offer. He walked towards her, close enough to feel her breathing on his neck. She couldn’t look him in the eye. Tom grabbed the back of her neck with both hands and kissed her softly, like he hadn’t done in years.

With his eyes still closed, he moved away and watched her expression change. The muscles in her face, all tightened up in a frown, suddenly relaxed, as if she had had the first bite of her favorite chocolate pie after waiting for hours straight until it was ready to eat. As if an eraser passed by her face, resetting her features to her original, peaceful state. Her eyes were so strongly pressed together that he couldn’t see her eyelashes at first. After that kiss, those flaunty strands came back to the surface. And then, as a stubborn spring that insists on going back to the position it is most used to, the frown came back.

“What was that for?”

She said, in a tone that was very different from the previous one. She sounded like a puppy looking for shelter, scared that its owner would leave it on the streets after taking it for a walk.

Tom remained silent. He was gazing at her eyes relentlessly. He was trying to read her, but her restive eyes kept switching from one side of the room to the other, as if she was an old computer trying to fetch a forgotten file that hadn’t been used in years. She couldn’t focus on his eyes for more than two seconds.

He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her closer. And then what Tom could have never expected happened; she broke down in tears. Her contracted shoulders and her folded arms lowered so much between his arms that it was clear she had finally let go of a weight that had been there for a long time. His bold certainty suddenly went away and he didn't know what to do anymore. He didn't know if talking was the best option, if he should just be there and let her put it all out, if he should ask her something. And then all of those silly thoughts went away when, while sobbing, she released her arms from being squeezed between their chests and hugged him tightly.

Relief. They both felt relieved. Loved. It felt like they had never had a moment like that after their marriage.

Pam pushed Tom away, pulled her shirtsleeves to the tip of her fingers and dried her wet nose.

"You're a fucking asshole."

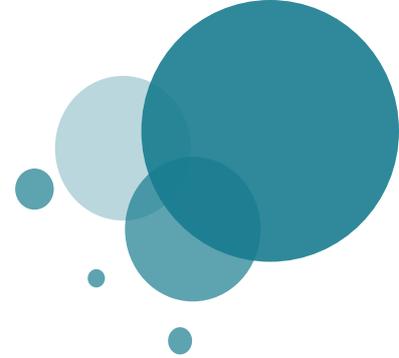
Tom couldn't help but smile. The words were sharp, but her intentions were golden.

"Enough of that. Let me get a wet cloth to clean this floor before the cat gets hurt."

Tom turned away and made his way to the porch. He opened up the entrance door and closed it behind him. Pam said something while he was closing the door, but he couldn't make words out of that. The street was so dark that all he could do was access his memories to recreate the picture of the house he knew was right in front of his. The wind was cold and he was underdressed. But it was refreshing.

"Don't stay there too long or you'll get a cold!"

This time he heard what Pam said very clearly. Getting sick used to be a big concern of his. But not this time. He wasn't scared of the wind, he wasn't scared of the winter. He realized his own condemnation was the only thing that could injure him. And this time he had his mind made up. He wasn't scared of Pam anymore. He wasn't scared of his reflection anymore. His house didn't define him; his clothes and his job didn't define him. For a moment, he felt complete. He was more than his tiny box.



A Remarkable Birthday

Silvia Regina de Alencar Frigatto¹

That morning, when the alarm clock went off, instead of performing the same old ritual of getting up, getting dressed and heading to work, I stayed in bed for a longer time, observing the effort of the first sun rays trying to pass through the curtains. They had travelled, approximately, 150 million kilometers to reach Earth, at 3×10^8 m/s, and now they were blocked by my reluctance in getting up and welcoming them in. I reached for my cellphone on the nightstand and typed the following message to Jane: “Morning... Sorry, but I can’t make it to the office today. Not feeling well.” The answer came almost instantly: “Don’t worry, I’ll handle things. U r the boss and besides... 2day is the day when u can do anything u want ;)”. Jane was not only my business partner, but she was also my friend and one of the few people who respected the fact that I really disliked to celebrate my birthday. However, she didn’t know that this time my birthday was not going to be like many previous ones. It would be remarkable, because it would be my last one.

At last, I went downstairs to have something to eat. While I chewed breakfast, my brain digested everything that I had planned for that day. By the end of the last bite of the apple pie, my hopes of feeling its taste were over. I stood up and walked towards the door, leaving the keys of the *Mercedes* resting where they were. I opened the door and without looking back, I left those 250m² of glass and concrete behind.

Outside, the very first springtime flowers were already blooming. But for me, winter had been lasting for so many years... “I don’t understand why you don’t want to celebrate your birthday! What’s the problem with celebrating life?”, my mom used to ask. “What life?”, that’s what I answered only in my thoughts. For me, it did not make sense to celebrate a lie. This is not the life I desired and I did not become the person I wanted to be. Time passed and I reached the summit of my height. I expanded, while my infant ambitions of becoming an astronaut converged into a tiny spot, immersed in the vastness of my cosmos.

My thoughts were interrupted by the shouting of a crowd gathered in front of the old Ridley family’s mansion. Many decades ago, the Ridleys were the wealthiest family in the area and, consequently, they took advantage of the wide and pleasant space in their dwelling to offer the most remarkable parties of the high society. Years later, the family moved away but kept the property. My father was hired to take care of the place during the Ridleys’ long periods of absence, so me and my family moved to their backyard apartment. Once, during a visit to the main house, my brother

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and I found out a secret room on the second floor. Its peculiarity caught our attention straightaway: the walls had no windows, but the ceiling was made of retractile boards. One night, we finally understood why it had been designed that way. When the ceiling opened, the moonlight invaded the room and we were covered by the numerous stars which dotted the sky. The room, which we fondly named as "Enterprise", soon became my favorite place on Earth and I would spend every night in the company of the Great Bears, Boötes and other constellations. My desire of adventuring in space grew stronger.

But time is a continuous variable. My father got another job, we moved out and the mansion became an abandoned building which, at that moment, was burning in flames right before my eyes. The fire had just started, but it was spreading fast. I paid close attention to what others were saying. Apparently, the firemen had already been called and were on their way. No one knew what had caused the fire. And among all those voices, I heard it... Some kind of reverberation was coming from my own depths. "Help!", the voice said. I recognized it as the weeping sound of that child whom I kept asleep in my memory. The noise raised in me the guilt for having confined her during many light-years into forgetfulness. I closed my eyes so that her lament could guide my errant youth directly to the child's rescue. I ignored the warning screams from the crowd and went inside the house.

Mercury is the closest planet to the Sun. However, Venus is the hottest one, due to a denser atmosphere which retains more heat. Its temperature can reach 450 degrees Celsius. All these information can be found on the Internet, but at that moment, Venus was orbiting my skin and its atmosphere was filling up my lungs. With a huge effort, I found my way upstairs. It took me a few minutes more to finally stand in front of the Enterprise's secret door which, to my astonishment, was already opened, as if my arrival had long been expected. Inside I stretched my arms into the darkness and soon I sensed the sound waves materialize in the figure of a small and delicate body, which I hastened to bring near mine. I could feel the up and down movement of her chest, its rhythm synchronized with the beating of my heart. We were trembling and so was the house... The Riddleys' mansion inevitably reached its death phase and collapsed into itself.

What happened next, not even science nor me could explain. Somehow, when I finally had the courage to open my eyes, they saw a dozen others looking back at me, gleaming with surprise. Apparently, the child and I had beamed down to the front yard. I was holding her in my arms and took her wrist; the light blood-flow was setting a time that was almost over. I knew I had failed her and all that was left for me to do was to apologize... Apologize for having lived everyone else's dreams and not hers. "Now it's too late... And you've grown up already...", said the fading voice in my mind.

I gazed at the sky, hoping I could see an answer hovering beyond the clouds and the blue mantle. My thoughts travelled at the speed of light. All of a sudden, I was taken over by an unexplainable sensation. I felt as if my interior was infinite enough for me to

continue growing inside of it. My skin was the starting point, not the final stop. A deep sigh of relief brought my attention back to Earth. The fragile child was now moving and when I looked at her puerile face, it lightened up with a radiant smile. I'm pretty sure that she was wishing me a happy birthday.

Mystery



Carolina Drama

Beatriz Lanzoni¹

There are many stories in this world, you know. Most of them have a happy ending, some end tragically, and just a few have a surprising closure. However, even fewer are those stories everyone heard about, but no one really knows how it ends. There's this one that happened a few years ago, just there down the South River lane, about a family fight, a so-called misunderstanding, and a getaway. Or so they say. I'm not sure if there's a point to this story, but I'm gonna tell it anyway.

Billy woke up that morning feeling the sunrays burning through his skin. "It must be around ten", he thought, before even opening his eyes. "I definitely slept for too long". He stretched his body and took a few seconds to realize why his back was hurting so much. He slept in the back of his red pickup truck. It was big enough for him and his backpack, but not comfortable enough for many hours of sleep. The truck was parked in front of his house, an old, simple, dirty white house. Billy used to bet if he would be inside the house when the walls decided to collapse and the structure went down.

After a few yawns, he heard a loud noise coming from inside the house. "That must be that little monster", Billy said to himself. "I may be late for work, but I better go check on him before that stupid redneck shows up".

Billy was 22 years old and lived with his mother and younger brother, who had just turned 10. He never met his father, and never spent time wondering where the man might have gone and why he had left him or his pregnant mother behind. Billy was a responsible and hard-working man, who was willing to be a good father when the time came. He did his best to make sure his little brother never missed a father figure. Billy was there when his brother said his first words, when he took his first steps and the first time he fell down while learning how to ride a bike. Billy helped him with his homework, tucked him into bed every night and always brought some treat home after his work shift.

His mother had always been a single-mother. She had had a few boyfriends – actually, too many to count – but never stuck with any men. She was a strong woman when she was alone with her kids, but whenever a new

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man started to visit their house, she would suddenly change her attitude and become a submissive girlfriend, even inside her own home. Billy never understood why she did that, but every time he decided to confront either his mother or the boyfriend, he ended up disappointed, with a headache and a black eye.

Billy jumped out of the truck easily. He had strong arms, which were always ready for work. The noise was getting louder and Billy started to get worried. He put his long red hair in a ponytail and peeked through the window. For a full minute, he held his breath.

The first thing he thought was to look for his brother. He was not inside the house, at least not anywhere Billy could see. But he spotted his mother sitting on the floor, with her head on her hands. Her face was covered with her long ginger hair, but it was clear she was crying. Her body was shaking and she was probably mumbling something, because Billy could see the 6-foot tall boyfriend yelling back at her from the other side of the room. He was a strong man, covered in ugly tattoos that he probably got while he was in jail. He had such an intimidating look! Billy never knew how that man and his mother met, neither why she started a relationship with him.

But Billy couldn't take his eyes off of the shadow between them: it seemed to be a man, but he was covered in blood, laying down on the floor. He was still moving, but it was clear he was really injured. The body tried to move, but the boyfriend kicked him back on the floor.

"What you doin' here?" the boyfriend yelled. Billy heard a raspy mumbling afterwards, but he couldn't understand any word.

"Please, please, stop that! He was just trying to help! You know him, you do!" the mother said. Her face was pale, but her eyes were red, as she'd been crying for a long time.

"I ain't talking to you, woman. I don't care who he is. The place for a priest is his precious church, it ain't a woman's house! I'm gonna ask you one more time, Father. What you doing here? What you whispering to my lady?"

Billy couldn't stay there any longer, just watching. He had to find his brother. He had to make sure he was okay and far away from that mess. But first, he knew he had to help his mother. That man inside the house was aggressive, he knew that well, and Lord knows what he was capable of doing in a state of pure rage.

Father Ezekiel was the priest of the closest church. Mother always went to church on Sunday mornings, but it was Monday that day. Billy had seen Father Ezekiel around many times, but never really talked to him. The priest was a kind man, always bringing simple gifts for Billy and his brother whenever their mother invited him for a cup of coffee, ever since Billy was an only child. Billy never really questioned why the priest was a constant figure in his life, and they never had a proper conversation. Actually, he never thought about it until that moment.

“Stop it, now! You’re going to kill him!” - Billy heard his mother yell.

“He gotta learn he can’t just show up to a married woman’s house. He gotta learn I ain’t stupid, I ain’t gonna be fooled, woman. And after this old sucker goes down I swear to God you and I gonna have a little chat”

Billy heard his mother scream one more time. He peeked inside again, and saw the boyfriend reaching for a hammer and kneeling beside the injured priest. Billy couldn’t watch that atrocity go on for another second. His first reaction was to throw up. He felt sick, dizzy and trembled back to his truck. He knew he had to do something. That boyfriend was going to kill father Ezekiel and Billy couldn’t even imagine what he would do to his mother afterwards.

As he sat down, Billy suddenly realized.

“I think... I think Father Ezekiel is my real father.” He whispered to himself.

It all made sense now. It was like the world had stopped for a moment and Billy had put all the pieces together. He knew the priest didn’t visit the other families much, and the priest came weekly to talk to his mother, usually when Billy and his brother were at school. Since Billy was a little kid, he always thought the way father Ezekiel referred to him as “son” was slightly different from the way he referred to the other kids. Kinder, somehow, warmer and nicer. He always knew he was different, but never quite understood why. But at that moment he knew. It all made sense. That’s why the boyfriend was so angry. That’s why his mother was crying. That’s why he felt rage burning inside him. He had to do something. He had to save his father and his mother from that man.

He got up and pulled himself together. Billy suddenly felt different, stronger. He reached for the first object he could find and walked towards the front door. It was a bottle of milk, which was delivered every morning around nine. Billy could feel his hand shaking, wrapped around the cold glass.

In one second, he got in. In the other, he locked the door. It was too late to back up now, but Billy knew he was doing the right thing.

The adrenaline made everything happen very fast, but at the same time, very slow. Billy could perfectly see every corner of the room, and he watched everything happening at the same time. The boyfriend dropped the hammer. The mother raised her head. The priest gasped for air.

“What the hell –” the boyfriend said, looking surprised.

“Where’s your brother?” the mother suddenly said. She wasn’t crying anymore. Apparently, she was too shocked to express any reaction. She was staring at Billy’s eyes, who looked back at her for a second, before turning his head to the man standing in the middle of the living room.

“Get out!” the boyfriend shouted.

“Shut the fuck up” Billy heard himself say. He couldn’t tell where all this courage came from, but he felt it was right. For everyone. “No one’s going anywhere until I know

what this is all about”

The mother looked away, looking embarrassed. The priest was still gasping for air, trying to say something.

“This ol’ preacher here” the boyfriend said, pointing at the injured man on the floor with his big hand covered by a black leather glove “he was attacking your mama. I came in right on time to teach him a lesson”.

Billy knew that wasn’t true. He couldn’t tell why it all started, but he knew the boyfriend was the one who had attacked in the first place. Billy could smell the breath of alcohol coming from the boyfriend’s mouth as he spoke. He knew that bastard was drunk, and he knew he had to find a way to stop him. He couldn’t allow that drunk to touch him. He knew it was a fight he couldn’t win. Billy then took a few steps toward the kneeled man, hiding the bottle of milk behind his back.

The boyfriend stood up, but he couldn’t stay still on his feet. Billy didn’t think twice, it was his only chance. Suddenly, he carved the milk bottle as hard and as deep as he could into the boyfriend’s head.

His mother screamed one last time. The boyfriend fell down right next to the priest, with blood and milk spreading on the floor.

“Dad, what are you doing here? Why did you have to come back?” – Billy kneeled on the floor and held the preacher’s head between his hands.

Suddenly, his mother got up. She walked to the kitchen without saying a word. She came back holding a white envelope. Her hands were still shaking, but she kneeled beside her son.

“Your father gave us this. He has been paying our bills for years, that’s why he came over, Billy. I’m so sorry!” she said, between sniffs and hiccups. She touched the priest’s face with one of her hands, trying to clean the blood over his eyes. “What are we going to do now, son?”

Billy took a deep breath, trying to think. The adrenaline was leaving his body and he looked around the house for a moment.

“We are going to take the body outside, dig a hole and bury that monster. We’re going to put all of our stuff in my truck and head to Tennessee, okay, mama? All four of us. Daddy is going to be okay, mama. Don’t worry. But we need to find –” Billy was interrupted by the sound of a door closing and a familiar voice.

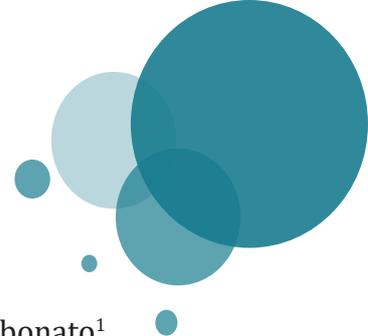
His little brother had just come inside the house. He shut the backdoor and crossed the kitchen singing and dancing to his favorite song. He was holding a bottle of gin in one of his hands and had the milkman’s cap covering his blonde hair.

He got into the living room. The singing got slower. His body got smaller. His voice got lower. The joy suddenly faded away. He stopped by the doorstep and looked at his family. And then right into Billy’s eyes. The clock struck twelve.

Well, now you heard one side of this story. That’s all I know and all I could ever tell you. Unfortunately, here’s where people start to argue. You can ask the librarian,

mystery

the gardener, the baker. Maybe even the cleaning lady and the mayor. They're all gonna tell the same tale. They all knew Billy. But they're all gonna stop the narrative somewhere before the ending. There's only one way to know how this story truly ended. You should go and ask about it to the only person who was there, the only person who really knows what happened. Find him and he might tell you. Go now. Go and ask the milkman.



They Draw Near

Jessica R. Bombonato¹

“The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it”.

(J.R.R. Tolkien)

Whether you believe in it or not, I will tell you it's the most undeniable truth. I assure you that nonsense of fairy stories were enough beaten out of my childhood by the practicality and materialism of this world. It happened on an all too ordinary day to be of any distinctive importance to a busy mind. In fact, have I not been particularly light headed that day, I would most likely not be telling you this tale today.

On my way out, going into my usual work schedule, work that, mind you, my dearest and foolish reader, it is not at all unpleasant or cause of any toil, I found myself stuck in the usual heavy traffic of godless machines, steaming up smoke through their nostrils like angry bisons on a cold wasteland of tall buildings. Usually my path can be quite merry, despite all the gloomy and grey surroundings, as I am a very uplifted person myself dare I say it. But that day for some reason everything was quiet. Even the loud war cries drivers would offer each other in the most eloquent tones didn't seem to exist at all. There was no connection to anything or anyone. We all stood in our seats, in silence and in acceptance.

Sometimes when we feel light headed or particularly empty minded, some claim that we can catch glimpses of things. But those things are nothing more than a tired brain. 'tis a tired brain – I think to myself – and nothing more. Once again! I've seen something in the rough pavement, not three feet away. My rough fingers rub the eyes. With strength to bring it back to the logical world. I look upon the same spot again. There is nothing. Only dust and rock.

The traffic moves again, my focus subtly switched back to the material reality. It moves as if it's a drowsy snake, and some of that drowsiness starts to take over some fellow prisoners. I slide the window open to take in some of the morning breeze, only it feels like I'm breathing in fume instead. Suddenly a strong gust blows. An incoming storm? I consider squinting my eyes to protect them from any debris. Once they are clear again, I see there is no storm coming. Instead there stepped a stately Vulture of our empty days. Perched upon the steel and rock of a short wall, which followed the lane where my car dragged itself endlessly.

