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I&tp perspectives | *encounters*

creative writing project



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This third collection of short stories written in spring semester 2021 on the underlying topic of 'encounters' comprises the work of the students of the Language and Text Production course, Masters Programme in English and American Studies.

The photos have been chosen as an incentive to produce divergent and varied texts with distinct writing styles, on a variety of issues approached from different perspectives.

From love and friendship, empowerment or emancipation to loss and grief, feelings and relationships are portrayed with sensitivity and chance meetings can trigger a series of events - not always dramatic, or life-changing, yet well-worth experiencing.

Bitter or sweet, optimistic or pessimistic - whatever the images and feelings evoked - each short story is well thought-out, unique and original!

unnoticed

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by elisabeth mesaric

NATURE. Being surrounded by this precious nature I suddenly feel the urge to stop, taking a big breath. This feels so soothing. I see all those majestic flowers, the hard-working little insects, and a whistling noise draws my attention to a marmot that is hiding behind some tufts of grass. It feels like my eyes have never been able to see all those enchanting parts of nature. Wow!

Looking at this little fluffy animal that honestly has an exceptionally large nose compared to the size of its face, I start to realize that size is not what matters. Although this animal is so much bigger than the little insects and tiny creatures around it, it is the one that tries to stay unnoticed the most. But why? Is the marmot afraid of getting caught doing things it shouldn't do? Exactly as I sometimes feel afraid of getting caught by someone when I come home after 8 o'clock in the evening. No. All jokes aside. I feel the marmot only tries to protect its own life by using his strategy of hiding and staying unnoticed. This behavior is reasonable and clever since it probably protects it from major dangers.

My thoughts flit around wildly.

I start to compare this little animal with other living creatures, and I realize that not only the marmot is the one that tries to stay unnoticed, but there are also some people who are unnoticed or even wish to remain unnoticed all the time. People who are a lot taller and stronger than other people but do have no self-confidence, people who are famous and wish not to be recognized everywhere and then there is me – me trying to live a full life and make everyone proud but still feeling unnoticed here and there.

At this moment everything feels different. Being here in this beautiful nature, I suddenly feel seen, although there are no crowds of people around me.

I feel seen although no one is talking to me.

I feel seen though no one is looking at me.

I just feel seen.

Feelings of happiness rush through my body and warm my heart with love even though I am standing here alone. After taking a big breath again, I keep on walking, and I am still impressed by the beauty of nature is. There are birds singing, grasshoppers chirping, and the wind gently touches my skin and makes the branches of the trees dance. My body in complete relaxation feels no time pressure and I perceive all the *beau* things around me. Right now, it feels so different. Noticing the whole life around me makes me feel noticed. I am in this beautiful place and have never seen so many fascinating wonders. What I perceive with my eyes is the same, but my brain has learned so much.

Stopping.

Taking a breath.

Looking consciously around me.

Such simple actions that should be part of every single day. Rushing around and trying to get everything done as fast as possible was part of my life.

But not anymore.

The simplest situations can bring the most joy. I do not have to be perfect. Who can tell what is perfect? I only have to see what is happening around me. Recognizing that there is more than owning expensive goods, looking good, or fitting in the norms of society. Noticing the tiny things around me makes me feel noticed and not how the other people look at me and what they think of me. Nature does not judge me; it gives me strength. Thank you, little marmot, for opening my eyes again and letting me see what life is worth living for.

The solution – NATURE and its beauty.

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hide and seek

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by **teresa österle**

“Boy, are you scared?” A shy nod. “I just want to go home.” Silence.

The only sound accompanying the duo is the engine noise of the truck they are driving through the bumpy roads of town. It’s the 24th of April, 1945. The weather resembles the current political situation – unpredictable, insecure. A moment ago, the sun twinkled through the leaves of the avenue they were passing and now the rain was back. The boy had even forgotten where they were heading to as he was daydreaming, thinking of the good old days when he was playing with his sisters and brothers in the woods behind their parental home. The time when war was nothing more than a game to the children. Carefree. No sorrows were near. They didn’t have much, but enough, and they were fortunate, even felt privileged, as they were blessed with their own farm including seven cows, five hens, and two pigs.

Now, it was as if even the sky felt sorry for the sixteen-year-old who had been recruited to serve his homeland and support it in the fight against the enemy by delivering arms to the battlefield. The lanky boy and the driver have been doing this for two months already. Maybe the war will soon be over. It’s pouring down. Small puddles of unabsorbed rain water already form on the streets and in the nearby cornfields. The wipers run at full blast but still are too slow to grant a clear view. It is cold. The boy in the passenger seat is shivering. However, one could not tell if that is because of the bad weather or anxiety bothering him – probably both. The driver, a heavy man in his 60s, wearing a lumberjack shirt and dirty pants, only seen with a cigarette in his right hand, repeatedly glances at his companion from the corner of his eye with concern.

“Listen, boy. I could let you off tomorrow at the crossing that leads into the woods when we deliver the next arms supply. Are you good at geography? Will you find your way back home

to your family?” Surprised, but feeling the wave of hope flooding every cell of his body, the boy stares into the driver’s leathery face and replies with a hoarse voice: “Ugh, yes, I know how the rivers flow. I’ll find my way. I, just want to be home.” It is decided matter then.

• • •

“Okay, we are almost there. In the backseat you find a loaf of bread. Take it and off you go. I wish you luck, boy!” Overwhelmed with the driver’s good-naturedness and generosity, I grab the cloth bundle. Not many vehicles are on the road today. The weather has cleared and only some few clouds deny the sun to spread its rays over the land. We are approaching the crossing. “My sincere gratitude, Sir. Fare thee well!” The man’s distressed facial expression, the rushed look over his shoulder to check that no one is watching, and his hardly noticeable nod to say goodbye reminded me that what we are doing could have severe consequences for the both of us. This is what makes me open the door and jump down into the mud even more quickly. I’m slamming the door and the truck is already driving off.

Silence. I am left on my own now. I need a plan. With closed eyes, I throw my head into the neck trying to sort out my thoughts. Exhale, I can do this and find my way back to my family. Until then, this dreadful atrocity called war which has been prevalent for the last seven years of my life will hopefully be over. I open my eyes and realise that I am standing right beneath a beautiful cherry tree which is in full blossom. The rose-pink and white canopy looks like a huge colourful cloud skewered on a tree-trunk. At least nature in this part of the country has not yet been destroyed which gives me hope. A sudden rustling in the cornfields right next to me make me jump, and I remember that I don’t have time to admire the beauty of life. Instead, I need to hide. They mustn’t find me!

I shoulder the cloth bundle hastily, scan my surroundings, and cross the road. Not a living soul is passing this road on that Tuesday morning. I cross the road and dive into the depths of the forest in which I should soon find – as far as I remember – the river coming from the north-east flowing towards the direction of my area. Some shrubs, raspberry bushes, and brambles have grown together and impede my getting through. Thank God, I am wearing long trousers that cover my shins. Making my way through the undergrowth, the vegetation slowly clears, and huge spruces rise towards the sky in rivalry for light. If I were here under different circumstances, I would enjoy listening to the beautiful forest melody that’s made of the wind rustling through the leaves of deciduous trees, the occasional crackling of branches when an animal is on its way, a spotted woodpecker banging his head against the trunk somewhere in the distance, and the coal tit with its unmistakable sound that resembles a quick heart beat – a short and a long tone right after another repeated a few times – like my heart beat. My pulse is up. The adrenaline is rushing through my veins as I stumble and fall but still move forward in a fast pace. The fear of being discovered sharpens my senses and makes me feel like the most serious criminal. Suddenly, as I make my way through branches and bushes, I perceive the sound of water which makes me stand still. I’m listening. North-east – like I thought it would be. Following the sound, my feet make their way into the direction of the riverbed and, indeed, there it is behind some linden trees – the riverbed I believe that leads me home.