Usually Vultures don't stay this close to the ground, instead they stay high up in lamp lights looking for any poor sylvan soul that crosses path with metal beasts. But there was no movement whatsoever, no search for meat, not budging from the gusts, it perched on the wall. Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

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Now should be the part where I tell you a bit about myself. Maybe I have some dull job at an office, or maybe something even worth of praise like a non-governmental organisation, rescuing little animals, maybe that would spark interest and sympathy on your part, as some trophy of an irreprehensible conduct. Something in all of us humans demands us to judge each other. No? Do you really think you can protest against that foolish reader? You are already judging me as I have already judged you, the moment you picked up this piece of paper, all has been thought out. And now you must decide if you want to go on blind into the dark or turn back into your comfortable stance. I too had to make that choice once.



The Vulture stared at me unwavering. It was slightly terrifying at first, but then I became accustomed with its presence, and it seemed to be with mine as well. We stood there in unspoken complicity between secret servants of the world, cleaning after the carnage more glamorous beasts had left behind. Our coat is not shiny and our demeanour is not elegant, but what would be of the world without us? It stared at me, and I at it before I was dragged back to the soot filled reality. The cars began to move and so have I. The Vulture continuously stared at me even after I moved past it. I observed it from my rear window, as the distance slowly grew. It remained on the same spot with its devil given red eyes on me. Of course at some point I had to break off the beast's gaze and focus on the road before me. The river smelled awful, so rotten you could feel it in your eyes, but such is

the price of progress. The burning sensation was not something unusual and at least today it worked to distract my eyes from the image of the bird.

My mind, however, was held captive the whole day. Something felt very odd about that animal, I'm not entirely sure what it was, but the sensation refused to leave my mind in peace. At work some of my colleagues tried to make casual conversation, never really wanting to know what happened. It seems to be the rule of our society, to speak loudly and mean completely different things altogether. I moved about my day as robotically as I could, nothing actually grasping my attention until..

"Did you see what happened on the avenue?", one of the gossiping interns said to someone else I couldn't be bother to name.

“A huge bird flew into a car!”

My attention was suddenly redirected to their conversation.

“A bird? Wow that is crazy!”, the other reacted.

“I know! It was some sort of vulture or something, just flew into the window! The car crashed... it was awful!”

“Those pests... Someone needs to do something about them! They are everywhere!”

“Yeah and they pass down a bunch of diseases!”

As they began to speak more and more, my mind did not follow, instead it was stuck at the image of the large Vulture from that morning. Could it be the same bird? I felt restless, I needed to know. I could not wait until lunchtime to look into it, I had to find out now.

Running down the stairs of the building I stepped out into the cloudy outdoors, I looked around but there was no sign of a car accident whatsoever. Odd, considering this avenue was pretty far from any police or fire departments. I walked along the crosswalk looking for something, anything, a shard of broken glass, or a misplaced rock. But nothing was different, everything was perfectly... disturbingly into place. With a sigh I looked up in faint hope of some divine intervention, but who would know the demons come from the skies instead? There it was. Above a tall street light, staring straight at me once again. The crimson eyes that warned me of some pending doom.

I was once again captive of its gaze on me, it pulled me in softly and violently at the same time. Suddenly the connection was lost and the bird spread its pitch black wings, so huge they cast a shadow over the sidewalk covering me completely, and took flight. I couldn't let it go, I wasn't able to, my eyeballs seemed to have been sewed onto it, so I ran. I ran as fast as I could, bumping into people I will never see again, I had to know, I had to follow.

The bird more often than so, looked down at me, and even seemed to fly slower for me to catch up. I knew it meant something! I could feel it in my bones. I followed it to a very old book shop, honestly I never knew there was one of those around here still, it was like the ones we see in movies and wonder how is it still working. Well... as a matter of fact it wasn't. A large piece of wood was nailed to the door, so old it couldn't stop anything from entering. I looked at the place where a door should stand and was about to look at the Vulture once again. It was on the other side of the street, on another lamplight that blinked from malfunctioning. Of course you must think I'm crazy if I say the Vulture told me to go in. But that's what you are expecting me to do anyway aren't you? Very well.

I went in. Dislodging the rotting pieces of wood to make my way through the dusty place. Some shelves were empty with only spider webs to decorate them, but the books instead were all on the floor, scrambled like a battlefield of untold stories. What happened here I will never know, all I know is what would happen next.

As unnerved as I was, I jumped in a scare when I heard something moving, or rather, someone. An old old man, with a light brown blazer, or maybe it was just filthy and dust that gave it that color, his skin was so dark it was hard to distinct him from his habitat, if not by his yellowed beard, messy and long. I chuckled. "Is that what passes as a sage these days?" I asked to the mirage in front of me, shaking my head to expel childhood memories of far off lands where a mage invites you into wonderful adventures. Surprisingly the mirage replied, very vividly and very much non-illusional.

"I don't know... Is this what a hero passes as these days?"

The coarse voice mocked me bluntly. My narrowed eyes focused on the man, it was a living man alright no matter how eerie he looked.

"What is this place?", I asked him, my tone demanded an answer.

"Aah... that my child is the true question.", he carried an open book, and as he finished his sentence, he closed it abruptly, causing dust to fly off and my throat to itch.

The man laughed at me.

"What is so funny?", I inquired again.

"Hu hu hu", he chuckled with a decrepit voice.

"It's funny how soot and excrement doesn't bother you, while paper and ink sets your body into allergic despair. But the eyes know what they do."

"The eyes?"

The man looked at me again with a knowing look. And we knew what it meant. The Vulture.

"Do you know what is wrong with that bird?", I asked trying to reason with the man. He laughed loudly.

"That is no bird. But you will find out soon enough. For centuries, stories had been forgotten here, and seems like yours is to join in pretty soon."

He walked closer and handed me a book, as old as the others, nearly falling apart. I opened it but the pages were blank. My eyes narrowed and I passed by the pages anxiously.

"There is nothing here!", I continuously maneuvered the pages, looking for anything at all, why would I be given an empty book?

It was when I felt a very sharp sting on my finger, a paper cut. Red liquid flowed from beneath the parted skin and dripped into the yellow tattered pages. Spreading slowly, it began to form a shape, I couldn't tell what it was, but terrified I dropped the book and ran out of the store. The moment my feet touched the sidewalk I dared to look back, and there was... nothing. Nothing at all, an empty space instead of an old bookshop. I couldn't understand it then, and my heart seemed more alive than ever, beating so rapidly I felt like I would explode.

The Vulture remained there, at least that. Staring at me, and now its eyes seemed even more menacing than before. I should get back to my work, get away from this unsettling situation as fast I could. I moved to cross the street and I heard the loud screeching sound of a car horn. The vehicle was coming right at me and I felt immobilized, in a reflex I closed my eyes and covered my face waiting for the impact, the wait felt like an eternity, maybe because, it never came. I opened my eyes and there was no car on the street.

My steps quickened as I made my way back, along with the people that walked by to do their usual tasks. I looked at them, looked for an anchor of reality, when something else happened. Two men fought, argued and cursed each other. Well that wasn't really unusual to be fair, what was unusual was when one of them took a sharp knife from their coat and stabbed the other in the eyes. Both men screamed hysterically as blood spilled against the cement walls of a building. And no one moved out of their way, I was paralyzed by the scene, red liquid splashed gruesomely over passers-by, who still moved their way, not even blinking! The man that stabbed the other then stabbed himself the same way, over and over again on each eye socket, screaming and shouting in pain and horror. I had to look away, the vision was too much for me to handle. I looked down... there was blood on my hands, and it dripped from my own eyes. My heartbeat accelerated and I ran.

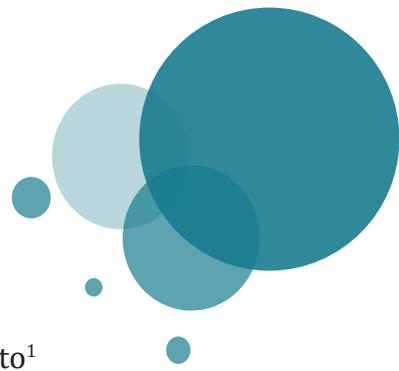
I stopped on a footbridge, with a river of cars running beneath my feet. I dared to look up again, and now it wasn't just one person that committed insane acts, instead everyone around me screamed, and attacked each other, it was as if the world had been taken by rabid wrath piled up from ancient times. The carnage was saturated in shades of crimson. So much screaming, so much hate. There wasn't a single person that wasn't driven mad here. I couldn't understand why, or what was happening, at my feet a trail of something thicker than blood marked the path I had taken. My breath hitched and I saw the Vulture again, it soared high above me, its shadow covering me completely.

"Set me free!"

The shadow floated on the pavement beneath me and the shadow had its own eyes, bright, big and red. My soul was in it, and my soul was dragged to it, seized in it. And it will never be released from it. For those eyes burn into my spirit, and my spirit is in the shadow, and it remains... in shadow.

The Birthday Gift

Julia Muto¹



A man walks down the street of moonlit Prescott, Arizona, carrying a small black backpack over his shoulder. He stops in front of a house and stands there, staring at the windows, looking for movement. He takes some time to think about how he got there, and how the morning felt so distant.

He had walked down the same street, but drenched in sunlight, carrying nothing but keys in the pocket of his black chinos. He stopped when he reached the white, one-story house with a large front lawn. There, he saw an old lady digging holes next to the stone walkway, kneeling in a blue dress and boots, a sunhat covering her calm face. She moved slowly, but surely, potted pansies at her side.

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He stood in front of the house for a moment, watching, until the woman turned to him and smiled.

“John! Come here and hand me these, would you?”

He walked toward her and gave her a pot with purple flowers.

“Why don’t you hire someone to do that for you?”

“That would take all the fun away!”

John sat next to her, occasionally doing what she asked until there were no flowers left. Then, the woman got up, refusing John’s help, looked at him in the eyes and hugged him tightly.

“Happy birthday! I’m so glad you could come.” Her head barely reached his shoulders.

“Oh, Daphne, where else would I go?” He bent down, returning the hug and they headed inside.

As they went from the living room to the kitchen, John looked once more at the many mounted heads of wild animals on the walls, by the fireplace. Their eyes stared straight at the wall on the other side, yet he felt watched. That’s when he felt a sharp pain on his leg.

“Peanut! Stop, you’ll hurt him!”

Peanut was the ugliest dog John had ever seen. A fat English bulldog whose teeth always showed through the enormous, hanging cheeks. Reluctantly, it released its mouth from the leg and walked to the kitchen, an angry look on its face.

“Sorry, John, he doesn’t know how strong he is. Let’s get the cake and go to the backyard, shall we?”

The backyard was surrounded by tall hedges, which kept the garden from the neighbors' view. There were flowers and herbs and fruit trees, and in the middle a small wooden table with two chairs. On the table, there was a small, rectangular box wrapped in blue paper and a white bow. John and Daphne brought out a white cake decorated with pink flowers, a pitcher of lemonade, plates, glasses, and silverware; they sat down and she handed him the box. Inside there was a black fountain pen, with a rounded hexagram on the end cap.

"You didn't have to! This is very expensive!"

"Of course I did, it's your 30th birthday. I thought a writer such as yourself would appreciate a decent pen, even though nowadays people seem to only use computers. Maybe this will help with your writer's block."

John blushed, remembering the blank document he's been staring at for months.

"Thank you, Daph. I don't know what to say. I mean, I'm barely a writer; I only wrote one book"

"Yes, an amazing book! Now, shut up and let's eat."

But Daphne wasn't good at keeping quiet herself.

"It's such a coincidence that your birthday is on the same day my Ted went missing... Maybe that's why life brought you here, to me."

"Would you like me to propose?"

"Heavens, no, you're way too handsome to settle for an old lady like me. I'm sure you will still find a lovely girl to marry. Then, you can bring her here sometimes, because I've gotten used to having company and you're the only person in this city I can tolerate."

"Wouldn't it be better for you to have more friends? I mean, you live here all alone, right? And I've never seen your family... I won't be here forever."

"Unfortunately, everyone has always been solely interested in Teddy and his money. Like they knew what he was really like. Since we didn't have any children, I feel no obligation to leave my inheritance to my sister; I've told you about Jasmine. Even though I've still got some good years left, I've already decided: it all goes to the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society."

"Wow... everything? The company, the estate?"

"Well, I want you to have the house. And Peanut. I can't trust him with anyone else."

"Oh, are you sure? It's a very big house". And a very angry dog.

"Yes, but maybe I should teach you some gardening before I go. Jesus, let's stop talking about this, I'm as healthy as a horse!"

Daphne smiled, and John took a sip of his lemonade.

*

After standing in the dark for a few minutes, or hours, John heads to the gate.

As usual, it was open. He moves it slowly, sweat in his glove-covered hands, doing his best to be silent. Soon he hears a creak and freezes. Peanut stares at him from the backyard. John opens his backpack while maintaining eye contact; he pulls out a large bone; Peanut's face changes from deadly serious to open to negotiations. John walks toward him, extending the bone in front of his body like a shield, and when he reaches the dog, Peanut calmly takes the bone and proceeds to a corner of the backyard.

John enters the house through the clean kitchen. There is no sign of the silverware they had used. Making his way to the living room, he feels the warmth of the now unlit fireplace, which does little to distract him from the dozens of eyes that follow his movement.

He walks down the hallway for longer than he thought possible, reaching the open door to the bedroom. With eyes accustomed to the dark, the moonlight makes everything clear: the dresser, the nightstand, and the king size bed, with a lump in the middle. He enters the room with hesitant steps, trying to reach one of the pillows. When he touches it, Daphne doesn't move, so he takes it as fast as he can. He heads to her side of the bed, hugging the pillow against his chest, looking at his friend. She still seems to be fast asleep.

John stands there, thinking about alternatives. He's had this conversation with himself earlier, and couldn't find a solution. The change of environment didn't help. Nothing shut down the voices of his editor, his peers, his avid readers, the debt collector, all wanting more from him. He lifts the shaking pillow above Daphne's head, and drops his weight on top of it.

She finally reacts, shaking her body wildly. They struggle, her face still covered, until a loud bang echoes through the room.

*

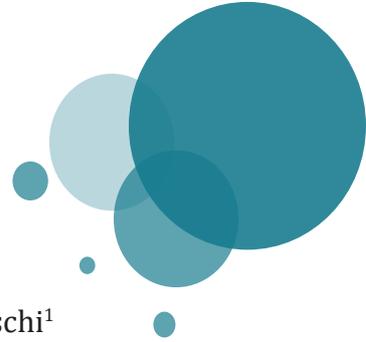
A shadow moves in the backyard, digging deep by the vegetable garden. The shovel moves quickly until it hits and cracks something.

"Sorry, Teddy"

Teddy's skull is hit once again, this time by the small barrel of the Smith & Wesson. On top of it goes the new body, wrapped in a large rug. When it falls, the rug reveals the dead eyes, always staring forward. Daphne looks once more at both men, and, with a long sigh, starts covering them with dirt.

A Strange Man's Tale

Nicolle Bedeschi¹



For us, who lived on *this* side of the river, the Mist was more than a manifestation of nature. It was an entity.

Sometimes it used to stretch its fingers to our village, putting people on alert. In such moments, it was mandatory to hear things like “Avoid letting your kids alone out there”, which people gladly obeyed. For decades we heard many rumors. Disturbing statements from the ones who crossed to the other side of the river, where a dense fog accumulated from time to time. They were stories about disappearances, shadowy figures, whispering bodiless voices. However, death was never involved. Because of this, some people used to treat the Mist as just “ominous weather”. I used to be like them, but a day has changed this forever.

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Early on this same day, I had had an argument with other kids about not “being brave”. I have never liked water, so I have never learned how to swim. Everyone has their weaknesses, things they know and things they don’t. But some children don’t care. I just couldn’t be the only one who couldn’t swim. Upset with their judgment and searching for something to prove myself, I decided to spend the afternoon all by myself, wandering the outskirts of the village.

When I was about to leave, my mother intercepted me.

“Leaving again? There are a lot of things I need help with here, young man.” Her apron had spills of a new meal and strands of hair covered her face.

“I just wanted to go for a walk...” I replied, not hiding my bad mood.

“Yeah?,” she was frowning. “You look as upset as you were earlier. We talked about this. I know it’s hard to ignore mean commentaries, especially at your age, but there’s no use to overthink it. The truth is everybody cares about what other people say. What you must do is not letting they know *you* care.”

Those words really impacted me, resonating in my head for years. A mother’s wisdom always seems unreachable when we are young, but after you grow up you discover the time lost with silly things. My mother’s wisdom was one of the things I most admired about her. She was a tough, hard-working woman, more practical than sentimental. This trait helped to shape who I am today: someone who does what needs to be done. But back then... I was a little different.

“Now, give this to Mr. Martin.” She indicated me a brown package.

“What is in there?” I asked curious.

“What I owe him. You don’t have to open it.”

“Why do you owe him?”

“He lent me his car last week. We hardly need to go to town since we have everything here, right? Our car is totally out of question.”

“Mr. Martin always says he doesn’t want anything back...”

“That’s because he’s kind. But decent people don’t forget to appreciate favors properly,” commented my mother in a severe way. “Now, handle this directly to him. If he’s not there, you bring it back to me. Then you can go for your walk.”

I nodded positively with her words, but a thought occurred in my head and I had to say it.

“Mom... have you ever wanted to live elsewhere? I mean, don’t you ever get tired of living here?” I asked, wondering how many other places I could see. By that age, I had explored almost every single place available in and out of the village. Mother didn’t really know, but I was a kind of a brat in that aspect.

“You are a very curious creature, aren’t you? You are more curious than ten children together. One day, I’ll take you to see the world. But right now... we are fine this way.” She finished talking abruptly.

It was just the both of us living in a small but comfortable house. We had everything we needed, although we didn’t have much. A simpler lifestyle in a remote settlement in the woods with an air of mystic stories; paths of stone covered in moss and hidden waterfalls where we used to go on warmer days. Still, that’s hardly enough to adventurous people like me, a trait I still carry.

I was opening the house when she intercepted me once more.

“Son? Today is weird out there. Stay away from the river. You know why.”

“Alright,” and I left to the cold air of the autumn.

After doing what I had to, I suddenly decided to do something that children, or at least some of them, used to practice when bored. A well-known hobby of ours: to spy old Abe. I passed in front of his house just to check if he was really there. Then, I hid in the bushes of an empty house nearby. It really seemed like a haunted house, full of bushes all around it and falling tiles.

Abe was an elderly man with an obscure past. Adults never told us much about him, but curious children end up discovering much more for themselves. He had lost a wife to illness and, little after, his son for unknown reasons. After the misfortune, Abe had become extremely recluse and odd, whispering things we couldn’t understand; doing things people called the beginning of madness.

So, a man loses his family. Naturally, his mind suffered a great deal and a part was gone forever. But the other kids and I understood little about suffering. We secretly ignored the recommendations of “letting the poor man alone”. When we got bored we used to go out to do strange things that could grant us some terror and excitement.

Old Abe was some sort of terror.

I observed him for long minutes. The serious man spent his time doing regular things such as feeding the chicken, harvesting vegetables, nothing out of the ordinary. He was using the same grey beret as always. Most of the children used to receive an angry look from him, but not me. He never looked at me or spoke directly to me, which I considered a good sign.

Getting tired of spying him in that uncomfortable place, I considered leaving for something more interesting. But then, he stopped in the middle of the garden looking ahead like a statue. He stood there for a long time just doing nothing. Maybe he had memory problems; not exciting, right? After what seemed ten minutes, Abe grabbed a wooden chair from the house and started walking.

Where is he going? I thought, really curious. So I just followed him.

Pardon me, I was just an eleven year-old boy. Today, an adult, I realize the dangers of my actions. I miss the ignorance of my childhood; the innocence of that time is no longer possible.

Abe was going to the limits of the village. No one to stop him or me. I considered going back, as I should, but if I discovered the man's secret I could tell the others with pride. He never noticed my presence, as if trapped in some sort of enchantment. Abe put the chair in front of the river and sat. The only thing to observe beyond the gray waters and the boats was...the Mist.