Keep on going! That was the sentence I’ve been repeating to myself for what feels like seven hours. It must be something around 5pm as the low light of the sun makes the wood slowly grow dark around me. I stop – leaning my side against the raw surface of a *picea abies*. Tiredness and fatigue spread. My shirt sticks to my sweaty body; I can feel the blood pump

through the soles of my feet leaving them swollen and warm in the boots that already caused blisters at the left heel. I feel so exhausted and should probably find myself a shelter for the night. A few meters up the hill, away from the rushing stream where I can possibly still hear when troops are approaching, I spot some stacked logs where I can lie in between protected from the cold wind that is gradually emerging. I collect some branches and build myself a makeshift roofing for tonight's sleeping place. After some greedy bites from the loaf of brown bread, I take a last gaze at my surroundings, checking if nothing and no one is near. I fall asleep immediately.

“The next thing I remember were the deep voices in the distance that woke me. First, I stayed put in my hiding place adjusting my eyes to the dark of the woods. It was probably early morning as I could already see some brightness through the canopy above. Then, I carefully spied over the logs and saw five military men giving themselves away with their torch lights that lit up their immediate surroundings. Were they looking for me and what would they do if they found me? Hell, I was so scared, my heart rate was probably up at 150bpm. They followed the river downstream – the way I came from yesterday. I took my chance to flee into the other direction as soon as they passed the height of my hiding place. Stooped, I battled my way through bushes and thorns, scratching my arms open. Anxiety was sitting in my neck and forced me to run even faster - trying to make as little noise as possible. Every branch I was breaking sounded like a loud gun shot to me and I could barely believe that they didn't hear me.

However, after a 30 minute non-stop run, I ended up in a meadow. Breathless. Sinking onto my knees into the grass covered with morning dew, I calmed myself down from the agitation. I remember the beauty and stillness of that moment in spite of everything as if it was yesterday. The grass was shimmering in the first rays of sunshine. In between the blades were some common daisies, cuckoo-flowers, and bird's-foot trefoils still closed to protect themselves from the night's cold. Soon they would open their petals to turn the clearing into a beautiful flowery meadow. I raised my eyes to get my bearings. The riverbed came from the left and straight ahead stood a small ramshackle log cabin with some old tools for haymaking right next to it. My gaze was fixed on it until I realised where I was. I knew that place. I knew it like the back of my hand. Relief was all I felt in that very moment when the sun came out behind the mountain range in front of me. These were the meadows my family owned and used for agricultural purposes. I knew how to get home from here.”

“I came home on the 26th of April. It was still about two weeks until the 9th of May when the war was finally over. Until then, I kept myself hidden at home so that neighbours would not peach on us. It was an awful time. I am happy for you that you haven't yet had to live through a war and you hopefully never will.”

Astonishing how I still hear my grandpa's voice in my head when I remember him telling us this adventurous story of how he fled his government commitment in the military for the hundredth time. I hear his unclear pronunciation, his use of dialect words even I had hard times to understand, his gestures that emphasised every single bit of the story and made it even more dramatic than it probably was. I still remember his eyes – tiny and sticky as the age-related macular degeneration was progressing. His eyes looking into mine with this soft gaze that still was so present even though his sight was fading.

Here I am now – standing in the corridor of my grandparents' house. They are no longer among us and the house is going to be sold which is why it's being stripped of its contents. I

am thinking of my granddad while looking at one of his drawings – a marmot peering out of blades of grass. It somehow looks as if the animal hides away from something which has always made me think of my granddad's story, when he had to hide from the military in the woods on his way home. My grandpa drew it when he was aged 62, thirty years ago. It is so accurate in every detail that sometimes I can hardly believe that he was the artist of the drawing collection I am holding in a wooden box. I take also this last picture frame with the curious looking hiding marmot off the nail and put it on top of the drawings. I close the lid and the squiggled clasp of the box and leave the house, carrying the memories of a wonderful granddad with me.

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us - them

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by anna lena siller

I see them. I feel them. I hear them.

Us.

All my arduous life, I have been a witty and cynical observer of the social scene. Small as I may be, nonetheless powerful I am. Or, at least, I was. Can you spot this mountainous treeless setting which extensively stretches along five acres? This is my land. Or, at least, it was. The very land, I used to rule.

Blooming, blushing, and booming wild weeds were once spreading like wildfire upon our terrain: Alpine blue sow thistles, alpine gentians, alpine buttercups were once beautifully dancing in the breeze. Bushy as the fleece of the ram they once felt, sweet as honey they were once scented, bright as the sun they were once lightening up our world. The cows were once mooing, the birds were once singing, bees were once humming and buzzing, eagles were once crying, and grasshoppers were once chirping.

Now I find myself amidst a few clumps of coarse grass that is available for us indigenous restless observers. Now we eke out a precarious existence foraging in rubbish dumps. Now we are subsumed under those illegal aliens. All flowers are hopelessly begging for some dewdrops, resting in the brown grass, nodding in the wind. All animals are silenced. And with these rapid changes our happiness died. Darkness conquered our light: The grey of the sky, the grey of the river, and the grey of our terrain.

Meanwhile, my family and I have retreated to underground coves, where we have neatly arranged spacious living and sleeping quarters. Down there, upon my hole, runs a shallow river between walls of sheer rock. This is the frontier to the dreaded land. Were you in my position, you'd better not set foot on these treacherous grounds. I never would. You would be exposed to the risk of being overrun or knocked down, brutally cut into halves, and ignorantly left for dead.

* * *

Them.

I know those ignorant aliens and their strange habits. Yet, I do not know how they communicate. I personally do not hold them in high regard. No one of my species does. Let's be brutally honest about this: The mere existence of these strange creatures does not fascinate me. Deep down I resent their very existence. Those illusive giants are disrespectful. Those illusive giants have peculiar habits. Those illusive giants are ruthlessly selfish and inconsiderate. Please do not accuse me of being judgmental - I can prove it to you.

It would be on any brilliantly sunny day, when those very giants trample completely irreverently on our sacred natural habitat, with reckless disregard to our holy land, with no heed of their immediate surroundings. What we had carefully arranged all our life they trampled to death. Oh sorry, I almost forgot to mention how prudent they had become in the course of time. Unfailingly courteous as they were, they usually left a trail of indigestible waste. 'A generous present for the animal kingdom,' they must have thought in their self-absorbed minds.

However, one year ago something changed. All of a sudden, those ignorant aliens were hustling upon our terrain with breakneck speed. They were cruising our rough terrain, zipping up our hills, finally approaching us blindingly fast. They pushed themselves up every hill, every upsurge, every hindrance. They seemed restless, guiltless, careless. They were able to withstand any mental and physical blockages. Why the devil were they moving at such an extraordinarily fast pace? I would not call it a safe running speed anymore. 'Speedy Gonzales' I would name each one of them, being dumbstruck by their supernatural velocity and their rapid acceleration. For us, the speed did not seem adaptable. It did not seem alienish either. I know that those illusive giants have constraints. Don't they? At least I thought so. Then I detected their bodies to be merged with a robust metal frame. They were intrinsically and rigidly attached as if no one would have a chance to tear them apart. I quietly observed how the riders pushed their arms forward, stretched their backs out, and willfully attempted to outsource their like-minded competitors. Every ten seconds they would produce a sharp beep-beep-beeeeeeeep sound. The situation seemed akin to a road race.