Poor man, why nobody ever tries to help him?

Then, strange things started to happen. I heard creepy sounds coming from beyond. Even now it's hard to describe, but it sounded like some sort of buzzing... like an insect.

A giant insect.

The strange behavior of Abe and the cold weather started to make me regret not doing as my mother told. Well, I was out of danger, out of the waters. Nothing to worry... except the buzzing. I noticed the air becoming even colder. The Mist seemed to expand beyond the waters and it started touching the ground. I could barely see the mountains.

"Go... go... where... is going to work?", he mumbled with great effort. The rest of the words were indecipherable to me.

A voice from someone or something *answered* him. I didn't get the words or the language, but *it was* talking to him. I convinced myself that something really bad was inside the Mist. I had never heard anything unusual like that before.

Why nobody ever tries to get rid of it? It's making people go weird!

Abe stopped talking. He stood up, walked towards the water and went right into the Mist without even blinking. What followed was no sound of water, someone drowning, or anything beyond silence.

I quickly started to panic. *I should have stopped him! What if he dies? Where is he going?* But I couldn't swim and could barely see anything in front of me. I stood there for minutes, waiting for him to come back, but nothing happened.

I ran straight home, very certain that something took Abe forever.

“Did you deliver the... what happened?” said my mother seeing my state of despair.

“I saw it! Old Abe entered the river right into the Mist while talking to something! I think... I think he’s dead! We have to help him!”, I screamed desperately.

The way she looked at me indicated a long lasting punishment.

“W-h-a-t did you just say, boy? Abe?”

It didn’t take many minutes to convince my angry mother, but it took several hours to convince the others. They just couldn’t believe old Abe was trying to kill himself. Our neighbors looked at me and then to each other, strangely. They knew something, but they would not tell me! People spoke to me with pity: it wasn’t my fault, I was too young to do something, that Abe was a lost cause, that he was an old, crazy man.

Their faces were not as terrible as how I felt for being a coward. Again. I have begun to fight against acts of cowardice since then.

For one week, I forced everybody to search for him. The village, the river, the forest. I even went to his house. Amidst his dusty possessions, dirty like they were untouched for months, I found old diaries with a writing very difficult to decipher; a small tube television with the antenna broken; portraits of his dead family, all gathered on a single dresser. Nothing could help us in this quest. The awkward thing was that I was told Abe’s body was nowhere to be found. How could that be?

Then, some weeks passed. People seemed to forget easily what had happened and even the Mist let us alone, for everybody’s happiness. But I couldn’t forget.

My mother called me to the fireplace one night, visibly worried about me. As punishment, she used to forbid me to leave the house, keeping me for tedious hours inside my room. Strangely, even after something terrible like spying Abe, leaving town and going near the waters, she didn’t punish me. She wasn’t exactly angry. I was surprised by this behavior; just the look of disappointment on her face would have been enough to make me feel regretful.

“Son, sit here with me. It’s time for us to talk about... what happened with Abe. You are going to turn twelve soon. I think it’s time for you to start processing some... things.”

“I want to know what everybody’s hiding. I know you’re all hiding something! The way you look at each other sometimes...” I replied angrily. “What is in the Mist? Why don’t you all do something about it? I don’t get it.”

“Okay. The Mist...” she cleared her throat, “is something we still don’t understand. It seems like some people... *very* few people here in the village can see or sense the Mist like more than just “fog”. Each person sees different things. Some hear voices, others a wave of uncomfortable thoughts. But the rest of us? No, we see and

hear nothing. We all tend to avoid the Mist because of these few people. But it's more like these individuals are sick or something like it. You heard things there, right? Speaking to Abe? Well... you might be one of these people, son."

I already knew I was the weirdo reporting absurd things, like some skeptical people used to mock me. What worried me was Abe's fate.

"So... Abe was like me, then?"

"Yes. Yes, he was. But there is a problem..."

She stared at me as if considering stopping or going on. I saw an expression of dismay I had rarely seen in my mother's face.

"Son, Abe didn't die the day you saw him at the river. He's actually been dead for six months now. Don't you really remember? Everybody was informed..."

I remember my heart beginning to pulse quickly. I no longer knew if it was a dream or reality. I could only hear my mother's voice calling me in a worry: *Marcus... Marcus...*

Romance



When Will You Tell Her?

Danielle Chinkerman Goldenberg¹

Elisa's hand reached for the radio as soon as the song had started.

"Oh, don't change the station! I love this song!" Ashley pleaded inside Elisa's car, and the driver exchanged a brief look with her brother, Jay, as if searching for help.

"She hates this song", Jay stated.

"Oh, come on, Elisa, how can you hate 'My Humps'? It's just the best song ever!"

"For idiots" Elisa replied, joking. "No one will listen to this crap inside my car."

In 600 meters, turn right, the electronic voice from the GPS instructed.

"Ok, I'll admit it, it's crap. But it's some funny crap. And it sticks to your mind."

"That's exactly the problem", Elisa replied. "And it's annoying."

"Come on, please?" the girl in the backseat pouted her lips.

"Yeah, please, look how adorable she is" Jay mocked, pretending to take her side.

Elisa laughed and turned the volume up.

"Don't you say I never did anything for you, Ash."

"You're the best, E. If you had another brother, I'd marry him."

"Hey, wait a minute", interrupted Jay. "What's wrong with me?"

Ashley smiled widely.

"Nothing. But you're my best friend. I wouldn't risk losing you."

Then she got back to singing the lyrics. Jay smiled back, only this time, his smile couldn't reach his eyes. Ashley didn't notice, but Elisa did.

In 200 meters, turn right.

As soon as the song ended, Elisa turned the radio off, hoping to avoid any other hideous song to play inside her car. Besides, they were close, now.

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"You guys are coming home with me, right? Ash, I'll drop you by, if you don't wanna sleep over."

"Yeah, that'd be great. Thank you."

You have reached your destination.

"And we're here", she said, stopping the car near the entry and turning off the GPS app. As soon as she parked, Ashley opened the door and got out. Elisa looked at her younger brother with some concern in her eyes.

"She looks gorgeous tonight", Elisa said.

"Doesn't she always?" he replied, half-smiling.

"So, when will you tell her?"

"Shut up, E.", he answered, shaking his head. She could tell he was nervous. His hands wouldn't stop moving and he couldn't look at her.

"I'm serious. You have to tell her, she's as blind as our aunt Cynthia."

"You heard her. Best friend. Wouldn't risk losing me. All that crap."

"So change her mind, hon. At least try."

He finally looked at her.

"What if I lose her?"

"You won't. Now get out of this car."

He opened the door.

"And, Jay?"

"Yeah?"

"How can she like My Humps? Seriously, your girl needs to be educated in music."

Jay laughed and got out of the car, waiting for his sister. Ashley was waiting by the door, searching for her ID, and "*damn*", he thought, "*she really did look great tonight*".

*

"Hey, Nath!" Jay greeted his friend. "Happy Birthday, dude!"

"Thanks!" Nathan shook his hand and gave him a hug, patting his back enthusiastically. Ashley hugged Nath too, making the gift box in her hand look a bit messy.

"Happy birthday, Nath" she fixed the bow on the top of the box and handed it to him. "I hope you like it!"

He thanked her, even though the sight of Elisa made him forget about the gift in a split second. Jay and Ashley exchanged looks and walked over to where their friends were, leaving the other two to talk.

The girls were all on top of a cellphone. Tinder open, having a small debate and then switching left and right as the faces appeared on screen.

“Fancy place” Jay whispered to Ashley, she agreed with her head and a sweet smile that almost made him curse. His hand was on her back as he led her to the small group of people on the table.

“Hey, Ash and Jay! Come over! We’re picking Tom’s next girlfriend.” Lucy greeted them.

“So that’s his phone, huh? Poor guy.” Jay commented, searching for their friend.

Tom was nowhere to be seen. “Where is he?”

“Hitting on some random girl over at the bar,” Miranda said, waving her hand in the direction of what must have been the bar.

“Does he know what you girls are up to?” Ashley asked.

“Hmm, probably not. But he did leave his phone with me, so he was aware of the risks”, Lucy smiled widely.

“I’ll go get him”, Jay said, his hand leaving Ashley’s back as he walked away.

He spotted Nathan on the way, by himself, and asked him where he could find Tom.

“Probably over at the bar”, was his answer. Jay laughed a bit and made a mental note to talk to Tom about drinking too much. He’d make a threat to take Tom to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

“Where’s Elisa?” Jay asked.

“Bathroom.”

“So that means you guys can get around other people now without sticking your tongue inside the other’s mouth?” Jay grinned.

“Stop being such a jealous brother.”

Jay stretched his shoulders and straightened up, as to look taller than Nathan.

“I am not.”

“Jay, when will you tell Ashley you like her?”

“Seriously, could everyone just please stop asking me that?” he replied, annoyed, looking around to check if the girl in question could have possibly overheard the conversation. He ran his fingers through his hair, starting to wish that Elisa got back soon, so Nathan would be distracted.

“We will, as soon as you tell her.” Nathan smiled and pointed over, gesturing to someone at the bar. “There’s Tom.”

*

Ashley was chatting with Lucy and Miranda, who finally returned Tom’s cellphone to its owner, once both Jay and Tom had gotten back from the bar. Tom seemed happy enough about his new matches on Tinder, and thought it was all very funny. They were

talking about the next trip they would all make, probably to some city in Ireland. Jay was defending Cork, Lucy wanted to go to Belfast, Ashley and Miranda said they had to go to Dublin (again) and Tom was inclined to go to Galway.

Jay excused himself for a moment, going after another flute of champagne. Tom was about to follow him, but Jay was acting like his babysitter and had given him a lecture about Tom having had too many drinks already.

The discussion followed on for a little while, even though each one of them knew it was pointless. They would visit all of those cities, but the fun was to decide in which they would spend most of the nights. *The fun was also in winning the small discussion*, Ashley thought.

Her thoughts were interrupted when this tall, dark haired guy with blue eyes touched her shoulder, making her turn, and asked her to dance. She glanced at the girls, half-smiling, before accepting his outstretched hand and letting him lead her to the dance floor.

They followed the slow song absentmindedly, swaying to one side and then the other, having that kind of conversation you have when you're meeting someone for the first time. His name was Daniel, he was studying Law, got a good job and had two younger brothers. They continued to sway, his body getting a little closer to hers. She told him a bit about herself, too. Twenty-two, no siblings, enjoyed swimming when she needed to clear her head from university chaos, worked at an office.

From what she could tell, he smiled a lot. She asked about his hobbies, but wasn't able to hear his answer because someone dropped a glass on the floor. When she looked around, searching for the origin of the sound, her eyes met Jay's.

He was the one who let the Champagne flute drop to the floor. Its liquid spilled around, getting to his clothes and some of the girl's dresses. Some of them let out small screams and almost all of them looked at him with fury in their eyes. Jay didn't even notice. His eyes were locked on Ashley's. His face was pale and she noticed he was breathing heavy. Then he seemed to return to his self, turned away from her and walked towards the opposite way.

"Is everything okay?" Daniel asked, and only then, she also felt herself returning completely to the moment. Only then she noticed she stopped dancing. Daniel kept looking from her to where Jay had stood only moments before, as if trying to understand what had just happened. As she gave no answer, he asked again. "Ashley, is everything okay?"

"I'm sorry", she said, looking at him. "Excuse me."

And with those words and confused thoughts, she went after Jay, crossing the hall filled with people, trying to spot his curly hair above the crowd. She went to their table, asking for him, but he wasn't there. She saw Tom and Lucy exchange worried looks, but none of them said anything. Ashley turned around and continued to search for him, Tom took his phone out of his pocket and started to call Jay, but before he could pick up, Ashley was already gone in the crowd.

To her surprise, she found him four minutes later, at the bar, two empty shot glasses on the counter, the third one on the way to his mouth. She sat beside him.

“What is the meaning of this?” she asked. Her voice sounded angry, was she angry? Why was she angry?

“I’m drinking. It’s a party, isn’t it?” his voice a mixture of hurt and anger. Why was he hurt?

She turned his face to her.

“I asked you what you are doing” she tried again. “What’s going on?”

His eyes drifted away from her face, back to the shot. He took it in and asked for another one, ignoring her. He was mad, but he wasn’t mad at her. He was mad at himself, for being such a coward and then being pissed off that some other guy other than him had asked her to dance. But something about seeing her in another guy’s arms, smiling that smile that lit up his day to some guy that wasn’t him, something about the whole situation made his insides burn.

So he was drinking to stop those thoughts.

He couldn’t answer her questions, because he had no idea what he was doing.

She was starting to get mad at him, too, but his body was slowly absorbing the alcohol and things felt out of place. He looked at her. She looked furious and her mouth was moving fast, but he couldn’t make sense of her words. His other shot was placed in front of him, and he drank it too, as if searching for courage in every drop until the last one. She slapped him in the arm as he drank, almost causing him to choke.

“Ash” he said. She had stopped talking and looked at him, waiting with her arms crossed in front of her. “I’m sorry.”

“About what?” she asked, her tone was sharp.

He closed his eyes and prayed his sister was right and they were really made for each other, because if that wasn’t the case, he was about to blow the whole thing to the air.

“I got jealous.”

“That’s stupid, I don’t even know the guy” she replied, unaware of what he meant. He held her hands in his, making her look at him again, before he explained.

“I got jealous because I’m in love with you. And you’re as blind as my aunt Cynthia, as Elisa said earlier.”

He probably shouldn’t have said that last part, but it just slipped through his lips. Her eyes widened as she sat there, with her mouth slightly open, saying nothing. He could hear his heartbeat and for a second, he wondered if she could hear it too.

“You’re drunk”, she finally said,. Untangling her fingers from his, she got up and returned to their table, not looking back even once, leaving Jay feeling like he was sinking under water and no one would throw him a rope.

“Woah, what’s that look on your face?” Tom asked. “Did you find Jay?”

“He’s at the bar, getting himself drunk, the bloody idiot!” she spat.

“What happened?” Tom’s face turned immediately to worry, Jay wasn’t the type to get wasted, *he* was.

“He said he is...” she didn’t think she could finish the sentence. Her friends looked at her, she shook her head and breathed in deeply. “He said he’s in love with me. But I’m pretty sure he only said that because he is drunk and got jealous.”

The table was silent. Everyone had this almost scared look on their faces, like they were all afraid to say something. Suddenly Tom got up and went to the bar as fast as he could, almost running.

“He saw you dancing with Mr. Tall and Handsome?” Lucy asked, carefully..

“Yeah, that’s why he got jealous.”

Every time she rewound those last minutes in her mind again, she got a bit angrier. *Why am I angry?* she asked herself for what felt like the hundredth time.

“And then he got drunk?” Miranda looked like she was trying to solve a math problem.

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying. What is the matter with all of you?” she slapped the table, trying to get some sense out of her friends. Why was everyone so weird all of a sudden?

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him he was drunk and then...” her mind was confused. “And then I left.”

The shock on Miranda and Lucy’s faces was all it took for her to notice. She covered her mouth with both of her hands.

“Oh my God. I’m a horrible person!”

“Girl, that man has been in love with you ever since I can remember.” Miranda said, still trying to find a way to keep her mouth shut.

“He... what?” Ashley was trying to make her brain understand those words, all of that situation, but it seemed impossible, almost like they were trying to explain it to her in ancient Greek or something.

“He looks at you like you’re a goddess or something”, Lucy agreed.

“How come you’ve never told me?” now she felt like accusing them. “I mean, what kind of friends are you?”

“It was not up for us to do so”, Lucy raised her hands as to calm Ashley down.

“Yeah, and it was not our fault you were too clueless to notice.”

“Miranda!” Lucy reprimanded her friend.

Ashley felt like she was about to vomit. It couldn’t be. Everyone knew but her, and how could she not know? Taking things into consideration, Elisa’s comments, the boys’ jokes, it all made sense now. And it was just too much.

She needed to get away from there. She needed a drink.

When she started walking, the girls asked where she was going, as she replied something. It was either "I'm going to the bathroom" or "leave me alone", she had no idea which one had gotten out of her mouth, as she thought both of them at the same time, over and over. Either way, none of them went after her. It was always Jay that went after her, always worried and wanted to know if she was fine, refusing to let her alone when he knew she wasn't, even if she lied to his face. Jay. She thought about him and her stomach revolved in itself.

Reaching for the bar, she sat on the opposite side, trying not to be spotted by Tom or Jay. Jay was wasted, and Tom was making him drink some water. His headache would be shit the next day. She kind of hoped hers would be hell as well.

A couple of drinks later, she was feeling dizzy and Tom had left Jay there by himself. She was so mad at him for not telling her. Best friends, that's what they were! They weren't supposed to have secrets from one another.

Another drink was put before her. She glanced at Jay from her hidden spot. He was taking another shot of something that looked like whisky. He never drank whisky. But then again, he barely ever drank anything. And he never lied to her. Not until tonight. She was feeling betrayed, and anger drove her to finish that drink too. When she asked for the other one, she almost didn't recognize her voice. She was also drunk.

Tom returned with Elisa, who hugged Jay and gave him a lecture in front of everyone, after all, he was her baby brother. "If she doesn't see what a great guy you are, she doesn't deserve you!" were the words that travelled through the crowd to get to Ashley's ears.

"He lied to me", she muttered to herself. Then, determination struck her like lightning, she felt the need to tell it to his face.

"Jay!" she shouted, from where she stood, stumbling on her way to him, Tom and Elisa.

"I think now's not exactly the best time", Elisa started.

"You're a liar!" Ashley spat, poking him on the chest, fury inside her eyes. "How could you not tell me?"

"You just proved that I shouldn't!" he replied, his voice loud.

"I'll take you guys outside", Tom said, reaching for Jay's arm, as he led her by the hand. "You need some fresh air."

"You also need to stop yelling in the middle of the party", Elisa agreed. "You don't want to ruin Nathan's birthday."

Once outside, they were both breathing heavily, and Jay asked Tom and his sister to go back to the party, as *this shit was personal*, as he stated.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you", he said.

"You are a fucking idiot, that's what you are. We were supposed to be friends!"

"Yeah, obviously I fucked that up, too."

Only then she noticed he still had a glass on his hand. She slapped his hand, making the glass fall onto the grass, and slapped him again, this time on his arm.

“You should’ve told me!” she accused him again.

“So you could have broken my heart earlier?” his eyes sustained her look, defiantly. He was hurt, she could tell. She had hurt him. This thought made her heart ache.

“I was the last to know, and you know what?” she got closer to him, her hands moving everywhere. “I don’t even know if we ever were friends!”

Now he looked confused, but if anything, more pissed off.

“What the hell do you mean now, Ash?” he tried to take her hand, but she didn’t let him.

“I don’t even know if we were friends at all. I mean, did you always take care of me because you liked me or because we were friends?”

“BOTH!” he yelled, as if it were obvious.

“How can I know that you didn’t do everything just because you liked me?”

He shook his head, she wasn’t making any sense. Of course he took care of her and worried about her because they were friends. Of course he did those things because he liked her too. Those things were always intertwined.

“You know me”, he simply said.

She stopped, dizziness blurring her mind. He tried to hold her hand again, and this time she let him. She kept looking at their hands, their fingers intertwined. It felt safe. It felt right. She thought it would be different, that it would feel different now. But it didn’t. It still felt right.

“I was your friend because that was what I could be”, Jay’s voice was soft now. “I just wanted to be with you, anyway you wanted me.”

“So what changed?” she asked, her eyes still on their hands.

“I realized I would lose you sooner or later, if I didn’t try.”