Competition is a real thing for them. Claiming victory as well. Reaching the distant mountain peak as well. Invading our habitat as well. Uncontrolled dumping of trash as well. Just that you know. That's *their* world.

* * *

'Darling, would you like some more grass soup?' my beloved wife tried to indulge me with her tasty dishes on a casual light dinner situation.

'Thank you, my dear. I do not have a craving for food today,' I replied, in slight disgust of the nourishing meal placed right before me.

'Darling, what's the matter? There must be something on your mind considering that you are vehemently rejecting your favorite meal!' uttered my wife, in severe doubts about my holistic wellbeing.

‘You know, one of the things that most offends me at the moment is that our little ones can’t play outdoors without running the risk of passing the frontier line and being run over as an immediate consequence,’ I answered in a low murmur.

‘Darling, I am aware of the situation. I reckon that we should dig another hole, exclusively for them. Similar to a kids’ playground, we could just create a kids’ pit. Certainly, they would be happy to discover a private room for themselves,’ my wife comforted me, clearly bragging about her own suggestion.

Not wishing to see my beloved wife’s proposal interfering with my intention, her message to me was an encouraging *carpe diem* – after all, the fewer our worries, the more memorable our moments. ‘*Carpe diem quam minimum credula postero*’, I was reminiscent of a coined phrase by Horace that I ran over and over again, in vain. I could not remain idle in the face of such violations and just ‘enjoy’ life. How ludicrous would that be?

‘Are you serious? Would you really opt for dodging, for hiding, for locking us away... in our land, the very land we have founded, we have built up, we have heroically endeavored to preserve for future generations? I do not want our kids to have a bleak future, my dear. I do want our kids to face a bright future ahead. I do want our kids to be as privileged as we had been; be able to relish moments of limitless freedom as we did in our childhood. I do not want them to be locked away in the shadows just because of these ignorant blithering idiots!’ I angrily exclaimed.

‘Darling, I am afraid I need to tell you that we do not have other alternatives left,’ my wife was trying to justify her position with an unduly pessimistic undertone.

‘I am sure we will. I am not sure what ... how... who...but I am sure to expel them!’ I started to speak with a stutter, as soon as I thought about the implementation of any immediate action plan. Nonetheless, I was determined to fight for reinstalling justice. I was intent on provoking change, stopping immediate intervention and preserving our right to live in dignity.

* * *

Days later my mind was crystal-clear. Nothing could prevent my undertaking from succeeding. Or almost nothing.

I summoned a joint preparatory meeting, calling a herd of cows, a flock of sheep, a herd of goats and a swarm of mosquitoes to attend and to put their bid in signing my petition. At this point, it’s high time I informed you I was intending to set up a petition against direct intervention in favor of a *bona fide* reform plan. Luckily, all living species within my kingdom were determined to assist in times of need for justice and reconciliation. I felt overwhelmed that my plan was widely applauded. More than that, my crew also suggested that we spoil those illusive giants’ experiences within our territory.

With a collaborative and concerted effort, a herd of cows and a flock of sheep left behind increasing amounts of excrements on the path, by which they wanted to hamper a smooth ascent for those ignorant aliens. I almost felt disgusted by my own land, which reeked of pungent odor. If animal excrement hadn’t acted as a deterrent enough at this point, I was certain that those ignorant aliens would still be daunted by the sheer invasion of mosquitos. In fact, swarms of mosquitoes, albeit not visible with the naked eye, were buzzing around and infecting those illusive giants with a hurtful bite. Apparently, my mosquito friends have

developed a taste for alienish blood. But I do not want to lay the blame at the door of some innocent mosquitoes - anyone has to satisfy their peasant hunger somehow. Even those slightly bedraggled-looking dirty golden eagles, which are normally our worst and most hated enemies, circled around the alienish invaders. I felt greatly amused watching how the eagles accidentally dropped wooden sticks or small rough stones next to those illusive giants, who gave a piercing shriek from time to time.

In light of all these determined attempts to dissuade those ignorant aliens from setting foot in our territory, I cannot think of one more reason why an invader would love to access our habitat ever again. Never again would they even try. At least that's what I thought.

* * *

Sometimes, however, life proves you wrong.

In reality, it seemed as if our collaborative arrangements exerted the opposite effect on them. In the face of ostensible indifference to our suffering, backed by an astonishing sense of self-interest, those illusive giants picked up where they had left off. Like swarms of bees, those ignorant aliens continued to pervade our territory. Scarcely did they feel halted by emerging animal excrements, by targeted mosquito bites or by unexpected eagle attacks. Instead, they seemed to resiliently tolerate our obstacles.

The consternation of our crew was obvious. In a state of pure bewilderment, I finally had to ascertain that our remarkable efforts remained fruitless for us, little invisible marmots. Indeed, it was our last-ditch attempt to save our immediate surroundings, our sacred land, our living species.

There is no doubt that we living species shared the common objective and the firm intention of beating the scourge of terrorism. We had been resolutely trying to manage the black clouds until we conquered them. However, they conquered us.

At the end of the game, the implementation of our reform plan failed.

We failed.

They triumphed.

Us.

Them.

Are they ever going to stop?

Are we ever to be free?

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petrification

photo: violet stathopoulou-vals

by jessica buchberger

It is a day like any other day. One cannot differentiate the days anymore. Is it Monday? Is it Thursday? Is it April or November? All days feel the same. They basically are the same. The only thing changing is the weather. This is the one thing where I can see that the earth is still turning.

It all began more than a year ago. When the news hit, I was at the market buying some food to get over the weekend. The small corner-shop had a TV set above the counter on the left side. When I entered, the TV was muted, but as the channel switched to live broadcasting the owner turned the volume on. The images were shocking enough, even without the audio. After a few seconds the people on the shop started to forage. Some left with several carts full of food and necessities. I was petrified. The images would be etched in my mind forever. A middle-aged woman with one Botox injection too many commented in a squeaky but clear voice on the terrible scenes from around the world. A novel disease had been discovered. “As officials tried to downplay and even deny the existence, the situation spiraled out of control in some major cities around the world”, the lady with a hairstyle right out of the 70s announced. For quite a while I just stood there while the other customers began to scatter along the aisles. The news spread rapidly like a flame.

By now I have been confined in my apartment for almost a year. The first few weeks of the pandemic were chaotic and violent. People were robbing pharmacies, supermarkets, and sometimes each other. Violence became the superior force over everything. I cannot remember when and how the government gained control once again, but everything changed once more. From normality to chaos to another reality. If it was for the better, I do not know. Since then, everybody felt like under arrest. Nobody was allowed to leave their homes, except for essential workers. Food, medication, and other necessities were sent. No human contact as well. They would deliver the packages to your front door, and then you would get an email that the package had arrived. How this was logistically managed I cannot recall. They said it was for

our own best interest. To restrict our social contacts to an absolute minimum should be the aim. So, there I was in my single apartment. Alone.

It was on the second day of the pandemic that Mrs. Ying from apartment 3A disappeared. The McAllister's from 1B vanished one week later. Mr. and Mrs. Smith went away the following week. I saw a girl from apartment 3B for the last time in week 6. All of my other neighbors in the building were gone too. In this low-rise apartment building are overall 13 apartments. How many people lived in the building exactly I could not tell. I did not know all of them. To some of them I had never spoken a word. To some I had only said a grumpy "good morning" from time to time or had just caught sight of. I only knew a few people by name. But I remember their faces. I would have recognized them in a dancing crowd at a festival halfway across the world. Now they were all gone. I presumed they were all dead by then. So, it was just me.

In the beginning everything was OK. I could focus on myself for once. I started working out. I started painting. I started reading. Some books I reread others I read for the first time. I started cleaning my apartment every second day. I started watching my DVD collection. I started growing plants out of seeds. I started tap dancing. I started learning Italian. I started meditating. I started playing the guitar. I started writing songs. I started writing a book. I started writing a short story. I started writing a journal. I started cooking. I started baking. The problem was that I only started doing all these activities. In the end, I only had the energy to do them for a couple of days. After a few months I could do some of them for merely one or two hours. At best. Most of the day I sat on my chair in front of the window. Staring at the streets. Observing how nothing happened. Suddenly, I felt utterly alone. I slept, ate, and sat on my chair.

Day in, day out I just existed. I looked through the window. I was watching the clouds roll by. Oh, how I wished to be one of them. To escape that drabness of human existence I was stuck in. One day even my imagination was beaten. I sat there like a statue. As if I had looked into Medusa's eyes, I slowly, but steadily petrified.

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to meet or not to meet

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by annalena gerbis

Hi, my name is Linda and I'm 22 years old. I would describe myself as a usual 22-year-old Austrian. I like to hang out with friends, party on Saturdays, travel in summer, and go skiing in winter. Before 10th March 2020, I also enjoyed going to University classes – at least most of the time. I would say, my life was awesome and rather easy. I usually did what I liked to do – completely unconcerned about everything else. I mean, come on, nobody has been thinking of a baby elephant when at a party, or counted the people coming from different households in a room. Strangers were not seen as virus catapults, but rather as a real pleasure. Haven't we all been inviting someone we didn't know that well over to our place to have a drink with us? As I said, life was pretty easy.

Since then, almost everything in my life has changed. When University switched to distance learning, and the first lockdown of the country was looming ahead, most of my colleagues from University, myself included, grabbed their most important belongings, jumped onto the next train, and went back home to their parents' place. Their place seemed, compared to a student's dorm, just nicer to spend so much time in – we thought. And of course, most of us enjoyed their time back home again, at least for a while. Believe me or not, there was a reason why I chose to study a bit further away from home. The house, and my childhood room, suddenly seemed to be a lot smaller than I remembered. In the beginning, spending time with my family and siblings was nice, though for me that was just not enough. I really needed my friends too.

With the help of devices, I tried to compensate for the time usually spent with friends. We drank coffees via videotelephony, played charades, and had house parties – all online. Real-life encounters got rare. Most of the time people met online. I don't want to seem grumpy, these online possibilities are great, but to me they cannot make up for face-to-face meetings,

especially when your WIFI-connection is suddenly unstable for the 1000th time and the party is over too soon, again.

Yes it's true, real-life encounters got rare. However, after some time of not having seen anyone except for your family, many people started losing their nerves – not only students, I'm certain. On a long expected sunny day, I finally met my best-friend again, and then there was this super awkward moment; how to greet one another. Shall I give her a fist bump just like all the politicians do, or shall I just say 'hi' from a baby elephant distance, or shall I hug her – with or without a mask? There were so many questions in my head, I would never have thought of before. And of course, I shouldn't be mentioning that not even your best friend entered your home anymore. You just went out for a walk. Maybe you had a coffee afterwards, in your garden, three meters apart from each other.

After some time, I was convinced, everyone seemed to have formed an opinion on what to make of the corona virus. It somehow became a question of believing or not believing. Some of your friends started having parties again, while others barricaded themselves in their homes. People really seemed to live the extremes. I would also love to go to parties again, but even when I get invited to get-togethers – with up to five different people – I can't help it, strange concerns are popping up in my mind. Had we better meet outside, as it would actually be safer, where your neighbours can see? Or rather inside, as it is actually not allowed to get together? Should we wear masks? Have a corona-test before meeting each other? Or should I just stay at home?

Meeting people is not easy anymore. You still want to meet your friends, but you also don't want to catch the virus yourself, or even worse infect your friends or family. As soon as I meet someone, or go somewhere I automatically think of distance, masks, virus, When I think of the future, I just hope that, thanks to the hopefully high immunization rates, we soon won't be thinking of all these strange concerns anymore. I hope we will be able to celebrate life once again, get to know other people, take a sip from our friends' drink, hug each other, have huge family dinners, meet our grandparents without being concerned about harming their health, just do all the things we took for granted before once again.

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the protagonist

by julia heilmann

Amy liked working at the library. She had accepted the job a couple of months before, after her mother had unceremoniously shoved the newspaper listings towards her onto the breakfast table.

“It’s time,” she’d said, and Amy had sent in an application on that same day.

It was her first real ‘grown-up job’ and the first she had stumbled across after graduating from university. It wasn’t her dream job by any means, but it wasn’t horrible either. Most days, she just felt stuck.

The town she lived in now, her hometown, could barely count fifteen thousand inhabitants, but Amy had felt drawn to this place after spending such a long time away in a big city. Growing up here was splendid, a lively old town for a lively young girl, and for the most part she had enjoyed it. At some point, though, every bird must flee its nest, and it had been no different for Amy. Contrary to her greatest expectations, though, moving away never turned out to be this massive life event that brought about fundamental changes in her personal journey. It wasn’t anything like in those novels she had always loved to read, and none of it had resulted in a bittersweet romance, no grand coming of age. Now only a 9-to-5 and the promise of maybe someday being able to afford her own apartment.

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiss

It was as if running off to a new town to meet new people and experience something new hadn't changed her, hadn't helped her grow as much as she would have liked. The adventure, the significance she had always wished for never materialised. Instead, Amy felt as though she was her same old self in the same old town. Not a bad life, but not a particularly exciting one either.

But now that she was back, things felt different. Little did she know what accepting the job at the library would bring about; not the change she had always anticipated but something of even more value.

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During her time at the library, Amy had all sorts of encounters with all sorts of people checking out all sorts of different books. Many people owned a library card and made use of it regularly, but some fascinated Amy more than others. It was that one summer, her first back in town, that stood out to her in particular.

Summers had always felt slow like molasses here, sticky and creeping up on everyone before engulfing the entire town in indolence, and that year was no different. It started quite early, a mid-May heatwave landing like a sucker punch.

Working at the library during those days was a blessing, with the AC blowing consistently and the promise of holidays around the corner in just a few weeks. An elegant elderly lady with a penchant for mystery and romance novels, Mrs Choi, tended to visit the library during those days with her granddaughter in tow. The girl was teen-aged and wore her hair in a high ponytail most times, sunglasses never leaving the bridge of her nose despite being indoors. Amy hadn't learned her name yet as she merely accompanied Mrs Choi and never checked out any books of her own. She was a good companion for the frail old lady though, helping her reach the upper shelves and carrying the ever-growing stack of books for her.

Whenever Mrs Choi would peruse the new arrivals, the girl would sometimes wander off on her own and marvel at the Young Adult shelves. Most of the time, however, she sat in a chair near the entrance and excitedly tapped and typed away on her phone, flashing pearlescent white down at the screen.

"Mona, stop staring at that *thing*," Mrs Choi would hiss, and the girl would stiffen in her seat and quickly pocket her phone.