She looked at him now: Her best friend. She remembered her comment inside the car, about marrying Elisa’s brother, if she had another one. That sounded almost cruel now that she knew. His hands were still warm in hers, and she felt stupid. Her thoughts drifted on to imagine the whole scene differently. What if she had seen Jay dancing with some girl, some pretty girl she had never seen? Would she be jealous, too?

Would she be okay by knowing that he could have a girlfriend, and with time, that he would do all the things he used to do with her with this new girl? That one day, she’d be nothing more than an old friend, who he never sees anymore? That someone would run her hands through his hair when he was laying on her lap, watching some stupid movie on TV? That, just like earlier, when she left somewhere, wanting to cry, Jay would not be there to make sure she was ok?

Her chest ached at those thoughts, and she thought about how right her hand felt in his. She wondered what it would feel like to be with him, as more than friends. It was so weird that she had never thought about it before. It made so much sense now.

She looked at him, and he was still waiting for her to say something. She had left him without an answer at the bar, the first time he said those words that changed everything. And she didn't say anything now too, but she needed to.

Instead of saying anything, as she didn't think she could put everything she was feeling into words, she threw herself in his arms and kissed him. She felt drunk, and he was also drunk, so it was a quite messy kiss, but none of them cared. The kiss tasted like alcohol and strawberries. A part of her was shocked they had that conversation in such an altered state and still managed to understand each other.

*

As they got back inside together, Tom decided to celebrate the new couple, handing them both more flutes of champagne, as if they weren't wasted already. Tom himself was quite drunk, but none of them seemed to care, and everyone drank a little bit more than a little more. One of those "I'm too drunk to know I'm too drunk" moments that make you drink another drink when you should've stopped drinking after all.

"Ok, whatever, let's just get out of here", Jay said. He pulled Ashley's hand and crossed the crowd, as if there wasn't a single person in front of them. The only reason they got back inside was to get her purse that had stayed on their table. They didn't even say goodbye to anyone. They left the party, got in a cab and in the absence of logical coordinates, ended up at Jay's flat. Ashley did try to explain her address, but after annoying the taxi driver with loud laughter and scrambled words, Jay convinced him that the drive to his place would keep them inside the vehicle for less than fifteen minutes. That statement seemed to please the cabbie, who also gained a few extra pounds as a tip, due to the inability of the passengers to make complex mathematical operations, like addition, in that state.

They tripped a bit on their way across the building hall, and soon they were inside the elevator. It took them three stops on the wrong floor before finding the right one. Jay had pushed two buttons that 'looked a lot like his', and Ashley tried to correct him, unsuccessfully. The apartment door was open and Tia, his lizard, walked around the sofa.

"Jay, I told you a thousand times to lock your front door. You always leave it open." Ashley started a failed attempt to scold her best friend, but the tone of laughter in her voice was evident, making her lose all the seriousness of the subject. "One day you'll come home to find out there's nothing else in here anym-"

Jay pulled her towards him, stopping her from finishing the sentence. Without much thinking, he touched her lips with his. There wasn't a lot of thinking about the kiss, by any of them. Somewhere deep in her conscience, Ashley heard an insistent little voice telling her that maybe that wasn't the wisest of decisions. Still, for some reason, she couldn't care enough to break the kiss, nor to take her hands off that curly and so soft hair. Jay guided her through the flat by a path that she already knew: the one that led to his bedroom.

As they crossed the room, his hands unzipped her dress, and soon enough that dress was nothing more than a bunch of fabric on the floor. Jay's bed was soft and inviting, and Ashley found herself lying on it, his weight pleasantly over her body, until they were interrupted by a strange and insistent noise coming from the living room.

"Shit, that's Elisa's ringtone." Jay cursed, sitting down and sobering up in a burst. "I'll be right back; she'll kill me if I don't answer."

Ashley could hear him answer to some very tough questions, such as how they left and where they were. The lack of Jay's body heat made her shiver, and she easily slipped under the blankets.

Meanwhile, in the living room, Jay was trying to answer in a way that guaranteed the other side's comprehension. After hanging up the phone, he threw it on the sofa and suddenly felt all the tiredness that the day had provided. He lifted Tia, putting it in its little house, before heading back to the bedroom. Containing a yawn, he crossed the doorway and found his best friend sleeping in his bed. Jay took off his suit and put on his pajama shorts, leaving his worn clothes on the floor. Then he joined Ashley, pulling her close in a tight hug before he fell asleep too, embraced by her perfume scent.

*

Ashley woke up with a throbbing headache and none of the courage needed to open her eyes. Confused memories danced in her mind. An attempt to speak French at some point of the night, stumbling a couple of times because the ground was moving. She only opened her eyes when she felt her skin against the sheets. "Whoa. Something's wrong here." The searing pain she felt when the light got into her eyes was only subdued by realizing that she was lying in Jay's bed. In Jay's room. In addition, nearly without clothes. She wondered what the hell had happened the night before. With a lot of effort, Ashley lifted out of bed, searching for the homeowner.

"Jay?" she asked, her voice sounding a bit hoarse.

"In the kitchen", he answered, and she headed to the right room.

"What happened last night?"

"Hmm, please don't scream", Jay frowned as he requested. "And good morning to you, too."

"I meant it, Jay. What happened?" Ashley leaned against the wall, holding the blanket around her. Jay came close to her, holding a glass of water and a small pill, probably an aspirin, and gave them both to her. She took them without question.

"What do you recall?" He looked at her, analyzing the girl.

It was her time to frown. Damn headache.

"Remembering hurts", she simply stated. Jay laughed a bit, turning off the stove and distributing the boiling water into two cups, both over a small tray.

"We had our first kiss" he risked taking a glimpse her way, and she didn't seem as

confused as he thought she would be.

“Drunk first kisses don’t count”, Ashley said, as a completely neutral comment. Not as if she was saying that, they needed another one to make it count, or wanted them to forget the whole thing that happened. She wanted to say exactly what she had said and nothing else, and Jay understood that. That was one of the reasons they became best friends in the first place.

“Strawberry tea?” he asked, even though he didn’t need an answer, knowing all too well that that was her favorite flavor.

Ashley nodded slowly as she headed to the couch, looking for Tia. It was taking a sun bath on a corner, near the window, and it looked happy. “Of course it’s happy”, she thought in a bitter way, “Lizards don’t have headaches.”

Jay sat by her side, supporting the two cups on the table in front of him. Turning to face her, he smiled wondering how she could be so adorable with a hangover. Then he pulled her hair from her face, leaning his hand on her neck and gently pulling her close, kissing her again. It would be a lie to say that this kiss wasn’t premeditated, once Jay was thinking about it since he woke up.

“But hangover kisses count”, he affirmed, before taking the cups again and giving her the one with strawberry tea.

“Hangover kisses count”, Ashley timidly agreed, blowing the hot liquid before taking the first sip, as she tried to hide the little insistent smile on her lips, without much success. “So I guess we need to talk about yesterday.”

“You do remember”, he accused her.

“Some things, yeah. I guess we need to talk about it, don’t we?” Ashley moved her fingers alongside the mug, staring at the tea.

“I guess we do. But can we not, right now?” he frowned a bit and she looked at him, putting her mug on the tray again.

“You were right. I was being an idiot.”

He laughed and the sound was a mix of pleasure, because she loved his laugh, and pain, because she was hungover.

“I didn’t say that,” he stated. “You did. You called me an idiot.”

“Well, I’m correcting it now”, she said, matter-of-factly. “I think we should try.”

“What about that ‘you can’t lose me’ speech you gave yesterday in the car?”

“I won’t, will I?”

“No.”

“Then I guess it’s fine.”

“You’re such a coward”, he said.

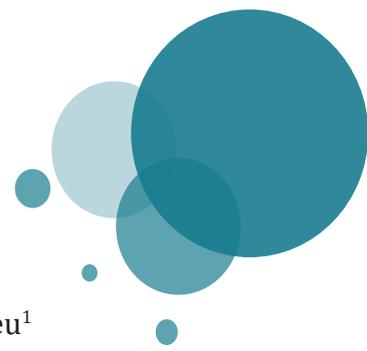
“I *was* such a coward”, she corrected him. “I’m being brave now.”

Jay smiled and leaned over to plant a kiss on her forehead.

“We are.”

The Flow

Julia Abreu¹



Anxiously holding herself from swinging her feet under the table, Olive munched her cereal as quietly as possible, wishing her rainbow tie-dye hoodie could shelter her from her mother's curiosity as well as the cold. The faint light pouring from the window seemed to have reached peak greyness since the previous week, leaving no doubt that summer was officially over, and the kitchen felt chillier than usual on that Sunday morning.

The girl had hoped that no one would be awake that early on a weekend, and was looking forward to an untroubled, quiet breakfast as she poured the milk over her cereal. That dream had ended ten minutes ago, however, once her sister also came to the kitchen to make herself some coffee, followed shortly after by their mother, who sat neatly on the chair next to her youngest daughter, showing no particular interest in food but instead on why her firstborn had dressed herself up so nicely that early.

"I'm hanging out with some friends today", answered Sandy, pouring the coffee into a mug. Unlike her sister, Olive wasn't one to drink it, but she had to admit the warm smell that spread over the room was a much needed colorful addition to the otherwise frigid environment. "Tyler's throwing a party that we wanna go to."

"I don't like the idea of you heading off to some party at night before you go back to school", said the mother, raising a single eyebrow. Olive repressed a shiver. She could only hope not to receive a similar reaction to her plans after her mom's attention would shift from Sandy to her.

"Mom, *relax*", said her sister, finishing a sip. "It's in the afternoon. We're just gonna order pizza or something."

"Why am I only hearing about this now?", asked the mother. Sandy looked genuinely offended for a moment. Olive chewed her cereal as slowly as she could, hoping her current invisibility would last forever.

"You *knew* about this! I told you last week, how I had plans for today! I said I was going to Ali's, remember?" She fixed her hair and took a long sip from her mug.

"I thought you were going to Ali's for a sleepover, not some boy's party", said her mom. The sister rolled her eyes so vehemently her head motion nearly turned into a hair flip.

"*God*, mom, we don't *have* sleepovers anymore, we're not *twelve*", she

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scoffed. "Ali's just giving me a ride to the station, then we'll meet up with Kate and Jen so we can head to Tyler's." Olive had no idea of who those people were. She stopped recognizing the names of Sandy's friends the moment her sister finished middle school.

"Will Emmet be there?" Her mother asked as she straightened her back.

"...Yeah." Mumbled Sandy as she pulled out her phone and swiped aimlessly, the dull tap from her fingernails on the screen filling the awkward silence that drowned the kitchen like a tidal wave. The shade of red from her nail polish matched her jacket, its golden zipper shining along with her earrings, nearly hidden behind her silky locks of tamed brown hair. Olive pulled up the worn-out sleeves of her own sweater over her hands and ate another spoonful of soggy cereal. "Why?"

"You know I don't like that boy, Sandrine." Sandy sipped her coffee. Olive wondered how someone could sit so perfectly poised in an ashen kitchen on a Sunday morning. She chewed her cereal so slowly the cold milk had turned warm by the time she swallowed it. "Did you hear me?"

"Jeez, lighten *up*, mom! Will you just let me *live*?", snarled the girl as she pocketed her phone. "We've been going out for ages and you haven't even tried to get to know him!"

And there it was – they were arguing again. Olive could guess their dialogue line by line from that point on, a wasteland of "you're not old enough"s and "that boy means trouble"s from her mom with no actual progression or depth, deaf ears for her sister's arguments to fall upon, no room for her opinions to flourish. Olive mixed whatever was left of the milky soup in her bowl, letting her mind drift apart from the aggravated voices in the kitchen by watching the swirling wavering of wheat in the whitened whirlpool, wishing to be somewhere else.

The clinking clash of china brought her back to the present when Sandy fiercely put her empty mug in the sink and filled it with water. Whatever was left of the coffee scent from before was gone, like the smile on her sister's face, and, shortly after, the sister herself, slamming the front door on her way out.

Olive was on her own now.

She took another spoonful from the bowl, fiercely avoiding eye contact. There was nothing left to distract her mother's attention from her, except for the fading remains of the argument that had just taken place, and she could feel the lady cooking up a new conversation piece. Each second of anticipation felt as long as an entire day passing – and it might as well have been, for the kitchen now felt as chilly as if winter had arrived early. The cereal bits had been soaking up in the milk for so long they dissolved almost immediately upon touching the girl's tongue, but she took her time chewing it regardless. Her mother was sitting both far too close and miles away. The girl's sight was fixed on her stagnant bowl as the rest of the room shifted around her, bending the rules of space and time. It made her feel dizzy.

“So!” her mother’s voice pierced the silence. “First day of high school tomorrow, huh? Aren’t you excited?” She put her elbows on the table and rested her head on her hands attempting to look friendly, but Olive found that the eagerness in her voice and implicit demand for an answer longer than a single syllable made her sound like an inquisitor. The girl swallowed.

“A little bit”, was all she could come up with. Honestly, she’d been trying to keep her mind off of it, enjoying whatever bit of summer freedom she still had left. She ate another spoonful.

“Is everything set for tomorrow? Do you want me to help you pack?”, asked her mother, as if the subject wasn’t a regular school day but instead a journey to another country. In many ways, Olive wondered if that’s what it would end up being like. She shook her head, both as a way of trying to block those thoughts and of answering the lady. “Well, if you say so. What are your plans for your last day of vacations, then?”

Olive swallowed much slower than necessary.

“I’m heading for the pond”, she said hurriedly, taking another spoonful into her mouth just as soon as she’d finished talking. She felt her mother arching forward, still keeping her head supported by her hands. Her back looked upright and stiff despite her leaning far into the table. Olive stirred whatever was left of her milk.

“Will you be meeting your *friend* there?”, asked the mother, as if the words left a sour taste in her mouth when she spoke them. Olive pretended to chew. A droplet fell from the leaky faucet into the coffee mug inside the sink. The low dripping noise spread throughout the room. Ripples formed in the overflowing water.

Olive swallowed as she nodded. “Yeah. I guess.” She stuffed her mouth again and stared at the now empty bowl, drawing circles in the last drops of milk with her spoon. The faucet dripped again. Her mother was silent. Olive wished she could call that silence “awkward” like before, but the word she was looking for was “terrifying”, “atrocious”, “threatening”. Other synonyms she listed mentally instead of paying attention to her mother’s stare while her wrist moved in circular motions. The mushy cereal felt like a bowling ball descending through her throat. Another drip.

The mother laid her back on her chair, impeccably so. “I hope you’re at least planning on changing before you leave, Olive Brooke Heidi.” The girl shrunk on her seat and hid her hands under her armpits. Her hair draped messily over her shoulders, hiding her blushing face. She looked at the dripping sink. “I honestly don’t understand why someone would wear such flashy clothes in public!”, continued the mother. “There are much better options, you know. Maybe you should consider a wardrobe change now that you’re in high school! You’ve been wearing that thing for so long, you could try finding something that suits you better, something not as... *weird*.” Olive continued to look at the ripples in the sink. They both knew she wasn’t talking about the coat.

“I *like* it”, grunted Olive. The mother sighed.

“Well, if you say so.” She stood up, blocking what little light was pouring through the window. “But people change during high school. Just look at your sister, and whatever her friends’ names are now”, she said, waving her hand in the air as if she were shooing flies away. Olive hastily got off her chair and tossed her empty bowl in the sink, violently opening up the faucet. The water bubbled into her sister’s mug and slowly flowed down to the rest of the dishes until everything was hidden by the flood. “It’s inevitable, darling. You’re going to grow out of it someday.” Olive closed the faucet.

She stomped her way through the hallway and swung the back door open, planning on slamming it shut like her sister had done earlier, but holding it back before it hit the frame. Olive sighed and held on to the doorknob extra hard instead, telling herself that it had the same effect, but knowing that it was a lie. Her breakfast weighted down on her stomach as if she’d eaten a block of cement. She raced through the backyard and into the nearby woods.

The clouds from earlier started to fade as Olive made her way through the trees. Her heavy marching steps became less stiff as they rustled through the fallen leaves, and she soon saw herself skipping playfully through the roots. She waved her arms back and forth, dancing, soaring, letting the light shine on her face, spinning around in her coat, rejoicing over how it was finally getting cold enough for her to start wearing it again – get it out of the closet, let it swing freely in the crisp outside air, show off all its colorful spirals. Treading down the same path she’d taken so many times before, ever since she and Pearl had discovered the natural pool of water located halfway between their houses, she tried to wash away as much of her talk with her mother as possible.

There were no previous tracks leading to the pond, which made the girls conclude that they’d discovered the place when they first found it – even if they were later told that it wasn’t true, they still felt like it was. Olive never understood why no one else had wanted to claim that spot before; something about it utterly fascinated her, even if she couldn’t tell what it was.

She found Pearl leaning over the very edge of the pond, staring at the water with her knees straight and her back arching forward. If Olive didn’t know any better, it’d look as if her friend was preparing to dive – except her next movement wasn’t jumping, but instead glancing back and skipping over to the end of the slope, her messy blonde hair bouncing wildly along with every stride, as she saw Olive carefully stepping downhill. Halting a few feet before the other girl, Pearl put her hands on her waist and tried her best to sound cross, although it was clear she was struggling to keep her mouth from curling into a smile.

“Olive Brooke Heidi, you are *late!*” She folded her arms and turned her back to her friend, both to add theatricality and to hide her grin. “I am *very* disappointed in you.”

“I’m terribly sorry, ma’am!”, replied Olive, covering her mouth in return trying not to snicker, bowing apologetically. “It won’t happen again”.

“Well,” said Pearl as she twirled back around, “I forgive you. But only because you’re wearing my favorite coat”, and playfully pinched Olive’s sleeve, pulling herself a little closer, meeting her friend’s eyes as she lifted her head. Olive gazed back, feeling her heart skip a beat as the sun shone down upon her friend’s hair, covering her head with an effect that almost looked like a halo, tiny spikes of swirling light containing the entire visible spectrum. She smiled, suddenly dreading every moment they’d spent apart since the last time they’d hung out – and then her focus slowly slipped to the swirling pond behind Pearl’s giggling figure.

“Thinking about taking a swim?”, asked Olive, although she already knew the answer.

“And having some mutant fish bite my toes out? No way!”, Pearl smirked as she replied. “Besides, it’s probably too cold for that”, remarked the girl while Olive took off her coat and tied it around her waist, still keeping her eyes on the pool. Pearl looked at the ground.

“...Yeah. Fall’s already starting”, was Olive’s way of continuing the conversation – the weather. The girl knew she was only validating a flimsy excuse of a reason not to swim, but it might as well have been any other motive. Despite having claimed the pond as their personal spot, they had yet to gather enough courage to swim in it, or to at least admit the real reason as to why they wouldn’t. “*Nobody knows where that water comes from*”, even if the spring lied a short hike away from Pearl’s house. “*The water must be dirty anyway*”, despite it being so transparent they could see several feet below the surface. “*It’s too deep, we’d probably drown*”, even if both girls had been members of the school’s swim team. “*The current is too strong, it would drag us down the river*”, despite it being the softest of swirling motions. “*It’s so cold, we’d catch hypothermia!*” in spite of the water never feeling icy to touch, even during the winter.

Reasonable, actual explanations, Olive told herself every time they were stated, even though she had yet to convince herself of that. Still, she felt almost grown up for thinking of such logical prohibitions, especially when her own mother’s reaction was telling her daughter she’d “most likely catch a disease from swimming in that sinkhole”, and Pearl’s dad saying “once a little kid tried to swim all the way down to the bottom, and they never found her body”. It did inspire the girls to create their own fantasies, though, and Olive laughed to herself upon remembering how she once tried to scare Pearl by saying that whoever swam in the pond was turned into a hideous, disgusting monster – to which Pearl smiled widely and answered “I think they’re turned into mermaids instead”.