Amy wondered who Mona, whose name she had now learned, was texting all the time. A group chat consisting of her closest friends? Her crush? Did she make use of the time her

grandmother wasn't paying attention to make plans for the weekend?

Whatever it was, Mrs Choi would scold her for it, gently at first and then more loudly.

If it had been anyone else disrupting the quiet of the library with their scolding, Amy's supervisor Jackie would have probably told them to quiet down, or at the very least she might have thrown them a sinister look. But not even Amy's tenacious boss dared to mess with ladies like Mrs Choi.

Often, Amy found herself thinking about how reminiscent this grandmother-granddaughter relationship was to the one she shared with her own mother. She felt for the girl, doing everything for this woman she looked up to, maybe even feeling slightly indebted but still getting scolded for the most minuscule of mistakes. Amy hoped Mona was enjoying herself, that she had a supportive group of friends and had experiences to shape her life into something magnificent without letting her grandmother's words hold her back.

Even when her job would have technically required her, Amy never had the heart to tell the girl off for laughing out loud or popping her bubble gum. Sometimes, Amy concluded, people should just be allowed to be themselves, and she hoped this young girl was living life to the fullest.

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A young boy, maybe ten or eleven years old, came around almost every single day after school. The first time Amy took notice of him was a couple months after she had started her job. He had looked so sad that day, sat in his denim dungarees at one of the reading desks near the children's section, sulking over a copy of a *Percy Jackson* book. One time, Jackie had sent her over to talk to the boy and see if he was okay. Quietly and carefully, Amy had sat down in the chair next to him and asked him how he was doing. She'd managed to coax a name out of the now frightened-looking boy: Aaron. He was eleven and liked going to the library after school to do his homework and look at picture books.

After the time Jackie had asked Amy to talk to the boy, he had allowed Amy to recommend him some of her favourite books and left with a smile on his face and the promise of getting to look at the new arrivals for the children's section early, before they were even shelved. Aaron continued coming to the library regularly, some days looking lonesome, always brave. Still, he never stayed past 4.30 p.m.

Amy often felt the loneliness radiating off the boy, secretly even found herself empathising and identifying with him. She imagined how Aaron must feel like – alone, a little bit empty, too young for any of it – and she saw herself, not necessarily as a child but now, working her job at the library, going home to her mother’s house in the evening and dreading it. The words and stares and scathing comments, the judgement and the shoot of resentment peeking out of her patient soil.

Almost daily, Amy would bid Aaron goodbye with a high five, and when he arrived looking sorrowful, he left looking winsome. One day, Jackie had looked at her with a regretful glint in her eye that told Amy not to ask the boy about his parents, and she never did. As long as he kept coming in, it was all right.

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A man, maybe five to ten years older than Amy, frequented the library every Tuesday and Friday that summer. His presence felt strange as if he was much older than he looked. He always sat in the same spot, reading for hours. Stacks and stacks of books littered his little reading desk, but he rarely checked any of them out. Sometimes though, he would take one or two books home with him and return them later in the week.

The man’s mysterious aura drew Amy in more and more, and as the weeks passed by, she frequently found herself tending to the shelves near his favourite reading spot. She came to notice that he usually carried a dark leather briefcase with him and was always dressed in a suit. His tie was knotted looser on Fridays compared to Tuesdays, but it always complemented the colour of his suit. As she shuffled around this corner of the library, she found herself wondering about this guy and the life he led. She imagined him working a corporate job, something that awarded him an official title. For a brief moment, she wondered if he was a spy or some kind of undercover cop.

He clearly led a busy lifestyle, but he also looked sad sometimes, lonely, sitting in his chair like an ancient statue, unmoving for hours with a pensive look on his face. Amy then wondered if he was all right and why he was spending so much of his free time at the library instead of with his family. Was he like Amy’s own brother, unable to stand his parents and avoiding them at all costs? She found herself imagining sitting down next to him, starting a conversation, but decided it would be too awkward and bordering on rude to interrupt him.

So, Amy had never talked to him, until one day when she was working the front desk, and he started up a conversation with her,

introducing himself as Matthew. The book he was looking to check out was an old edition of a middle-grade classic Amy had never read before. It was for his younger brother, he claimed with a proud smile. This was something Amy hadn't anticipated, judging merely from his appearance and the demeanour she had previously observed.

Amy wondered if all the books Matthew checked out were for his brother and found herself looking through his account history later, something she wasn't technically forbidden to do but which felt like a risk anyway. It turned out that this rather enigmatic character put a lot of thought into the books he picked out and from then on, Amy saw him for what he was: a good brother, a family man.

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The patrons Amy found herself most fascinated by waltzed in together every Friday afternoon: a pair of young women, around Amy's age – probably in their late twenties or early thirties. They contrasted each other in every way, which might have been the reason for Amy's inability to avert her gaze from them. One of them had sleek dark hair falling just past her shoulders, sometimes elegantly pulled off her neck into a clip or ponytail. Her straightforward, professional look reminded Amy of Matthew. Both of them had a very distinct air to them that could be interpreted as awe-inspiring and sometimes borderline intimidating.

The other woman stood in stark contrast to her library companion. Where the other was polished and proper, she seemed bubbly and free-spirited. It wasn't so much her clothes that Amy took notice of but her hair: almost golden, cascading in fluffy looking tufts of strawberry blonde. It matched her cheerful face perfectly, and Amy felt intensely envious of it. Perhaps it was more than the hair that made her feel this way, though. Amy thought that maybe it was her self-assuredness, her confidence, the sense of self she saw in her but could never seem to find within herself. The first few times she noticed the two of them, she felt something almost ugly rearing its head inside of her, something she didn't want to acknowledge – jealousy.

What made it worse, perhaps, was that theirs looked like an unlikely friendship in every way, but somehow it seemed to work effortlessly. The two ladies reminded Amy of the friendships she had come across in books and on TV when she was growing up. Tight-knit, supportive, aspirational. Looking at them reminded her of how her teenage self had pictured her adult life –

successful, loved, sure of herself. Not just a figure on the sidelines of her own life, but the main character.

It wasn't until she overheard them conversing one fateful Friday night that Amy's perspective changed. She hadn't caught the beginning of their conversation; therefore context escaped her, but she didn't necessarily need it.

As she rounded a corner, pushing her cart of returns, she heard a voice through the shelves.

"I don't know, I really hate books with main characters that are just clearly a vehicle for the author to fulfil their own wishes and fantasies. This one, for example," the dark-haired woman said. Amy couldn't see the book she was pointing to, but it didn't matter. "This one is horrible. It's not even autobiographical, it's just cheesy."

The other woman laughed at her frustrated tone. "Well, maybe the author needs this sort of escape from reality and so do their readers."

"Maybe, but let me tell you, there is nothing glamorous about living by yourself and working an office job. The main character in this book might go on a journey to three different continents to find inner peace, a new best friend, and the love of her life, but most nights, I'm too lazy to make dinner for myself, and I use all my weekends and vacation days to do laundry and catch up on sleep."

Amy busied herself with the books in her cart, stalling to hear the rest of the conversation. The blonde woman laughed at her friend's boldness.

"I don't think I would want to be the main character either," she said. "Sounds exhausting."

From behind the shelves, Amy smiled to herself.

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Amy never ended up learning the ladies' names, but she didn't need to. When she first saw them, she thought she wanted to be exactly like them or be cool enough to be friends with them. Having a life that made others envy her the way she had initially envied them was not in her cards though, and whilst she would have been upset before, she wasn't now.

For a long time, Amy didn't believe that her life was notable. Everything about her has always been ordinary, boring. Even in

the library, she stood on the sidelines and watched other characters walk in every day, wishing her existence was as exciting or meaningful as theirs.

Every day, we meet people, and we only see what we want to see in them. People like Amy sit and observe others every day, imagining what it would be like to live lives as glamorous or exciting as theirs, but real people aren't well-rounded, fully developed novel protagonists. We don't know if they missed their tram on the way into town or what games they liked to play most with their childhood friends. We don't know if they have ever experienced heartbreak, or regularly talk to their parents, or the last time they cried or why. We don't know these people, and assuming their lives are so much better than ours doesn't do any favours to anyone, least of all to ourselves.

At some point, however, the façade Amy had projected onto the characters from the library had started to crumble.

What Amy has learned, now, from all of this, is quite simple. Some people like to lose themselves in fiction, desperately wishing they could be as remarkable as the characters they encounter in books, but real people also have their own stories, their own lives to fall back on once they leave the library. Real life isn't anything like it is in the books. You don't need a great, suspenseful mystery, a tragic love story, or an identity crisis to lead you on an epic adventure. You don't have to be a hero or even a sidekick.

You just have to be.

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fossilized li(v)es

photo: violet stathopoulou-vals

by isabel rene kreitmeier

They had everything they needed.
They had each other.
However, their life was heading in a completely different direction...

She was sixteen when the two met for the first time. No one could have forbidden their love because it was stronger than anything ever before. It would stay that way forever. They were simply meant for each other. That is what both thought at least. Thinking of that time, her eyes fill up with tears. Sometimes they do so. Sometimes she only feels an infinite emptiness that fills her body. Sometimes she feels nothing at all.

Fossilized.

Olivia is an attractive woman. Her long, wavy brown hair reaches over her narrow shoulders when she wears it open. But she does so only very rarely. Her emerald green eyes sparkle when she laughs. But she does so only very rarely. She does not even know when she smiled for the last time. She graduated with honours in journalism. She is very smart. However, she has never worked in this profession. He did not want her to.

Jacob is tall and well-built. His dark brown, tousled short hair goes well with the three-day beard he usually wears. Throughout his high school years, he played on several professional teams. He had a bright career ahead of him. But then he had an accident. He and his friends drove their car off the road. All of them were seriously injured. All of them were drunk. His sports career had ended before it had really began. He never quite got over it. His baseball bat is still decorating the bedroom like some kind of trophy. Olivia has always stood by him. Every hospitalization, every rehab. They got through everything together.

She was sixteen when the two met for the first time. She was nineteen when they married. He became a car mechanic and she started her studies. After finishing them she wanted to start working. He wanted a family. She also wanted children, but not until later. They decided to have a family. But Olivia did not get pregnant. Their life turned out differently than they had planned. Jacob changed jobs more and more often. They argued more and more often. He drank more and more often.

She was sixteen when the two met for the first time. She was nineteen when they married. She was twenty-one when he slapped her for the first time. Twenty-two when he knocked out her first tooth. Twenty-three when he broke her wrist. Twenty-five when she had to have thirty stitches to her beautiful face.

It could happen anytime. If she gave the wrong answer, if he didn't like the food, if he came home drunk, if he came home sober. At the same time, he was infinitely sorry and would try everything to redeem himself. He still had that charm from back in the day, that warm smile that promised a sense of security. She couldn't stand it any longer. Every fiber of her body ached. Not only from the beatings. It felt like her body had stopped fighting. Her skin looked pale and her eyes were empty. Their marriage, their relationship, the ridiculous stories she told others about her bruises – everything was a big lie. However, she could not leave him.

On that particular day he came home and looked at her with that special look, the one he had given her so often before. That look that made her feel like she was everything to him. That look that gave her the feeling that everything would be all right again. They had dinner together and talked about their day. The atmosphere was really good, and they laughed a lot. After dinner they watched TV only for a brief moment. Pretty soon they started kissing and tearing each other's clothes off. It was the most intense and tender sex in ages. Maybe even since the time when everything was still alright. She lay on her back, he above her. Then her gaze suddenly caught the baseball bat. The sight of this very bat, which had become the symbol of her suffering, at that very moment, choked her throat. She felt sick to her stomach, her pulse was racing. Her eyes blurred and her head was about to explode. She could not move any more.

She was fossilized.

Jacob reached climax. He was lying on top of her, breathing fast. He stroked her cheek, smiled at her and kissed her forehead. "I love you."

Olivia was paralyzed.

She didn't know what had happened to her. Jacob got up and went into the shower. The hot water turned the shower partition into a milky white opaque wall, bathing the whole room in damp haze. He stepped out of the shower and into the fog, he recognized the outline of Olivia. Slowly his view became clearer. That's when he saw the baseball bat coming towards him. It was the last thing he saw.

The red splashes of blood harmonized with Olivia's sparkling emerald green eyes. She smiled.

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the man who said he was God

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by angela maria linder

Lost.

Not long ago, I had been frequently using this painful word to describe myself and my take on life - of course, that is, only in my weekly therapy sessions. In the presence of my friends, family members and strangers I tried to abide the façade of a happy and fulfilled life. And I was good at it. My references spoke for themselves: I would still receive compliments for my “radiant aura” and “positive energy”. And, I can tell you, faking an aura and energy is indeed a task for a specialist. Not even my closest friends seemed to smell the fraud. I mastered the art of masquerading in such perfection that, every now and then, I even believed it myself.

What kind of aura, what kind of energy? My inner life looked like a different picture. I was just too proud to say it out loud, to admit to my circle full of the most kind-hearted people living seemingly perfect lives that I was not happy, that I felt empty and detached from myself and my life. And I did not even know why I felt that way... How ironic life can be at times. The home that was my own life, whose walls I had built with pure intentions and hopes, whose windows I had designed with a positive outlook on life, whose doors I had created for loved ones to visit, felt to have turned into a prison... And I somehow got lost in it. Perhaps, I should have marked the exits more clearly; then I wouldn't have had to search for them like Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson for treasures in the *Journey* trilogy.

Instead of initiating the quest for the hidden exits, however, as if on repeat I re-enacted the script I had already acted out millions of times, over and over again. Unluckily enough, as inspiring as Julia Engelmann's motivational poems may be, the mantra “if you repeat something often enough, it will become true” did not quite work out in my case. I tried. I even had grapefruit for breakfast. No success. All in vain.

Eventually, I decided to do what I have always been doing when I felt I was on a dead end road: Run. However, not around the block, but away from my problems. And when I run I can

run fast and far, depending on the gravity of the problem. This time, my breath would take me as far as to Istanbul; so, you can imagine how urgently I needed a change... To gain some objective distance from my life? Or to simply flee from myself? I was not entirely sure about what I expected from this journey when I purchased the plane ticket. I was not sure about hardly anything those days.

But there was one thing I was certain about: I could hardly await to arrive at a new place, with new vibes and new air to breathe. On my way to the airport, I just looked out of the window and imagined the hot and humid air caressing my skin, highlighting my freckles but also bringing about a smile, the beauty of the buildings touching my soul and the tumult of the streets absorbing me and my thoughts so that I would become one with the flow of the city. No thinking, just feeling.