But that was years ago.

The girls sat at the end of the slope, Pearl spreading her arms on the grass and leaning back, Olive hugging her own knees and leaning in, far enough from the brim of the pond not to risk accidentally falling into it, but close enough so that the gentle murmur of the swirling current could still be heard if one were quiet enough. The water dragged itself sluggishly around the edges, some of it pouring out of the pool through an opening

in the rocks that led to the stream that passed by Olive's house, with whatever remained forming a mellow whirlpool at the center. The light never seemed to reach the bottom, and the lack of exploration from the girls themselves led to no way of telling how deep it actually was. The rays of sunlight that shined upon it seemed to shatter into a thousand shimmering pieces and to be flushed down to the bottom of the vortex. Tiny diamonds washed under, sinking, submerging, swallowed by a whispering spring. "What sorts of riches could be sought underwater?", Olive wondered.

Pearl broke her trance by exclaiming "So, high school". Olive looked over at her friend, only to find out she'd also been staring at the pool all this time, and continued to do so now. Olive followed her lead.

There wasn't much to be said in response. No matter how much they pondered over it, there was no way of predicting what their lives would be like after school started the next day. It'd be foolish to deny it'd been all the girls thought about during the summer, no matter how much they tried not to, and how they still felt just as lost, staring at a future that was just as dark, extending to limits unknown.

"I've heard there's twice as much homework", said Pearl again, as Olive made no effort to break the silence. "But I don't think you and your perfect record need to worry about that". Olive snorted and rolled her eyes, but still smiled. It was hard to keep a serious expression around Pearl. "We should have like a study meet-up thing, you know? If it gets too hard?" Olive looked at her friend, realizing she was staring at her now.

"We haven't even started classes yet and you're already thinking of studying?" She grinned and looked back at the pond. "And you say I'm the nerd."

"Hey, I'm not the one who went shopping for textbooks in the first week of July!" said Pearl as she laughed and poked Olive's shoulder, who smiled vaguely in response.

That shopping trip already felt like it'd happened in another lifetime, just like the eagerness to actually use the books. Olive could picture the corner of her room where they'd sat gathering dust all summer long, and where they still remained even though they should've been moved to her backpack. The version of herself that looked forward to reading them was a million years behind her, just like the time to use those books seemed to lie equally far ahead into the unknown land of tomorrow, and Olive felt as if she were being dragged into it despite never having chosen to take that leap. The sun danced in the twirling water, slowly melting away, tiny specs of light falling to the bottom of a liquid hourglass.

Olive saw Pearl start to fidget through the corner of her eye, her friend's hands aimlessly digging through the dirt around her feet until she pulled out a pebble. "Are you nervous?", she asked quietly. Olive watched as she ran her fingers through its smooth edges, guided by its curves in circular motions. Her eyes were void of expression; her brow was free of wrinkles; her shoulders were equally relaxed.

The girl opened her mouth, but no words seemed to come out. She thought of when her own sister entered high school, about three years before then. She thought of how Sandy's nails were never polished, or how her hair ran scruffily down her back, or how she hosted sleepovers with her friends and celebrated because their parents let them stay up past midnight – the same Sandy who started to drink coffee because she got far less than eight hours of sleep at night, and wouldn't go out unless her shoes matched her jacket. Did she also feel nervous back when she was in Olive's place? Olive could only remember how jealous she was of her sister, but the glamour faded as she became closer and closer to entering that world herself, and whatever remained was buried in anxiety.

"I don't know", Olive answered, and it was true. "I guess I am", even though "nervous" alone wasn't enough to describe it; but then again, she didn't know which other words to use. Inside her, she felt a spiraling turmoil so paradoxical that it just translated into numbness, a hurling nausea too heavy to gush out, an inability to compute the true dimension of what was to come – and it didn't help that she avoided to think of it at all costs, fiercely ignoring whatever it was that she yearned for, or why the feeling was there in the first place.

However, as the water continued to swirl around in the pond, Olive couldn't help but smirk – it crept into her, the sick sort of satisfaction in seeing a slight possibility of success, despite all odds and declarations, and knowing someone else is suffering through the same fate. She was glad to be there, sharing that shimmering sunlight with her friend beside those whispering waters, and she was even gladder to have her by her side for the rest of her life as well, just as when they started middle school, and even before that. It was a sense of warmth and comfort hard to explain, and even harder to overwrite. It rushed up to her throat, quick and burning like bile, but what came out of her mouth was a sigh of uncanny excitement. She turned her hopeful eyes back at Pearl and smiled.

But Pearl wasn't smiling.

She instead pulled her arm back and swung it hard at the pond's direction, releasing the pebble she'd been fidgeting with. It hit the water and bounced back up once, twice, and fell into the liquid vortex. The ripples expanded slowly from the center, forming the subtlest of waves around the brim. Olive swallowed hard.

Pearl scanned the area with her hands in search of another rock. "Remember what you said", she started as she picked up another pebble "about how you turn into a monster if you jumped in there?" and motioned with her head to the pond, blushing a little.

Olive nodded, feeling glad that she wasn't the only one to hold on to that story. "What if...", Pearl hesitated, her hand shaking a bit as she fiercely held on to the rock she'd just found, and Olive felt herself clasping her own hands together in anticipation. "What if that's what happens when you enter high school too?". The tips of Pearl's fingers turned white from her grip, and she swung her arm again to make the pebble skip on the pond.

Olive followed its trajectory, flying from that choking grasp into freedom, and then into the water, slowly submerging to the unseen bottom, her heart sinking along with

it. "It was just a story", she said, even though she knew that's not what Pearl meant – and, even worse, had never tested out the theory to see if it really were untrue. The light followed the rock until both were swallowed by the vortex, transporting them into a land yet to be unraveled.

"You get it", groaned Pearl, but Olive didn't want to admit that she did. Maybe that was the real reason her sister had stopped talking to her friends from middle school, or why her mom didn't like Sandy's boyfriend, or why she'd had an increasingly sickening feeling in her stomach as summer turned to fall. How could she even be sure she wasn't going down that same path? Or, even worse, she thought as she retraced the pebble's trajectory by following the expanding ripples on the water, how could she make sure she'd follow the path she wanted to follow, if she ever came to find one?

"I don't think that's what happens", she said, and tried to find reassurance in the fact that it wasn't a lie, but her cracking voice betrayed her in revealing that she couldn't quite say it was the truth either. Pearl saw right through it.

"Well, then *what* happens?" Another rock skipped twice, and then inevitably sunk. Pearl already had a new pebble, passionately squeezing it with her hand close to her chest, breathing sharply. Olive choked, as if her own throat were being crushed instead, and instinctively held her own arms as if to return the favor.

"I don't know what happens", said Olive.

"Then you agree that *something* happens", snarled Pearl, automatically arming herself with another pebble as she tossed the previous one into the lake.

"I don't know if anything happens", said Olive, feeling her shoulders grow tenser and tenser, wondering what it would be like to be that rock.

"Does nothing happen, then?". Another question. Another violent arm swing. Another pebble being passionately gripped.

"I don't know!". Another split second of Olive wondering what it would be like to be that same pebble, held by that same hand, swung into those same waters.

"What's going to happen, Olive?", Pearl raised her arm ready to throw again but stopped the motion mid-air. She turned to her friend, flushed and heaving. "What's going to happen to us?"

Olive met her eyes, but couldn't bear holding that gaze. She hugged herself even more fiercely, staring back into the swirling pond. "I don't know", she wailed, her voice so faint it was barely audible. Olive closed her eyes. "I don't know", she whispered, and she wished, and she watched the whisking of the pebbles play in her mind as her thoughts wandered – and she opened her eyes again to the sound of the waters whispering back.

The swirling pond murmured, comforting, inviting, the sun breaking down into a thousand glistening colors, twisting around in spiral patterns, sinking into the unknown bottom, dancing, playing, plunging in an invisible flux. Countless treasures hidden deep, wishing to be discovered, dashing, glistening, looming. Her own blood flushed up to her

face, her very own vortex of feelings gushing up as she asked “Do you want something to happen?”

“...Do you?”, was Pearl’s response.

Olive stood up.

Untying her coat from her waist, she kicked her shoes off her feet and started to roll up her pants until they’d reached her knees. She looked over at the pond, the wavy watery colors in a swirl, twirling, entrancing. She’d never feared that she wouldn’t like it; she feared she’d like it too much.

“What are you doing?”, asked Pearl, getting up in a jolt.

Olive stared deep into her eyes, yearning, longing, glimmering. “I’m choosing to become a mermaid instead”.

She offered Pearl her hand.

Step by step, they swayed into the water, washing away their wishes, answering their wants. The soles of their feet, their ankles, their shins, their knees, their bodies, hand in hand, eye to eye, swirling, swooning, swimming – glistening and glancing upon the other’s soul, the sweet sense of success, of possibility, of sincerity. One last look of reassurance, a glance to eliminate their longing, and they were set.

Swinging their arms back, arching forward, leaning in, they lunged their hands onwards, launching each other further than they’d ever dreamed of, and plunged.



Connection

Kátia Mayumi Torikai¹

She was disappointed with me. She didn't say anything and she wouldn't stop me from going, but I knew she was. My mom avoids being overprotective and restrictive, she's more the kind of person who wants me to learn the hard lessons of life on my own. Instead of attending the lectures with her, I was going to a college party. "What lectures?" you may ask. Well, it's hard to explain, but I think we basically learn how to become better people there. I'm aware that since we've started attending them, I avoid judging people if they're not doing anything harmful to themselves or others, 'cause you know, it's their lives. Let them be, for God's sake. I try not to cultivate negative feelings towards others, and try to be kind.

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But lately I've been wondering whether their attitudes towards life are appropriate or a little bit too compliant, because their main lessons state that we must keep a positive energy in order to improve the situation of the world. Hate will only provoke more hate and we need to be able to break this vicious, harmful cycle. See, I believe in all that, as crazy as it sounds; I really do think our energy has the power to influence the environment and those around us. However, how can I keep a positive vibe when I look at the news and what I see are gang rapes, civilians being murdered without remorse, LGBTQ people being hurt or even killed because of whom they love? Should I keep a positive energy and just pray, hoping for a better world?

'Cause I can't do that. I get enraged. Sad. I want to fight, and cry, and scream. In these lectures, the actual main goal is to become a saint; ascend spiritually to a level where you're above mundane and carnal attachments and supposedly attain the power to help others and eventually save the world, basically speaking. I know that if I told that to my friends they'd laugh at me, not because they're evil or they're one of those 'friends' in movies who are actually douchebags. No, they are good people. It's just that becoming a saint seems like such an ingenuous and pretentious goal.

But I'm getting lost in thoughts here. I hurried up to the kitchen, hugged my mom and said goodbye. Maybe one day she'll understand, I thought, and I knew she was thinking the same thing. I walked to my friend's house, who is basically my neighbor. While he was getting ready I supposed that people who saw us from afar would never guess we were usually talking about the apparent lack of sense in our existence and sharing depressive thoughts, since our laughs were so loud

and we liked to dance even with no music on, and it is not like we were pretending. We've talked about that before. There are moments in which we are so happy and warm and it's like we've never been sad or could ever be again. Then two days or two minutes later, it's gone. I think we were both missing those moments for far too long 'cause we were feeling a physical urge to go to this party. So we drank two cups of wine and then headed straight to the campus.

When we arrived, the music was already on but I wasn't hyped yet, so I took two shots of whatever-that-was. My mind was instantly affected and when I looked around, it seemed as if I could see everything in slow motion, and it was so distinct even though my thoughts were slower: people laughing, traces of weed in the air, bodies swirling and going up and down. One of my friend's favorite songs started playing and he just looked at me, offering his hand, innocently blinking, no words needed.

I took his hand and we basically ran to the dance floor and I soon forgot about anything else. I wasn't thinking, I was just feeling the movements of my body, the heat, and my heartbeat uniting with the music beat. My friend and I made a hair flip in the same theatrical way, and that made us laugh so much I had to rest my hand in his shoulder for a few moments, while recovering my balance. I looked at him and his whole face seemed lit up. I loved the fact that he was the kind of person who never looked away. I knew he was happy. I was happy.

One more shot. Now my mind was definitely dizzy and I could feel my movements getting slower. A guy next to me was looking in my direction, and kinda unconsciously we began to move towards each other. He dragged me towards a wall and lifted me up. Lips, hands, hips. After what seemed like half an hour (or was it five minutes?) we went different ways, simple as that. I went back to the bar.

Two more shots. I found my friend on a bench outside and we leaned on each other. Why did I do that? I didn't even know that guy. But it felt good while I was there, so how could it be wrong? At this point I saw that some people had already 'lost their dignity' and were peeing on bushes, crying in the corners, throwing up on the grass, and I was feeling a little bit nauseous myself. Why did we drink that much? I suddenly felt miserable, and might have cried if my eyes weren't dry for so long. Probably this feeling of emptiness, which was growing inside me once again, was the reason why people did those things, and I sometimes wondered if everyone feels that way. Because it honestly didn't seem like it, and people from my family and some of my friends seemed to live in a state of blissful ignorance of their inner self. And if they ever felt that emptiness, they denied it to everyone, including themselves. I wondered lightly, if I tried harder in my spiritual practice would that diminish this void within me?

The cool breeze of the night made me feel better and helped me clear my mind as I inhaled deeply. I looked at the people again, that giant organic swirling mass of people, and I couldn't help but think that we're so beautiful. Incredibly flawed, naïve creatures, just trying to find some plenitude. Is it so bad to be human, after all? Is it so wrong to feel sad, and angry, and euphoric, and melancholic, and feel desire and passion? Suddenly I was very

conscious of the warmth I was feeling as my friend was resting on my chest, and his deep sigh didn't pass unnoticed. I felt like my cheeks were burning because for some reason that single moment felt much more intimate than any other thing I had done with that guy... Phil? Will? It didn't matter. I noticed he suddenly stopped moving for an instant, and when we looked at each other, I wondered if... No, I would NOT let that happen. We were not like that. We liked people but we didn't get attached to them, because that was too painful. It was some kind of rule we implicitly established for ourselves, for us. I was so confused and overwhelmed I felt like I couldn't breathe properly and my heart was beating so fast and my mind was getting dizzy again.

However, at that very moment my favorite song started playing. One thing that we had in common was that we overanalyzed everything: society, our friends, our thoughts, our feelings (if we still had any). But at that moment I was tired of it. I didn't want to think anymore, and neither did he. So I offered my hand, smiling, and he grabbed it, smiling back and already standing up and guiding me back to the people, to the music, to the heat. Back to the chaotic mess we belonged to.

Worldbuilding



The Mountain and the Wind

Carla Batista de Lima¹

The wind was blowing against the carved walls of the Stone Temple, as it did every day since the Temple was made. It fought against the bare faces of the empty and enormous mountain, before people ever laid their eyes on it. It wouldn't stop blowing, even after the ones that had once lived for those Walls became no more than dust. Uma was carving the drawings of ages past into the walls of the main chamber, as she did every day throughout the many, many years she lived there - first among her colleagues, and at some point, continuing all by herself. But on this day, someone else was within those walls, and that hadn't happened in a long time.

The imperial officer hesitantly entered the main gates, coming down the great corridor. The air of self-importance and superiority he had obtained with his post in administration was partially gone due to the fear and curiosity the place inspired, and there were many reasons to be curious indeed: the Temple had become almost a legend, and the rumors that a priestess still lived there were both frowned upon and laughed at. When Cart was a young boy, he was fascinated by the stories about the Stone Carvers and everything they could do, although much of that admiration was gone as he became an adult – and more so, when he became a spokesman for the local imperial governor. He was aware that many regarded his present task as a prank with the new local boy, but he still treated it with the same importance he gave all his appointments. After all, not many of his kind could get positions of prestige, and he paid great attention to not be taken as one of the silly commoners of the land.

By the time he was halfway through the hall, the distant, hard and continuous sound was impossible to ignore; he walked to the source, hoping to find someone. His steps, slowly approaching, reached Uma on the top of the wooden elevation she was standing on. He stopped and stayed beside it, clearing his throat loudly and fixing his posture. Her pale face and big eyes then stared at his upright figure.

“Greetings, o Priestess! I come on behalf of the Empire –” he tried to say, but his shaking kept him from finishing the sentence. Not in all his arrogance, not after all these years, could he ignore the magnificence of what stood around him and what he could now see clearly from the center of the room. From that point of the temple, he could hear the wind singing in many hallways, as if a hundred voices tried

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to create a new, chaotic melody; the stone eyes and ears stood still, watching everything, a thousand faces surrounding him; a ceiling so high, it would make one wonder how the cave held together. The cold, hard walls were too great, too menacing to those who had never seen them, who were not a part of them.

“Welcome”, said the small woman, in her warm voice. “I wasn’t expecting someone to come today. Who are you?” Her tone seemed amused, surprised and yet truly welcoming.

He tried to steady his voice and stand as erect as he could. “I am Cart of-the-capitol, first secretary of the governor of Gavin. Like I said, I come in name of the Empire to bring all living here a message”.

“I’m glad the Empire has finally noticed us and comes to pay their respect.” She climbed down until she reached his level. “But I’m afraid you are a little too late: I’m the only one here.”

“Wonderful, it’ll work better for all.” It was quite easier to concentrate now that he could focus on his task, hovering tall near the old priestess.

Uma frowned, her tiny face all wrinkled in inquiring. “How can it be a good thing?”

“The Empire announces the honor,” he pronounced slowly, with a discreet smile, “of choosing this old, ruined temple...”

“Ruined?”

“...as the new headquarter of the province. All the inhabitants must leave in two days, otherwise they shall be forcefully removed.”

“As you are well aware now, there’re no ‘inhabitants’ here other than me. And you must know, you certainly ought to know, I couldn’t leave the Temple.”

The officer shifted the weight of his legs. “I understand it’s a difficult position to you, but your lack of cooperation will only bring you harm.”

“The Empire can’t do this. I was here before it existed, before you were even born. Not once did they come to me. Why take my home now?”

“Our great Governor reckons the recent events in the capitol were carried by a violent group of people, of locals. Since this place seems isolated enough, and this ridiculous reverence may be respected by them, it’s only natural we should take it – it may prevent future attacks.”

She closed her eyes. Her breath slowed down, her shoulders relaxed. She then looked deeply into his eyes.

“Do you know what I am, Cart-of-the-capitol?”

“Well, I assume you are a priestess of the Stone Temple...”

“And do you know what that means?”

He was quiet for a minute, pondering on what he should say. Uma simply waited. Carefully, he spoke:

“You are a Stone-Carver, the Stone-Itself, the Living-Mountain. I believe that’s how they called in the legends.”

“If you know that, you must know that I took an oath...”

“...never to leave the Temple, never to quit, to keep carving the memories of your ancestors into stone until you become dust like them. Or so I heard.”

“Right. Then you know I can’t just leave.”

“This seems a sad condition, indeed, but I – “

“Do you know where your family comes from, mister? You don’t exactly look like people-of-the-plains. Is this not your history, your ancestors too? Do they mean nothing to you?”

Cart picked a roll of paper from his front pocket, delivered it to Uma and said sharply.

“I was born in the capitol, and now I work for the Great Intergalactic Empire. The business of your people means nothing to me – except when they become imperial matter. For now, that means this place is to be taken. You have two days.”

He turned around, and his steps sounded heavily on the stone floor. Uma noticed the roll, without meaning to open it – she knew the struggles of her position already.

When Cart left the temple, he squinted his eyes at the sun, putting his shivering hands at his back. Heading to meet his colleagues at the foot of the mountain, he walked fast. Breathing relieved, he remembered what had passed, organizing it to report to his superior – although he knew what he had felt at the Great Temple the others could never understand.

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Like any other day, Uma was sculpting. Her job was this: to remake old drawings before they disappeared, gradually eroded by the constant wind. She knew by heart all that was there – every story, every scene, and every face. She knew what had happened when they first lived in the mountains; she knew every war and every hero; all the plagues, all the droughts, all the starvation they had gone through. Thousands of years could be seen in the ancient walls, with all the great deeds of a people inscribed in them.

Nearly a hundred years had passed without a new drawing being made. There had been no deed worth carving in stone. The one event that had changed things could not be recorded, because it hadn’t been noticed, it hadn’t been understood until too late a date. None of the priests could’ve predicted they would be left behind, alone and isolated from all who had moved to never return. This gradual process couldn’t fit in a picture, it didn’t belong in a wall – it could only be seen in the worn faces and hurt eyes of the calloused-handed carvers.

In her worst days, Uma wondered if she should have gone while there was still

time. It hadn't dawned on her what was going on when people stopped coming; it was when the wind became stronger. When people left, their homes and buildings followed to the cities. The only thing that was permanent was the Mountain, the Temple and the devoted people inside. But, deep down, there was never a doubt in her heart: it was part of her very being now to be in the mountain, in the Temple; she was meant to die there, and so she would.

After decades and decades in her duty, Uma couldn't lose herself in emotions. She cleared her mind when she continuously exposed the heart of the stone; her feelings weren't hers anymore, for they now belonged in scenes of war, of peace, of suffering and of joy, rewritten every time, added to the memories of all priests that ever lived there. In this moment of distress, she calmly considered how the future stood before her.

She would probably be dead in two days. It was a big event, the last of them to go. Even if she'd wanted to leave a mark of her existence, a last farewell to the walls, she could not – not so much by the impossibility of sculpting something new in so little time, than by the ways of her people. Her greatest honor, her pride relied on the fact she had been chosen a priestess, to print the mark of others. She had dreamed about it since she was a young girl, and now, at her last days, she was grateful for the privilege of fulfilling her goals.

But it certainly was a sad thing to watch everything end.

Her only wish now, perhaps, was that the Temple wouldn't be mutilated. She couldn't bear the thought of the Imperial forces destroying all that was left of a culture. This was not how it was supposed to be. The Walls belonged to the Mountain; they should be preserved together, until time came for both to perish.

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After a long day of reflection and work, Uma was quietly eating her dinner, lost in thought. Suddenly, she heard faint beeps coming in her direction. She waited a moment, remembering her last visitor, and couldn't help thinking "I have a bad feeling about this". A small droid, a blue-and-white unit, showed at the door. Although she was a little surprised, it didn't bother her – the Temple was opened to all that wished to visit – though she doubted the droid belonged to the Empire. In its own language of beeping and chirping, it introduced itself and its purpose there.

"Well, hello there, Artoo. I'm Uma, the only one living here, so there's no need to call others. Who is your master and what do you need to say?"

Artoo tried to evade the question, and stated part of his message.

"Classified? You're quite important for such a small droid, aren't you? I understand you bring information about delicate matters, but you really should be clear. Come on, tell me, what is it?"

The robot reported what he must, to which Uma reacted more uncertain and astonished every second that passed by. Some people had heard about the Temple being

taken by the Empire, and reached for the droid masters to find the priests and protect the mountain, if they could. However, their priority seemed to be rescuing anyone they could find, since it was very important to her people to meet one of the Carvers.

“What do you mean my people? The one from the mountains? Are you sure?”

The confirmation puzzled Uma even more. She was alone for so long, isolated from the world, she believed all the others had left, and no one remembered or cared about the Mountain and the Walls anymore. It was hard to imagine they were not only alive and together, but secretly organized and joining the Rebellion...

“The Rebels?! How so! Are you one of them?”

Artoo confirmed its position. Those of her equals that remained in the city came in contact with the rebels, and now they planned some sort of resistance, an attack against the Empire. The news about the Temple had them worried, and they hurried to the Rebellion for help, as they didn't have the means to reach the mountain by themselves, the surveillance of imperial forces over the plains being too overwhelming. That was also why they sent only a droid to talk to her – it could go undetected and could find the way through the mountain more easily.

At this point, Artoo made a comment on the many entrances that led to the temple, some more evident than others. It then asked if the Empire knew about these entrances, since they seemed interested in using the mountain as a base.

“I don't know if they know. It's not really a secret, the mountain always had these cuttings in the rock and the Temple was built amidst them.”

The droid seemed a little frustrated. According to it, this could be used later as part of their strategy. In fact, many things she knew could be very valuable to the Resistance – and to her people. The carvings and the stories they portrayed were of great curiosity to them, and they were very excited about listening all that could be transmitted directly from a Stone Carver.

“I don't know if I can be of much use to you. I never really liked these violent resolutions, these complex plans and delicate politics. But I guess I don't have any choice now, do I?” She sighed and considered for a moment. “Tell me this, what will they do afterward?”

Artoo tried to report the story he knew as concisely as possible. This group, that had begun to be organized as soon as they moved to the city, had been hunted by governments even before the Empire arrived. They tried desperately to keep their culture, but it was harder every day. They didn't have enough freedom to do things as they used to, and now very few remembered how things were. The old people were mostly ignored by the new generations, or deliberately silenced and discredited. They needed to do something, fight against it. In recent days, that meant attacking the Empire, trying to gather more people, overthrowing the hostile administration.

“And if this administration office is settled in the Temple, will they attack it too?”

By the way, the droid couldn't answer the question directly, so she figured they hadn't come to a conclusion among themselves. It was a lot to take in, and Uma was perplexed with all.

"I need time to think better about this." Artoo exclaimed the obvious fact, there wasn't much time to ponder. "I know that, just give me one more day, and I'll have a decision." The droid agreed, and left to meet his masters again.

In a way or another, this would be Uma's last night in the Temple.

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"Sometimes I wish things wouldn't end, just because I don't know what to do every time. But everything has to end at some point."

The hardest part to Uma was the pressure of a fixed deadline. She was not used to it, and lived her whole life in a different rhythm, following her instincts and the nature – she would rise with the sun and go to sleep with it. Her duties were not limited by time, on the contrary, she might as well live an eternity carving the stone. That's why she was so uneasy in the morning of her last day, heading to a side entrance, walking softly after the blue droid to meet the rebels.

As she approached the daylight, she heard a distinct beeping and lots of exclamations, "Karabast!" as an unexceptional spaceship stood by the entrance. A small number of people seemed to be repairing a few damages on the outside of the ship: a big purpled-fur creature arguing with a droid, two women giving them orders and a boy trying to help both sides. Waiting for her, there were two other people, a man with part of armor on his left shoulder and a serious countenance and a woman with white drawings on her face and a tranquil expression. They welcomed Artoo and explained what they were doing there.

"The ship took some shots from patrol droids, but nothing too serious." The man said reassuringly. "We need to do some fixing up and soon we'll be ready to go again."

"Kanan, you don't know yet what she chose to do." The woman had a soft voice but a firm tone. She turned to Uma and made a slight reverence. "It is a pleasure for us to help you in this troubled moment. My friends and I came to offer protection and a safe ride to the capitol. Tell us what we can do for you, and we'll do our best."

Uma looked down, breathed the cool air of the mountain, and said:

"I avoided thinking about it. When I was beginning my training, my masters would always say that I didn't need to worry about problems, because every answer would be in the Walls. I carved the stone, I looked at it all. I found what I needed, but my heart aches with the resolution – I never thought things would come to this."

The man in armor spoke clearly, but something in his tone indicated he was trying to conceal his feelings.

"We too know what is like to lose our colleagues, our friends, and masters, to have our beliefs forgotten and our temples destroyed by the Empire." He pointed at a young man,

who was talking to the others of the crew. “But I found hope, and maybe a way to go on. He is my apprentice, and will carry on what I know.”

The kind lady looked deeply into Uma’s eyes, and seemed to have understood what the old priestess was thinking.

“I was very young when I learned not all things are as they should be. But I also learned that paths we didn’t expect can take us to places further than we imagined. You have people waiting for you. They can’t come here to you; go to them, teach them, and some day one of your kind may come back to this temple.”

“No. Jarrus, Tano, take me to the city; I’ll meet my people, and tell them what I know. But this temple is not ours anymore. I’d be happier if no one ever entered it again.”

Jarrus looked puzzled. “You don’t want to return to your home? It might be taken back from the Empire, in the future.”

“No, I don’t want to come back. I didn’t want to leave. But time has run out – if the last of the priests is to be gone, than there’s no reason the Temple should still exist.”

“But they are doing this to help you, to save the Temple. What’s the point if it is going to be destroyed?”

“I think she knows best in this case. It’s her responsibility, her duty; it’s her choice also.” Tano tried to reason with her partner.

“Thank you, miss Tano. I believe in the greatness of our work, and everything it stands for. But we always knew the Temple would become a ruin someday. Perhaps it’s time for a new way to live: far from the Mountain, in those silly wooden and fabric panels of the houses, with words as fast as the wind and as quiet as breathing. The stone couldn’t follow my people, so I will. They say I’m part of the Mountain itself, don’t they? Maybe the Empire will have something to fear when mountains walk.”

They smiled, and entered the ship.

According to Uma’s wishes, the two rebels found boulders big enough to block the main entrances of the temple. A small avalanche secured all narrow passages, making it nearly impossible for a casual walker to enter – even machines would have quite some trouble to get in.

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As the small committee headed to the Mountain, they saw rocks rolling and dust arising. Cart couldn’t believe his eyes, and for a moment he thought everything was falling. When his boss exclaimed, very pleased, that they had one less problem to worry with if the priest was dead, he couldn’t find words to agree.

These were very strange times to live in, indeed.



Code

Gabriel Soares¹

noun \ˈkōd\

1 : a systematic statement of a body of law; especially one given statutory force

2 : a system of principles or rules; moral code

3 a: a system of signals or symbols for communication

b: a system of symbols (as letters or numbers) used to represent assigned and often secret meanings

4 : genetic code

5 : a set of instructions for a computer

(Merriam-Webster)

*

The screen lit up and Yyene woke to an amplified picture of the professor's face. Every wall on her room displayed it, ceiling included, the images big enough for minor imperfections to be identifiable even in the man's young, well shaven, hair trimmed physiognomy. The lights went brighter as her eyes adjusted to its shine and the music was softly replaced by a voice announcing the beginning of the class. Yyene moaned and resisted for a while but soon she sat down comfortably on her bed, ready for her first class in Law School.

As Yyene sat, the displays adjusted to her relative position: the wall in front of her displaying the professor and selected images related to what he was saying; on her left side, keywords popped up accompanied by graphs and additional video footage, whenever needed; to her right, the screen was filled with images of her classmates and chat boxes with questions directed to the professor. All around, ads that related to the classes' content or with specific topics raised by the professor would appear.

"Weekly updates on *The Coding Issue* - subscribe now!"

"Purchase Tjodd's new book, *History of Law* - click here"

"Everything you wanted to know about firewalls - and how to program them - is on *Firewalls for Dummies!*"

"Like the shirt the student on the other screen is wearing? She bought it at Marza's e-store! Click here and check for more!"

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“Feeling bored? Search for a new course on *Courses.net!*”

And so on.

History of Law -- professor Tjodd’s area of expertise -- was a great way for those young students to understand and value the greatness of the course they had enrolled into, said Tjodd’s face on the main screen. Of course, it has little practical effects, which could be disappointing for students on a course that is aimed at coding, but it could give them some perspective... And so he went on to talk about ancient times, when Earth was inhabited by over 7 billion humans and there was something called a State. “7 billion!”, cried one astonished student, “and how many are there now?”, but the professor didn’t know for sure, as there were no more organizations publishing comprehensive studies about the population, that being a fascist procedure that States used to control people, something we had gotten rid of long ago.

“I know there are a thousand people on our Beehive, though”, said the professor. “And there are about ten of those around the world.”

And about a State, which he had mentioned, did anyone know what that was? Of course, a few did, but none could come up with more than some inarticulate rumbles about organization and oppression. “A State was a group of people that used police force to take money from people,” Yyene tried, and some students agreed shyly.

The professor saw a good point on the statement and went on to explain how primitive human organizations, prior to the Beehive, would attribute authority to some people, calling them leaders, and would let them control numerous resources. Yyene grasped the concept, to a point, as she knew that people from other eras did all kinds of absurdities. That is: those people lived in houses made out of mud and moved around inside vehicles that were accident magnets and killed thousands of people every year (which was a good thing, in a way, as those people multiplied like rabbits) and they hunted animals with their bare hands and whatnot. The connection between State and Law, though, was harder for her to grasp.

“You see,” the professor said. “What we now call the Law is part of what people in other times would call Civil Law -- that is, the law of the civilians, the individuals, you and I. The rules individuals should follow on the execution of business, of transactions and so on. But there was *another* law, which was a set of rules established unilaterally by the State -- that is, by the aforementioned leaders -- and imposed upon the individuals. Rules either oppressive, such as those who imposed that individuals should give away part of their income to the representatives of the State, or absurd, such as rules prohibiting individuals to assassinate other individuals or to steal other individuals’ properties. That is correct: such things ought to be prescribed in laws, back then, because otherwise people would just go and do it!”

The class felt disgusted with the idea; a few students laughed timidly. The professor paused for a second and gave them a daring look.

“Well, but that is when things get truly absurd,” he said. “It’s not just that our

ancestors felt the need to prohibit such actions in order to prevent them from happening. It's way worse than that. The fact, class, is that, prior to the Beehive, such things *did* happen -- regardless of whether law forbade it or not."

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Meanwhile, Kijki laid in the bathtub and let her body warm up, eyes closed, for a couple of seconds. She submerged her head in the water and enjoyed the absolute silence it provided – but it wasn't the silence she was aiming for. Instead, she stood up and, still dripping water, started to mess with the *Odyssey* through her room's terminal.

This is how she turned a long forgotten epic into music:

First, she needed a text file of the book. Of course, fetching one was no easy task for the average reader, with all the new DRM Laws and whatnot, but she was a member of the Academia, after all, and it had a few perks in spite of the low wages and the bureaucratic obligations. Then, she converted the file into music format – midi, usually, for the sake of simplicity – and the magic was done. It was not that easy, either, but text and music are both a bunch of zeroes and ones arranged in a specific order (and what is art, anyway?), so she could play with a few bits here and there and make music from literature. The result was basically white noise.

She increased the light, covered her eyes with a white ribbon and laid on the floor, feeling the cold granite on her skin. She let the indefinite sounds of the *Odyssey* fill her ears and her mind and soon enough the visions began. The trick was to deprive herself as much as she could of all senses, and then her mind would do the rest, conjuring images as if under the effect of hallucinogenic substances.

And then the system cut it. Playing the *Odyssey* as music was a felony - that is, a functionality not available in the operational system's original code. Kijki could do it for a couple of seconds because she had programmed most systems herself, being a prominent lawyer. Thus she knew all the gaps left in the source code, intentionally or otherwise, but soon enough the system's AI would detect the anomaly and reboot, interrupting the music. It didn't matter too much, though. A couple of seconds were enough. She took the ribbon off and stretched her muscles, as if just awake, and then got dressed and started the software that would broadcast her to all her students. Her mind was racing. A couple of seconds of the *Odyssey* was all she ever needed before teaching at Law school.

*

After classes, students were pretty much free to do whatever they wanted. ("Pretty much" is probably an understatement, though, as the greatest achievement of the Beehive was to grant absolute freedom to every citizen). So Yyene shut her connection to the classes' conference and moved the chat with some colleagues to the screen in front

of her. She was a little anxious, though, and decided she wanted to walk, so she switched the conversation to her mobile and went out.

From her dorm's door, like from all others, it was possible to see the whole of the Beehive: the rooms arranged in hexagonal blocks and connected to the main atrium by long white corridors with glass walls. She took the corridor that left her block and roamed towards the atrium, paying no attention to the greenhouse that encircled it. Yyene had no idea where she was on the globe and neither did she care, but her Beehive, like all others, was packed with all kinds of vegetation and animals, living comfortably in acclimatized environments made possible by the joint work of air conditioning corporations and environmental protection NGOs. Right now, though, she was more interested in the conversation on her mobile than in a bunch of zebras or mules or whatever they were.

"This class was ridiculous," a girl said. "I thought she was supposed to teach us how to code!"

Yyene had been equally annoyed with Kijki's first class, as the professor had spent most of the time preaching against firewalls. "I never thought that I would miss History of Law, but she managed to make me do it. Why can't she just be like Tjodd?"

"Exactly," the first girl agreed. "Tjodd at least could stick to the facts..."

"And how good did he look?," asked a boy, making the group laugh.

Yyene had been walking absent-mindedly through the corridor, and now she'd reached the atrium. There were panels lit up with all kinds of advertising and small kiosks with plastic replicas of products you could take a look at before buying the real thing online. Right in the middle there was an enormous statue of a strong man, nearly naked, who held a globe over his shoulders with his left hand while tearing away some chains with the right one. At his foot, banners were positioned with the motto: FREEDOM, INDIVIDUALITY, PROGRESS. There were also cafés, bars, restaurants and gyms, all crowded with people, and the energy of the place made Yyene feel more comfortable, bursting with energy. She instinctively sat in a café, because that was what students were supposed to do, but she didn't really want anything. She couldn't occupy a seat without buying something, though, so she asked for a latte and kept on chatting with the newly formed group of students.

"I can't understand why some people need to add ideology to everything!," she said, still referring to Kijki's class. "I mean, if she's such a revolutionary and believes firewalls are so bad, she shouldn't be teaching us to build them, to begin with".

A waitress arrived with her latte and she raised her eyes to thank her. Then she gulped. "Er. Sorry, guys", she said, now back to her friends. "I'm... I'm gonna have to leave the chat for a sec". She turned off the communication app and slowly drank a sip of coffee, her eyes incapable of blinking. She did not taste the latte, but instead kept the cup raised for a while, until she noticed it and put it down on the table. "God fucking damn it", she said as Kijki stood up from the table in front of hers and walked towards her.

Yyene was drumming the table over which there were now three empty cups of espresso; the latte had been taken away. Kijki was still drinking the same glass of lemonade she had held when she first approached Yyene's table, and she still kept the same patronizing smile on her face. "It's not like that", Yyene started for the third time in the last minute. And, for the third time, she did not complete her thought.

"You see". Kijki pointed to Yyene with her glass. Yyene was even more annoyed with her mannerisms. "It's not that I don't think we should have firewalls. I love how they work and what they allow us to do. But I believe it's the human nature to want to go further, you see? It's by challenging limits that we can reach new things. It's even important for improving the firewalls, kiddo".

"It's not like that". Yyene wasn't completely comfortable with arguing face to face with a professor, but she finally went on. "I have nothing against challenging limits. If you are able to convert some old writings into music or whatever it is you like to do, it's fine by me. I'm all for liberty. But you were advocating that people should intentionally leave gaps into the software in order to take advantage of them later!"

"And don't you think people should be free to do so?"

"I... Of course they are free to do that. But as our professor, you should help us get jobs and stuff, and you should tell students that in the event that they follow your suggestion and boycott their own codes, the market will soon keep them from being hired by anyone".

"Hasn't kept me".

"I'm not against freedom. On the contrary. The problem is that you leave breaches on your software as a means to attack the companies that hire you to code them. You said it yourself during classes: you feel like servers impose too many rules and you want to prevent them from doing so".

"I did. And I do".

"And in doing so, aren't you limiting the servers' right to have their systems the way they want them?"

"You could say that, but you see? As I limit servers' right to limit your actions on a specific system, say, if I prevent *them* from preventing *me* from turning the Odyssey into music, am I not amplifying *my* freedom?"