Lost in my imagination, the three-hour train ride to the airport felt like only three minutes. It was already 10. p.m. when I arrived, and I had eight more hours to fill before I would board the plane. Due to the fact that this entire trip was the result of a spontaneous reaction to a sudden and overwhelmingly pressing sensation of having to leave the country, I did not actually think through how I would spend the night at the airport. I figured it was too little time to get a hotel room but also too much time to sleep on the floor – my poor back... I mean, I was struggling enough already; I definitely did not need to add to that a pinched nerve. Anyway, as soon as I entered the airport, my plan for the night was settled when I saw a bar nearby warmly welcoming me with the satisfying “plop” sound of a cork being pulled out of a red wine bottle.

While I was approaching my ‘date’ for the night, I noticed that I had never spent a night at an airport before. I could not help but notice how lonely and desolate the airport seemed at these hours. The lights were dimmed, the corridors empty. I could hear no noise but the echo of my footsteps. Only a few fellow travellers were resting and sleeping on the benches lining the corridors. Without the life the crowds of people hurrying about their ways instilled into this place, without people occasionally bumping into each other, just to part again with a stressed “I’m sorry”, without the heart-warming tears and sobs of reunions and farewells, the airport had an entirely different, almost gloomy, atmosphere to it.

I caught myself hurrying to the bar, which was apparently the only properly lit place during the night. There was only a handful of guests having some drinks. Nobody was talking; everybody was just blindly staring into the void or into their glasses. They seemed to be no more awake than the travellers I had previously encountered on the benches... no more awake than I felt on the inside. An uncomfortable silence filled the air, however, their company (plus the light and the wine) seemed preferable to spending the night alone in a dark corner of the airport. “This is one of the strangest situations I have ever found myself in”, I thought to myself. A slight smile escaped my oftentimes so earnest mimic. “What am I even doing here?”, I felt I had reached a new level of impulsiveness. Even though I was not sure if that was to be considered something positive or negative, I somehow started to enjoy the unusual about the moment.

Intrigued.

Suddenly a rich, deep voice – like brown, suede leather – interrupted the silence and hung in the cold air like warm rays of the sun. “Excuse me, may I have a gin and tonic, please?”, the man asked politely, yet firmly. I could make out a slight foreign accent, which I, however, could not clearly identify nor attribute to a certain mother tongue or country. I dared take a

glance to my left to see the face of the man whose voice seemed to revive the atmosphere of this desolate place. To my surprise, he was sitting only two stools away from me. I did not remember seeing him when I entered; neither did I notice him arriving after me, and yet he was there and filled the emptiness of the room with his radiant presence and the darkness of the night with bright colours – literally.

I vividly remember how he sat there at the no-name bar of the airport wearing an elegant dark blue suit which perfectly matched the style of his black shoes. One could see from a distance that he had good (and expensive) taste. He reeked of money and success. However, he did not seem to be this self-indulgent workaholic who would have his coffee to go and his whisky at a fancy hotel bar. The smaller details spoke a different language, yet one that I did not fully comprehend. A beautifully patterned cloth hung from his collar. He wore at least one ring on each finger of his right hand – golden, silver, and whatever material there is to make rings – some bigger with colourful engravings, others more decent. On his left wrist, instead of a Patek Philippe, I detected a hand-woven bracelet among two other beautifully adorned golden bracelets. And, perhaps most importantly, he was there at this no-name bar at the airport sitting next to a young woman in cosy leggings and a hoodie, drinking his gin and tonic seemingly relaxed and at peace with the world and himself. Unlike the others, he did not blindly stare into his glass; his dark brown button eyes wandered around curiously but not nervously, as if ready to welcome anything crossing their way but being okay with the possibility that nothing may do. I had so many questions, yet one thing I knew: He did not look, he saw. And the difference is clear to someone who is wandering blindly but wishing to see again.

At one point – after I had decided to stop staring at the man so as not to make him feel uncomfortable – I overheard him ordering another drink; however, this time the bartender did not understand him, apparently because of his accent. He repeated his order another two times, without success. The bartender insisted that he did not understand him. The man was somewhat surprised and turned to me with an irritated expression on his face that was both questioning and demanding at the same time.

“He would like another gin and tonic”, I intervened, then darting a reassuring look at the man.

“Thank you... I thought I wouldn’t get any more drinks tonight”, he replied, jokingly relieved. “Is my English really that bad, though?”, he added with a tone suggesting he already knew the answer to this question.

“No! Of course not, I understood you perfectly. I guess it was just the bartender himself struggling with English”, I replied in an attempt at raising his spirits.

“You’re too kind. It would be quite unfortunate if my English were that bad given that I have to talk in English every day”. He laughed out light-heartedly. Small wrinkles, tiny and deep, started to form on his face.

“By the way, I apologise for not introducing myself earlier! I am God, nice to meet you. What is your name?”, he remarked confidently with a smart smile and wide eyes.

“God?”, I exclaimed in an unexpectedly loud tone followed by a laugh of amazement and disbelief.

“Yes, I am. And if you didn’t know already, so are you”.

I was confused. “Is he being serious or is there a hidden camera somewhere filming my reaction?”, I thought out of sheer irritation. Yet upon seeing this self-assured and confident

expression on his face, I knew he was being dead serious. “Is this the start of some kind of religious recruitment strategy?”, I thought to myself with a slight humorous undertone, not actually daring to consider this possibility seriously. I was irritated, and I tried to hide it behind a smile – more or less successfully, I believe. Indeed, I was caught off my guard by his response and I did not know what to say, nor how to react.

Dead silence.

For a few seconds, we sat there – he had moved one stool closer by that time – and an uncomfortable silence filled the room, pressing me deeper and deeper into my stool. I knew he was waiting for some reaction; while my eyes were aimlessly, yet desperately, wandering around the room searching for some proper answer in the ceiling, the walls, the windows, his were focused on me, demanding a response. “Am I really ready to have a discussion about religion at 11:30 p.m.?” I asked myself, already figuring out a way to discretely talk myself out of this conversation. Apparently, my brain does not work quite effectively under pressure, because my tactic was indeed questionable.

“And how is that?”, I asked, returning his challenging gaze.

Awake.

He seemed satisfied at my response. He sat up straight, re-adjusted his colourful scarf, and pushed up one of his loose golden rings – ready to enter an MMA ring, ready to give me an answer. He took a deep breath and offered a surprisingly simple explanation to his powerful statement:

“Just as any painting contains a piece of its artist, just as any love song embraces some part of the soul of its writer, just as any literary work encompasses a part of its author, so is God – the creator of the world – present in all of us.”

I was surprised; surprised by the fact that I received an answer I could not immediately disagree with, but even more by the happiness and sense of composure I could make out in his voice. He went on insisting that people should therefore always have at least as much faith in themselves as they have in God; they should not solely pray for help from above but also they should look into themselves. I was fascinated by the confidence he exuded. This man truly believed in what he said, he truly believed that he was complete in this ever so demanding world and it was then that I clearly perceived the feeling of peace he radiated.

Little did I expect that his unconventional way of introducing himself and my weird reaction to it would incite a conversation that would almost make me miss my flight in the morning. We went on to discuss the world that night – international politics, travelling, family, professions, festivals, his life, my life, his life goals, mine, etc. – always with a full glass of gin and tonic in our hands and a smile on our faces. And we indeed entered a boxing ring that night, only that we would not challenge each other with fists but with words. And we would keep it fair play: Our weapons were arguments and questions, and our ultimate goal was not to hit a KO but to challenge each other’s views. Yet, in the end, it was not even that important what we talked about but the fact that we talked. He somehow managed to bring out a side of me that I had not seen in a while, one that was more truthful to how I know, how I perceive myself. It was so easy to take off my heavy mask in his company. Was it because I did not know this man? Because I knew I would most likely never see him again? I am not sure, and it doesn’t matter... Because while the world around us was asleep, I was awake that night, truly awake. While the world around us was covered in black, his presence turned the darkness into bright daylight.