"In a stupid way, yes", Yyene said and gulped as she realized the language she was using with a professor. Kijki was remarkably young for a professor, perhaps not more than five years older than most freshmen, and that made Yyene too comfortable with her. Of course, formality was never expected between students and professors, but Yyene was maybe stretching things a bit too far. "In a way, yes, of course. In the short term, I mean. But on the long run, you are undermining servers' autonomy, which will, in turn, limit the availability of different options for the users, resulting in us having less freedom to choose".

“Or I’ll lead more people to mess with software codes, thus leading to more programmers who will then make more softwares, giving you more options to choose from, you see?”

“If you want more people coding, why not focus your class on, say, coding, instead of criticizing servers’ policies? Isn’t law school the right place to form programmers?”

“Now, aren’t you quite the fan of institutions?”

Yyene laughed. “Got me. It’s true, though. People look for stability; if servers are solid and can provide their services with security, they will thrive, people will want to work for them and you will have more programmers.”

Kijki opened her mouth, but suddenly stopped short of saying anything. Yyene thought for a second that she had lost her words, but then she saw what was puzzling the professor and she too was left astonished, with her mouth half open.

It wasn’t too easy to grasp, though. First, she noticed a kind of glitch on her visors, as if the image of a part of the café was somehow distorted. She was looking straight to the place where it happened, but the image in front of her seemed to be out of focus, as if seen out of the corner of her eyes. Then she started to make sense out of it, but there wasn’t much sense to be made anyway. It was an old man, as it seemed, his face a lot older than anyone she had ever seen – the skin looking thick and filled with marks –, but dressed in children’s clothes. She could see the details very clearly: the sleeves of the shirt, the pocket of the pants and so on. But the overall didn’t seem to work out. Either the clothes were too small to even fit him or they were stretched in an unnatural way. It depended on how one looked at the man, as if two completely different images were superimposed above each other.

Kijki seemed to feel the same way. “You... see?”, she asked.

“I sure do”, Yyene answered.

“And... What exactly do you see?”

“Now, *this* is a very good question”, Yyene answered and ordered another espresso.

*

Without exchanging a word, Yyene and Kijki decided to leave the café, the former’s espresso untouched. They walked out and headed to their hexagons, silent, trying to make sense of what had just happened. But... It was not easy. Not only was it a weird event, hard to understand in itself, but it was also a fleeting memory. They remembered vividly the details of the café and of their talk with each other, but the strange old man seemed to be as foggy in their memories as his image had been when they saw him. In fact, Kijki even tried to rerun the whole scene by rewinding her visor’s records, but it still didn’t stick to her memory.

Yyene entered her dorm and didn’t even turn on the lights. Her head ached. She went straight to bed and stood there for a few minutes, awake. Then she checked the chat with her friends and told them why she had had to leave the conversation earlier, and

about her discussion with Kijki. She didn't mention any old man or glitch on her visors.

And then she forgot all about it.

Life went on and Yyene focused her attention on college. Classes took a good part of her time, and hanging out with her new friends accounted for the rest. She kept arguing with Kijki as often as she could, though, now feeling more confident about contesting what she called Kijki's ideological epiphanies during classes. She was a fierce believer in the value of individual ideas based on their merit, and not hierarchy, so soon she didn't even hesitate before interrupting the stream of the professor's camera to speak out her own thoughts, usually directing side comments by text to her fellow students.

Throughout the first semester, they argued on a regular basis about such themes as the use of gender-neutral language in user interfaces, the morality of coding hidden processes that systematically harm one or both parties of a transaction (and how said morality depends on whether the coding is done as requested by the server who hired you to code it or without the server's knowledge), the necessity of adding accessibility features in operational systems and so on. In all such instances, Yyene argued firmly in favor of those opinions which supported the rigorous compliance with whatever had been settled between principle and contractor in the agreements that regulated the coding, while Kijki defended a more proactive attitude from the programmer, who she believed could legitimately act against instructions if said programmer believed this would lead to a, as she put it, nicer world. Meanwhile, other students chatted among themselves or used the time to open some of the incessant advertisements that kept showing upon each topic raised by the duo.

It was with a feeling of extreme satisfaction, thus, that Yyene turned off her main monitor at the end of her first semester and switched to the screen in which her friends were already planning a trip to the nearest bar. She had spoken her mind and, to her, that was all that mattered.

Wundj, Chyun and T had already picked a bar when she entered the chat. Wundj was reticent about going to the Atrium just to drink a beer, as he could do it just as well from his dorm, but Chyun and T had insisted that survival through college's first semester deserved a more traditional event than home drinking and video conference. Besides, T said, it was his chance of hanging out with three totally cool girls.

T suggested something a little more extreme, like a VR go-kart run or a laser drone match, but, luckily to Yyene, Chyun acted in the best interest of the alcohol lovers, and a bar it was! So each left their hexagons and headed to Huy'arr.

*

The Huy'arr — as everyone called the hip bar The Pirate and the Ninja, after the alleged signature interjections of the latter and the former, respectively — was this mad place on a corner of the northern site of the Atrium where lights shone up to the distant

white roof of the Beehive and music flowed into all surrounding streets. It was where everything happened. At any time of day and night, four DJs would play their best beats against each other, varying styles and mixing tunes, while the pyrotechnic officers would perform what could only be called magic with the Bedazzlers, the colorful flashlights they managed gracefully in order to match the chaotic impromptu of the music. The public, ceaselessly dancing, moved by the beat, the lights or some of the other stimulants abundantly available, was formed by all kinds of people, old and young, dressed in suits or swimwear or anything in between, painted with fluorescent or dark gothic like make-up, or no make-up at all, or those crazy pearly ink that made you look like a statue. Walking around, one could find people who had been dancing for weeks or months without stopping. They said some (the luckiest) were there for years.

Elsewhere, couples, three-ples or more-ples sat on the sofas, exchanging love and other drugs, while, in the VIP sections, businessmen and businesswomen sat quietly, waiting for their commercial partners to bring news from the unsuspecting crowd.

“Individuality”, T said as they admired the mob.

They entered and Yyene got them drinks — first round on her. Wundj started dancing like someone suffering an epileptic attack, and the girls laughed at the performance and danced as well.

Yyene danced with her eyes closed and her head down, shaking it from left to right and back, and then she raised it to a stronger beat and shot her right hand up and opened her eyes, shouting in approval. It was a blink, and the lights blinded her and she was surrounded by a colorful, infinite crowd, and the mescaline on her drink was starting to affect her, but in that blink, between those colorful dancers and the sparks of the Bedazzlers, she saw someone odd.

*

It was not the old man from the other time. But it was just as weird. It was a girl, this time, wearing ragged jeans pants and a white T-shirt — both pieces looking kind of masculine, maybe, but not particularly absurd, especially in a place with no dress code and where androgyny was just another trend. Besides, Yyene couldn't tell much about her appearance, having seen her so fleetingly. But she knew something was wrong, on the same way she had known it that day at the café.

But then she was gone. Yyene looked around, but couldn't see her or anything else that looked odd or out of place. She looked at her friends, but they were too immersed in their dancing to have noticed anything. “Damn,” she said, and switched off her earplugs.

The music stopped. Around her, of course, everybody else kept listening to it, dancing as they had been doing, but on her ears, there was all silence. Yyene turned her

head, searching for a glitch like the one she had noticed when she saw the old man, but she couldn't see anything at first. And then, she noticed the crack on the wall.

The Huy'arr walls extended outside of the dancing floor, near the VIP sections, with their screens covered with the image of torches and supernovas. The moving images of fire and explosions, over which the Bedazzlers shone and in front of which numerous people passed at all times, made it hard for Yyene to see it clearly, but she was sure there was some sort of crack on the wall, apparently unnoticed right in the middle of all those people.

Yyene understood why that happened. She knew what to look for, but she still couldn't see it clearly, even as she elbowed her way through the crowd to approach the wall. She didn't know what exactly to do, as she stood there, standing still in the middle of the Huy'arr like a freak, with her earplugs off, so she rang the one person she could think of that could help her figure it out.

*

It wasn't 1:00 a.m. yet and it was the last day of the semester, so of course, Kijki was up. She had drunk four gin & tonics and then she had put on some music (proper music, this time) and started coding something for her own amusement: an app that made her room's user interface appear to meltdown and move according to the music played. Of course, this rendered all her systems pretty much useless, as she couldn't find any functions or read anything on the screen, but it looked pretty cool and that was what she was looking for right now. It was a problem, though, when Yyene appeared on the conference.

"Jesus Christ". Kijki put her hands on her head and tried to focus on the melted down face of the student. The image was distorted by the app, but the fact that she was drunk and that Yyene's image was lost among hundreds of people didn't help either. "You see, if you want to argue about how our world is perfect and praise your beloved values of *freedom*, *individuality*, and *progress*, this is definitely not the time, kiddo. I'm... I'm in the middle of something right now, you see?"

Yyene frowned, or seemed to frown on the distorted screen. "It's not that!", she screamed. Kijki couldn't tell if she was screaming because she was shocked with the assumption that she would have contacted Kijki for such a subject or merely because her voice was muffled by the sounds around. "Listen, can you see this?" Yyene inverted the camera of her communication app, so that instead of showing her face, Kijki's screen would show whatever Yyene was looking at.

"I can't see shit, kiddo. Wait a moment." Kijki breathed deeply and deactivated her newly coded app. The screen focused and the images became clear again. "What do you want me to –" but she didn't finish her question because she knew what Yyene was trying to show. She hadn't seen it, not properly, because the image, like the one at the café, was hard to grasp. But the glitch was clear enough, and she understood right away what it meant. "Jesus Christ. Where are you, now? And please, please don't tell me it's that God-forsaken Pirate bar..."

*

It took Kijki half an hour to sober up, then forty minutes to convince herself to leave the dorm and head to that hellhole, and then half an hour to actually go there. Then, it took her twenty minutes to find Yyene, even with the GPS and with Yyene constantly in contact with her to give directions. But finally they met and Kijki saw immediately what was wrong at the bar.

“Did you try to... You know, touch it?”, she asked, leaning towards the crack.

“I tried to try. But I can never really see where it is, you know?”

Kijki got closer, raised her hand, then retreated. She knew exactly what Yyene meant. It was something you couldn't really look at, let alone touch. But it surely was there. “You see”, Kijki said, trying to figure out what to do. “If it is a crack on a wall, then it should be visible from the other side”.

“If it is a crack, yes”.

“Yes. So, you see, we could go around, and try to see what is there, right? Where this has come from”.

The problem was: that was the wall that separated the dance floor and the VIP sections. On the other side, thus, there was the selected area reserved for those who could afford it – which was not Yyene or Kijki's case.

“We can't go there, Kijki”.

“Jesus Christ, come on. I know you love to follow the rules just as much as you love to say there are no rules to follow, but don't you think you could let it go just once, for a change?”

“That's not what I mean. We can't go there. There is no way in”.

It was true, too. The VIP sections had no entrance. They were about a meter above the dance floor, but there were no stairs either. It was completely segregated from the rest of the bar.

“You see, sometimes I suspect I'm wasting my time giving classes to you, kiddos. Then things like these happen and I don't suspect anything anymore, I'm sure of it. Come on, think a little bit. How did those people get in there?”

“They paid for VIP”.

“And then what?”

“Then they gained access”.

“And suppose you were an actual lawyer and not an angry kid who believes that *freedom, individuality* and *progress* mean doing whatever people tell you to do. Suppose the owner of this hellhole hired you to guarantee that only those who had VIP access would be able to enter these rooms. What would you do, then?”

Yyene smiled. “I would add blockers for those who haven't got it. I would hide the entrance from regular visitors”.

“Bingo”.

So the good news was that there was an entrance to the VIP sections, and it should be somewhere near them. The problem was that neither Yyene nor Kijki could see or touch it, as their visors and sensors were programmed not to display it.

They started touching the wall, searching for a hidden space they could move through, but they didn't achieve much besides making themselves look awkward. “It's not working”, Yyene said.

“I know. You see, it's not just that we can't see the entrance, we can't even tell if we find it, because our sensors will make us feel like we are touching the wall. Even if, out of luck, we find the gap and our hands do get past the entrance, we won't see or feel it, and our brain will reject the possibility of us walking past there, as we're not supposed to. That's the beauty of Law”.

Yyene sighed. “Come on. It might be working against us now, but are you seriously against this kind of restraints?”

“Not ironic, kiddo. Law really is a beautiful thing. Why do you think I became a lawyer to begin with? But right now we need a way to break it”.

As Yyene gazed hopelessly at the wall, though, there didn't seem to be much they could do on that regard. “What do you suggest, then?”, she asked at last.

“Ok, we know we can't walk past this wall. But what *can* we do here?”

“Dance”, Yyene shrugged.

“Let's dance, then”.

Kijki positioned herself behind Yyene and instructed the student to dance. Then, she turned around, facing the other side, and started dancing as well. “Ready, kiddo?”, she asked suddenly.

“Ready for wha —”, and then Kijki jumped back to a stronger beat, knocking Yyene down. She was able to perform the jump as it was a reasonable dance move, but the result was that Yyene was thrown away towards the wall — and past it. “Holy crap”, Yyene complained standing up. And then she looked around and realized she was in. She had fallen through the wall, into the VIP area.

“As well as the code has been written, it can prevent only voluntary acts that would break the law”, Kijki explained. “That is, you couldn't walk into the VIP section because your body would feel like it's impossible. But no code can stop a body from falling down, you see?”

“Can you see me?”

“No. To me, you have disappeared behind the wall. But you can see me, can't you?”. Yyene could. From inside, she could clearly see the entrance and the stairs that led from the dance floor to the VIP section. And Kijki, standing clueless outside. “So, what you'll have to do is pull me in. Just don't step outside, or your sensors will be reset”.

Yyene acted as instructed and finally they were inside. Around them, people with VIP access drank their drinks and danced their dances normally, unaware of anything

exceptional: any odd event performed by the couple had been immediately normalized by their own sensors. Yyene and Kijki were safe.

They still couldn't see the crack, though. Again, there was that feeling that the piece of the wall they were looking straight at was somehow out of focus, as if perceived by far-peripheral vision. They touched the wall and felt nothing different about it. Then, they tried another wall, and then another, always to the same result.

But suddenly, something even weirder happened. Yyene was standing still, looking for some kind of clue, when she was once again knocked down. It hadn't been Kijki, though, as she could see the professor on another corner. "What the —", she started, but realized there was no one around. She had fallen on the ground, and surely someone was to blame for that, but she couldn't see anyone around her. Desperately, she looked around, until she saw, or she believed she saw, a glimpse of something, out of the corner of her eye. She thought it was a human figure, but when she tried to look closer, it was gone.

Kijki approached her and touched her arm, calling her attention. "There's definitely something wrong here, kiddo." Yyene agreed silently, and they both turned as another fleeting image passed around.

"Behind that man!" Yyene pointed.

Kijki ran and tried to pull the man out of the way, but that was an illegal move and her arms wouldn't do it. "Jesus Christ", she cursed and walked around him, just to be knocked down by whatever it was that had been hiding there. "It's not just one", she screamed as she tried in vain to stand. "There are many of these... Of whatever they are".

By now, everybody around had realized something was wrong. They had been knocked by invisible or semi-invisible beings as well and were just as puzzled as Yyene and Kijki. The professor stood up and ran towards the direction from which she felt the ghosts, or whatever they were, were coming. Yyene grabbed a glass of a dark red drink and thought she could throw it in that direction and see what the drink would hit, but that too was an illegal move and as much as she wanted to do it, her arms failed her. And then someone hit her again and she fell to the ground. She blacked out for a second or two, as she hit her head, and when she stood up again, her visor was broken, the glass cracked and the screen blank. She took it off, for the first time since she could remember, and looked around.

The Huy'arr was a different place entirely. The walls were old and decayed, the lights were pale and weak, and the people, most of which still danced, looked quite ridiculous in their pretentious outfits. But more amazingly, there was a hole in the external wall, an enormous tunnel that led somewhere Yyene had never seen before, somewhere out of the Beehive, it seemed, and through which an absurd number of people entered. Yyene didn't know that many people even existed in the world, to begin with. And furthermore, they seemed repulsive to her: ugly and ragged and dirty. And sick, they all looked sick, either too thin or showing huge bellies that popped out of thin

bodies. She saw young people dressed in old clothes, thin people with large pants, girls with men's shirts, some people with no shirt at all.

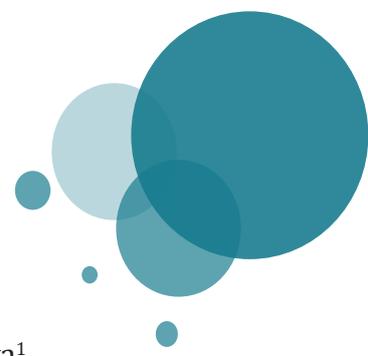
They entered the room shouting, breaking tables and glasses and bottles, running over the clients at the bar, who still couldn't figure out what was going on. Outside, away from the white hygiene of the Beehive, she saw piles of garbage and dirt spreading through streets with no end.

"Take it off!", Yyene shouted to Kijki. "Take off your visor!", but Kijki couldn't do it, of course. She had to tell it, then. She had to describe how the Beehive itself was falling to pieces, a victim of that mysterious mob that came out of nowhere and was taking over the place, still absolutely unnoticed.

"You are wrong!", Kijki screamed. "You must be. You went crazy or something, because this can't be, they can't just break the wall, can they? I know some civil disobedience is necessary, but this is something else, entirely. And besides, no one would want that, you see?". But Kijki was already being taken away by a man and tied down with ropes.

It didn't matter, though, because Yyene too was taken. Two men held her arms on her back and a woman tied her hands together and led her. She was incapable of reacting.

Her head was positioned in the guillotine against little resistance, her eyes roaming around, lost in confusion. She saw the faces screaming and celebrating, a dirty mess of people that repulsed her. At last, she sighted the word someone wrote at a crumbling wall, big irregular letters that nonetheless formed a known word and thus made her comfortable. FREEDOM, she read and completed the motto in her head: INDIVIDUALITY. PROGRESS.



Separated by the Sea

Gustavo Kim Tsutiya¹

The city seemed the same since my last visit. Six years had passed already, the sky was gloomy and the wind strong as ever. The funeral was on a tempestuous day. Relatives and acquaintances were whispering among themselves. Grandpa had taken his life and nobody knew why he did it. “Maybe he couldn’t handle losing his wife after all”, some said. The day passed quickly. Right before the sunset, an unknown woman came alone. She looked like she was in her 20s and had a tender yet sorrowful expression. She didn’t stay for long.

My grandpa was a retired fisherman, but he always went with me to the bay. Now I realize that he must have missed his old days a lot. He used to tell me all kinds of stories: that mermaids would help the fishermen with the weather and teach them more about the sea - in exchange of fishermen respecting nature’s limits when sailing the open sea. He taught me a lot about different types of sea creatures and we collected shells on the shore during the sunset. He was very sweet and caring, but also always very blue. Back then, I didn’t really think deeply about anything, I mean, I was just a child, but maybe I could have noticed something and changed the direction things were going.

After the ceremony, I went for a walk. I noticed that unconsciously I was moving towards the bay and following the path that grandpa used to lead me along during our late afternoon strolls. All the feelings I tried to keep bottled up during the funeral were finally surfacing. I still held up, crying faintly all the way and ended up falling asleep on the beach. When I woke up, the sky was already dark, but it still seemed like early evening. I ran back to the guest house I was staying at; my parents were absent, probably still with our relatives. I went straight to my room.

I was going to stay for a week in the city. My parents shared a room and mine was next to theirs. My grandpa’s house was not far from our small guest house. As I kept recalling my days beside him, I felt the need to visit the old house where many of my childhood memories came from. I couldn’t sleep, all I could think about was how I was probably the closest person he had, but like any relative or acquaintance that was present at the funeral, I also had no idea why he had taken his own life all of a sudden. My mom was really distant from him, my grandma left her and grandpa after giving birth to her and she told me he never spoke a word about her. She seemed to bear a huge grudge against grandpa because of this.

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I decided to go to grandpa's house. On foot, it would take less than half an hour. I tried to walk downstairs without making a sound and left with only my phone and a pair of spare keys I found in the kitchen. When I reached the house, everything was locked. I was so absorbed into my own thoughts that I wasn't thinking straight. I felt really frustrated. I sat in front of the house for some time spacing out, till I heard whispers coming from the garden. "The garden!", I thought. All this time I could've at least seen the garden. I rushed and jumped the backyard fence. Whoever made the noises was no longer there, but I was still able to hear hurried steps coming from the outside of the fence. My heart was racing from the sudden turn of events. I sat on the grass and tried to calm myself down.

It was a cold night and already around 4:00 a.m. I decided to use my phone's flashlight to get a better look at the garden. There were a lot of flowers blooming, "since it rains a lot here, they will probably be fine on their own", I thought. The city was always under bad weather, cloudy and rainy, but the garden would always make me think otherwise, that it wasn't that bad. Looking at it, memories started to flow: in the cloudy summer, the clovers would get filled with ladybugs, in the autumn, the ballerina tree would become an orangey-brown color, while in the spring a lot of birds would come to eat its fruits. On sleepless nights, I would watch the moon among the clouds while hearing the sound of the waves crashing in the distance.

When the sun started to rise on the horizon, I came back to the guest house. I was exhausted and emotionally drained. I slept until my parents woke me up telling me they were going to grandpa's house in order to organize his belongings. I came along. By car, it only took us some minutes to get there. I would finally be able to look into the situation better. When I entered the house, nothing seemed strange or out of place, the living room was neat and tidy, as the other rooms also were. The doctor told us he had a pill overdose and that seemed to be the case: the bathroom was the only place in the house that was messy; a lot of pills were still on the floor and the mirror was broken. Seeing those images was disturbing and saddening, but I couldn't let my emotions take over, this was my chance to try finding anything in the house that could answer my questions.

Starting by his room, I began looking everywhere for any note or letter he could have left, while my parents were discussing about what to do with his house and his stuff. I found nothing inside the drawers or the wardrobe. Everything seemed pretty normal with his bed and between the sheets. His old fishing equipment was intact. Now, the only part left to look into was his bookshelf.

Looking into an old album, I found a small envelope buried deep into one of the pages. At first, I thought it was a note from grandpa, but it didn't seem to be the case nor the writing was his.

“Dear Charles,

Many years have passed since then. I have lived in many different places and met every kind of people. During all these years I tried to accept what happened between us and move on, but I could never forget you nor our daughter. Sometimes I think if this is all just a bad dream and when I wake up I will find myself right beside you, in our bed, and we will live a simple and calm life alongside our daughter. You must have had a hard time dealing with everything on your own and raising our daughter without telling her anything. For a long time I was scared to see you and our daughter again and even revisiting our city, but I decided to come back. I need to talk to you. I need to see our daughter. I can't live like this anymore. I will come back to the city in the first week of September.

I will be waiting for you at the place we used to meet, close to the bay.

Yours sincerely,

Joan

After reading the letter, I was very confused. A lot of questions started to pop up in my head. Why had grandma left? Why didn't she attend the funeral? Should I look for her? For the time being, I decided to take some time to process everything, but I knew that, somehow, I needed to meet her.

Around 2:00 p.m. my parents called me in order to leave. I took the letter with me and put the album back into place.

After leaving grandpa's house, we went for lunch in a small restaurant nearby. During our meal, my mom started to talk about how the food we were eating there made her remember what she used to eat as a child. She told us that during her childhood, the city suffered a terrible crisis: the weather was so bad, that the city would be covered by dark clouds for weeks in a row and the wind was too violent for the fishing boats to sail. Since most of the families' meals came from the sea, the fishermen risked their lives by sailing in those bad conditions, many losing their lives in the process. With time, the fishermen learned how to deal with the bad weather, but still, some wouldn't return alive. The whole time back then I thought my mom wasn't that affected by grandpa's death. But hearing her talking about her childhood, something she had never done before even when I asked made me think otherwise, that she was suffering just as I was, or maybe more.

After we finished eating, I returned to the guest house in order to sleep while my parents decided to visit some of grandpa's acquaintances. Staying awake almost the whole night and having so much to think about had worn me out.

The next day, I waited till my parents had left the house and went straight to the bay. All I could do was to keep waiting and looking around for anyone who could be my grandmother. Unfortunately, no matter how much I waited, there was no sign of her: the only elderly woman that had passed by me the whole day had no idea who my grandpa was.

Since I had no luck there, I decided to come back to grandpa's house once again during the night. Maybe I could find a hint by looking at his old photo albums.

I made sure to take a spare key unnoticed from my parents before leaving to grandpa's house. I got there around midnight and went straight to his bedroom in order to start looking for anything helpful. There were only three albums for me to look at. The first one I took from the bookshelf was the one I found the envelope hidden inside. It was quite old and had many black and white photos inside. Looking carefully, I found what could be a photo of grandpa and grandma when they were young. The man in the photo resembled grandpa a lot and I didn't know why, but the woman beside him looked familiar to me.

While I was leafing through the pages, I heard the sound of one of the windows creek. "It's coming from the kitchen", I thought. All I could think at the moment is that a burglar was trying to break into the house, which made me remember what happened last time I was there at night. "The burglar was trying to enter the house since then", I said to myself with no doubt. I took the album with me and ran down the corridor that connects the bedroom to the living room hoping to be able to escape. Midway the corridor, the figure of a woman in the living room got clearer as I approached. She was dressed in a simple floral light blue dress. I was in shock. She was barehanded and quite astonished to see me there. All I could think of was who she was.

We stared each other in silence for some time. After looking better at her, I realized she was the unknown woman I had seen at the funeral. "You were at the funeral!", I said. Then I asked "Who are you?", and she answered by questioning me back, "Why are you carrying that album? Why are you here?". "It's my grandpa's!", I answered with resolution. Her expression weakened, she was no longer staring at me. I asked again, "Who are you?".

"I'm your grandma", she answered. Her words left me in a state of shock and confusion. I couldn't believe her. But why would she be in grandpa's house? Why would she lie to me? She approached me slowly and calmly. She didn't seem to have any intention to harm me. She asked me if I could lend her the album, which I did. She seemed to know it very well and started to browse through it. Then she showed me the photo I had seen earlier. The woman beside grandpa was clearly her, but how?

She asked me if we could sit since she had a lot to tell me, so we sat on the muddy green sofa in the living room and she started talking. "Grandpa was a good person, but he got greedier as time passed by, after other cities started to show interest in our small city to buy fish. It reached a point where the fishermen would spend months in the open sea. I remember clearly the day the prosperity of the city reached its end. It was a warm summer day and I was knitting baby clothes in the garden. The sky suddenly became cloudier and a fine yet constant rain began falling. It continued like that for weeks, it was like the sky was crying. After a long time the rain subsided but the weather was always overcast and stormy. Charles came back after a long time, much longer than usual. I asked him what had happened and he began to cry. The only thing he told me was that he had committed a serious sin against the sea and that we would suffer the consequences of his actions. I told him to calm down and that we would figure something out. I was already

eight months pregnant at the time and all I could think about was the safety and health of our soon-to-be-born baby. The fishermen were all afraid to go back to the sea and the city was no longer able to sell fish to other cities. The city faced a major financial crisis and we were barely able to fish enough for our own meals.”

After hearing that, I still didn’t understand why grandma had left grandpa after giving birth. I asked her what grandpa had done and why she decided to leave and she continued:

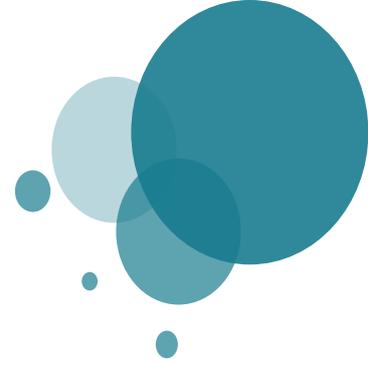
“I chose to pay for my husband’s sin of killing a mermaid and had to leave the city. The mermaids have cursed me with eternal youth, something that many of us would consider as a blessing and be happy to attain, but knowing how my life would become and how this small city would treat me, I wouldn’t put my daughter’s life in danger, I needed to leave. Charles could never forgive himself. The letter I sent must have triggered him and he was not able to deal with the guilt and pain surfacing after all these years, he must have tried to suppress it all to be able to live normally.”

After hearing her story, tears were flowing down my cheeks. I never thought grandpa could be suffering so much during all this time. Grandma told me she needed to meet my mom, so we returned together to the guest house and she stayed in my room.

In the morning, we waited downstairs for my parents to wake up. When they saw me waiting with an unknown woman, they were surprised and asked me who she was. I took my dad with me and told my mom she needed to talk to her. My mom was a bit reluctant, but she agreed to talk to her. I gave grandma the album and the letter I had with me and they went upstairs. My dad was very confused with it all. I knew I wouldn’t be able to convince him nor explain everything properly, so I told him she was one of grandpa’s acquaintances. They walked downstairs after a while. My mom had a distressed expression and grandma had a serious look in her eyes. My mom told me grandma needed to go to the bay to do something important, so we left right away.

We arrived at the bay and she started to look for a boat to rent. I knew she was going away and wasn’t coming back. She told me to take care of my mom and to treasure the time I had spent with grandpa. She looked very calm and at peace. I watched her boat sail and kept watching it until it crossed the horizon. I stayed at the same spot the whole day thinking about grandpa’s stories. As I grew up, I started to think they were only fantasy stories grandpa would tell to make this city a happier place for me, I had never thought they could actually be true.

When the sun started to set, all the clouds in the horizon started to clear up and it was the first time I could see the sunset clearly from the bay.



Sharp Blade, Dull Knife

Paula do Prado Bortoletto¹

Certain things have been in our routines for so long that we forget the glow they used to have when we first engaged in them. No one actually cherishes the fact that their lungs are sucking air on their own every single minute, and so is daily life in general. When people bring out mundane or ordinary facts like they were oddities, it is bizarre – not to mention, a little annoying. I mean, who wants to hear people thanking their knees for not failing, or just describing how work was on an uneventful day?

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Well, actually, I hope you do because that's when what we least expect strikes us.

I must apologize beforehand. It's not that I want you to see me as one of those inconvenient people in supermarket lines that sighs and you know there's a silly story coming, but I am ancient and bored and I could use a pair of kind ears such as yours...

It was just a regular Sunday afternoon. After lunch, I used to visit this friend of mine for a chess match. Not those with a clock to keep track of turns because we were not that professional or perfectionist about it. It was just a means to talk about the silly events of our weeks or drink a lot of tea. For some reason, he didn't mind starting and really enjoyed the black pieces. His eyes were very attentive as he moved one of his pawns with one hand, drinking his *Tulasi* tea with the other in such good spirits that I had to ask as I watched my rook getting slowly cornered by those petulant black pawns. Such petty, tricky pieces they were.

"My dear *Shri*, every single Sunday we sit here in each other's company and contemplate the banality our routines have become. You beat me some of the times and I, in return, take my fair share of victories in other times. What was it that lifted your mood so?"

We had been friends for longer than you could even dream. I would never be as rude as to ask that of a stranger so do not misjudge my sudden intimacy.

His lips curled upwards gently but his eyes winced, a gesture I could only interpret as somewhat bitter. There was something, certainly, and he was not going to share it just then. I reached for my cup of tea, trying for a more earthy taste on this sip. It is quite surprising how this place can actually make *Sideritis* tea the right way. Nothing would upset me more than if they simply boiled stem, flower and leaves altogether – I mean it. I rested my cup back and decided for a bold move, risking my rook in exchange for a future play to try winning a pawn and a horse from his.

“Curiosity was never one of your most prominent thirsts, Minerva.”

I shrugged half-heartedly at that statement: there was no arguing against that. He went on: “Nevertheless, I shall quench it.” I tilted my head slightly, intrigued. Something was not right, I thought as I watched him dodging my rook bait skillfully. Was I too wrong to assume I could ask such a thing? My eyes dropped to my side of the field. Our match was going to get bloody over the next moves and I knew I needed to pick my sacrifices quick. It had been too long since I last won.

“This is not a story about me, mind you.” He started off, sipping again at his Hindu tea and resting all of his hands on his chubby knees. His hookah of several hoses was being set by one of the nymphs serving us and I knew it would be rude to refuse it, so I rested my cup as well and awaited, my next move still a hazy idea. The thing about two deities playing a game of wisdom and strategy but also having obligations to the Arts was that the moves could never just be plain. They had to be graceful, because what is life – any kind of – if not a train of thoughtful beauties unchained by fate? It is just a mundane existence, devoid of meaning. We both knew that and so did our worshipers who we had to bless so thoroughly.

“You see...” He continued, curling his lips slightly. “I was watching the Chaturthi attentively, as you know...” Indeed, we have a moral obligation to mortals always to watch over the prayers and festivals held on our account. Some people might say it is foolish because there are so many hypocrites hosting these events that it is nearly impossible to tell real good from masked evil, but even so, to be cherished and have our faith gauges so filled up feels genuinely refreshing. Ganesha is even more into these rituals than I am, but that may also be due to my constant shortening of believers, whereas he can get plenty of fresh new ones each year. I tilted my head, going for one of the hoses that was then mounted for me – a gray one. He went for the pink one.

“An anecdote has made this year’s celebration all the more eccentric, though. I have always witnessed the might of festivals in terms of human traveling. They seem to be led by tradition and curiosity more than ambition or kindness, but that has probably accounted for most of their prideful achievements. I do not judge them hastily.” He shrugged apologetically, sounding frank and simply noting the facts as they were. I would know, I shared the same view. I moved a pawn at last, but he did not seem to notice so quickly. He was already too entertained in delving deep within his reflections and memories. “There was a young lady there that called my attention. She has this very peculiar demeanor of some creature whose place is not quite defined and so they try to fit in, they adjust, they are stealth; however, you can tell they do not belong, nor will ever. It is common to see people trying to mimic my worshipers’ behaviors in the most comical manners and it certainly is part of the whole celebration, but this lady just did not seem to know what was right from wrong...” He used his lower left hand to swiftly reap my pawn in a move I was not expecting, putting his rook on the front line of a confront between our Queens. Bold, and yet he went on, unshaken. “She was...” He made a sudden pause I could only read as dramatic, and so I leaned forward as to show all my interest in such event. “It frightens me

to even recall it... She was wearing socks. Socks! What a dreadful sight to see, this century of lame and cursed creatures, tainted by the claws of blatant misuse! Socks with my image on them! Oh, the absurdity!"

An angry elephant is a remarkable sight to behold, such natural spectacular view. You can see Savannas full of this powerful display of passionate anger and feel your own fuel heating up. Ganesha, on the other hand, was a mixture of anger and containment. It was just so that what he felt, he could not disclose and it looked ugly, deformed. I had to refrain from snatching his rook just yet, as I was too enticed on that view. A view of war, of long gone conflict within a warrior. I missed my people and their quarrels, I did very much. He did not seem to go any further which made me twist my features in confusion. Although turning our images into merchandise did seem quite rude, I was not quite following where his story was leading us to. "It is, indeed, angering to be pictured in such items devoid of any blessed purpose but to serve trivial needs." I blunted out, averting my eyes back to our board and taking a long drag of my hose in the process. A goddess cannot feel light-headed the way a human feels but it certainly changes the atmosphere on a heavenly level. I sighed and turned back at him, who was now quiet – and glaring at me.

"... So that is the problem here?" He replied bitterly, crossing two arms and taking a deep, hasty drag. He puffed the air like a dragon would burn a chapel, furious but precise, and looked down at our match. He was closing in, I knew my failure would come fast. Still, I would not go down without a noble fight. What a shame, once a Goddess of strategical war moves, now reduced to a mere apprentice in a whole new level of chess. I moved my Queen daringly through the board, threatening his last horse.

"I guess so... Is it not the reason you found it outrageous?" I should have asked and kept quiet. I should have seen it coming.

Clearly, that was not the reason as I saw his many arms agitating in sheer exasperation and his eyes, a flaming color then, fixated on my profile as he shook his head in disbelief. The pieces I had managed to collect from his part of the board started shifting into many different depictions of his head and so he glanced down at them. "Use me as a token of wisdom, intelligence, a beacon of light amid turmoil, and I shall praise you." He gestured towards the pieces and looked up at me, wincing his eyes. "Dare not approach my face to filthy parts such as human feet, though." He stared at me in all his offended state, seemingly trying to remind himself that I was not the offender he intended on punishing. So, he straightened his back.

"The appropriate punishment has been long banished from our rites, you see..." Ganesha was back to his long, paused drags, puffing impeccable smoke circles and closing his eyes for a moment. "I had her fall and a shameful doctor is looking at her ankle. Hopefully, he shall amputate it so she cannot engage in such actions ever again."

I blinked in silence. In all those years since I have fought my brothers and decided to strengthen relations to other pantheons, Ganesha was always one of the kindest, one of the most amicable beings to befriend me. It sounded so strange to see such merciless behavior, I could only tilt my head in puzzlement. My turn would have long expired if we were counting minutes in our match but I could no longer remain quiet. “My *Shri*, I must intervene. Having this female human no home as you said, how come you severe her so if ignorance is not a faulty trait? Was she tainting your image on purpose by any chance?”

That was it. It triggered the last bullet he had left, his many arms now wrecking every bit of our mahogany chess set, destroying his hookah even as everything turned into a massive particle mess under his wrathful touch. Was I to hear that story now, I would have known better. I would have seen the filth in donning an entity’s face on someone’s feet, I would have said better, been wiser. But that was not the case and so I simply lingered there, hearing my self be cursed in one thousand Sanskrit verses I could only hope were not too offensive to my own people.

Once the wreckage had been done, I bowed politely and watched him for a fraction before leaving, words unspoken filling up the air as I walked farther and farther away and noticed the nymphs already stepping in to clean up his mess. Several of them were known for adopting a behavior close to worshiping just to please us, their loyal guests, but one in particular had me halt midway to stare: she was wearing a Ganesha pin on an anklet on her left ankle. As if it were for pure whim, she comforted Ganesha while her companions took on the dirty work. She grinned and he grinned back, his arms dramatically gesturing to their surroundings in what I could only assume was a biased narrative of what took place there, but I was not going to intervene. When I realized, I was hiding behind a curtain and watching attentively – for us Gods can also be childish at times. The nymph looked very different from her fellow servants and before I could tell, she drew a very exquisite arrow-shaped blade from her sash and...

On a single blow, she slayed Ganesha, right there. In front of my eyes, with a grim smile. The other nymphs seemed to ignore the colorful rain pouring from the elephant king and she turned to where I was positioned, her voice that of a familiar Huntress. I did not expect to hear it on any occasion other than moonlit nights. It made me shiver. It angered me and I could not do a thing but stare her back as I listened, my eyes now completely aware of the quiver she had partially hidden on the back of her toga.

“When were you both going to realize he’d lost the game after his third round, Sister?”

Acknowledgements

Yawp is a big project. It's actually much bigger than one might think. Some of us have been working on it since 2013, and it's great to see how much it has grown in production. It's also *very* hardworking, so we would like to thank a few people whose trust and support have been essential for this project to come true.

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