He somehow managed to blow away the doubts and problems that hung upon my mood like grey clouds in the blue sky. And when I checked my phone the next time, I should have already been on my way to the gate.

Happy.

This encounter may have not brought about a tale of romance, nor one of a dramatic or life-changing event. I did not come home and felt whole or in the right place again. Unfortunately, that only happens in fairy-tales. That night, this man did not crack open the chains I felt hanging around me, and yet without knowing, he helped carry them for as long as the feeling lasted. At such a dark and desolate place as an airport at night, I perhaps did not find the answers nor the questions I was looking for, and yet I unexpectedly found a moment of joy and comfort. And that is okay. Because maybe we wait in vain for that life-changing event, that spectacular love-story, that sudden feeling of enlightenment to come along our way and make it all better... Maybe we should stop waiting and instead enjoy the beauty of such small and unexpectedly beautiful moments. And maybe one day it is the sum of these small moments shared with loved ones, friends and family, or simply with ourselves that have the power to bring the lost pieces of us, my lost pieces, back together. I trust in that.

And so, I happily boarded the plane. I was walking towards gate six when suddenly I realised that I needed to know one more thing. I looked back and shouted across the corridor:

“Hey! I did not even ask your name?”

“Google “Minister of Finance Jamaica”. You know, I cannot be God 24/7”, he shouted back, again with this ever so confident, bright smile on his face and this ever so challenging and perky undertone in his voice.

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stuck in an endless break of being young?

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by katharina schobel

*Three young people. Three perspectives. One pandemic.
And one encounter of seemingly no importance.*

* * *

Ida

Funny how fast humans get used to new circumstances, to a new ‘normal’, when just a moment ago everything was ‘normal’ as well, just the old ‘normal’, where everything that is different now was taken for granted, Ida thought, while she passed another window of an empty, deserted and obviously closed restaurant. She has never been a person that often went to restaurants, mainly because her rather big family with her three siblings did have enough but not too much money, so eating out only came about with special or unique events such as graduation. This remained the same now that she moved away to study in the city. Yet, she still missed it, just like something that often seems to be the case: That people always tend to miss what they cannot have or, in this situation, cannot do.

It is what it is, it is the same for everyone, and it has to get better at some point, she tried to cheer herself up a little bit as she moved aside two meters while she crossed the street at an intersection with little traffic to walk by a young man and a young woman at a hurried pace, both about the same age as Ida was.

Maybe, the young man, very likely a student as well, was on his way to meet some friends, she guessed, social contacts that could or should be avoided in order to stabilize the situation and the spread of infections. The young woman also seemed to be in a hurry to reach a destination or to meet someone in time. But they were probably also just in a situation where it does not make a difference to whom they could possibly pass the virus on? Their roommates, their friends, probably all young healthy people with a rather low risk of a severe ‘attack’ from the virus.

Ida was not in such a 'lucky' position. Aged over 60 and a heart attack a year ago, her boyfriend's dad. Rheumatism and a pulmonary embolism some years ago, his mum. Health issues that would not have changed a single thing of Ida's behaviour, her social contacts, and her life a little more than a year ago. Now, she could not and would never risk it, for their sake, but particularly for his, she could never be responsible for him losing one of his parents. She sits at the same table with them for breakfast, lunch and dinner every weekend because he still lives with his parents.

So, she has reduced her social contacts to a minimum for more than a year now. Friends, fellow students, hobbies, even when it comes to her own family - too afraid to risk that someone might die as a result of a contact that could have been avoided. It is getting exhausting, she feels empty, sometimes numb, longing for the old 'normal'.

Her friends and family keep telling her she is overreacting. Sometimes she agrees, sometimes she does not understand that they do not see the risk. Sometimes, when the whole situation just seems to be too much of a burden, she falls into a state of indifference. Indifference to what she might risk, to what the worst possible consequences of her behaviour might be, and indifference to how she would be able to live with them. But then her mind shifts back to responsibility, to perseverance, to sacrifice in this endless break of being young, free and wild. She managed to get this far so she will manage to keep on going a little longer, just a little longer until she can prioritise herself a little more again.

* * *

Anthony

The sun already disappeared behind the long valley in between the mountains one could see westwards from the city when he was finally finished with yet another therapy session. The doctors say the numbers are getting lower and lower, they assume I will be back to my old form in a couple of weeks. It's been a couple of weeks, two months to be exact, Anthony thought, and it is still such an incredibly exhausting task to breathe sometimes, particularly in situations where even just a little physical exertion is afforded.

Running 15 miles every week seems like a myth, like one of these extraordinary things you often see in one of those science fiction movies, unimaginable in real life. It feels like he was able to do this for years in another life. Thank God university courses are online these days. He would have had to buy a ticket for public transport because he surely would not be able to get to university by bike, as he used to, right now. But if the courses were held at university, he would probably not be in the situation he is at the moment.

He took the situation seriously from the beginning, reduced his social contacts, tried to protect the ones at risk and also urged others to do the same. It was still summer, the numbers were good, almost no official cases in his hometown. Just a nice and relaxed evening with the boys. Mild symptoms started five days later, they intensified for two or three days, but all in all it was still quite bearable, lucky me, he assumed back then. However, this was before his constant problems to breathe had started, before he was just tired for what felt like an endless six months. The tiredness slowly but surely went by, the breathing problems needed therapy, still.

It is what it is, he keeps telling to himself over and over again, after reflecting upon his condition. And so he did when he was crossing the street as no car was within sight, passing two women about the same age as he was. At some point throughout his fight with his physical

and eventually also mental problems he started to wonder what the strangers he daily encountered outside, during his walks to gradually get in shape again or on his way to therapy and back home, might be thinking; how they deal with the situation or even in what particular situation they might be in.

Do these two women regardless of all risks enjoy their 'prime time' of being young and a student? Are they flirting, meeting new people, drinking, partying? Or have they both, or one of them, also been infected? Was it a mild or even a severe course of illness? You have to stop doing this, he then told himself after both of them went on in different directions and were out of view.

* * *

Helen

A young woman in her mid-20s was walking through the less frequented side streets of the city during the twilight hours. She had to stay at work longer than she had planned and was in a little hurry to finally go back home and get dressed for the evening. Her boyfriend is going to pick her up soon because they have been invited for dinner at a mutual friend's place.

Gina, Mike and Lucy are also going to be there and she has been looking forward to this all week, especially because work is not what it used to be these days. Her boss is trying to make it as bearable as possible with all the constantly changing regulations. Thankfully there are still some people that do not make such a drama out of all this, Helen thought, while she was walking by a poster with one of the governments appeals to look after each other during the pandemic. The ones at risk should, she resolved, but young and completely healthy people with a perfectly functioning immune system could not just stop their lives, stick it into a confined box reduced to the minimum with this deprivation of liberty - at least she would not. She was raised in a family where the freedom of the individual was always essential, and she is strongly determined to live accordingly.

Walking through the city was one thing she particularly liked to do - always. Passing numerous different people, all of them with a different background, different style of appearance, different stories to tell, different world views and a different perception of the world. Nowadays, the city was just so empty, almost a little abandoned and deserted, Helen sadly observed. She missed it, she missed the liveliness, the masses. The only people she met during her walk home through the city were a young man and a young woman, walking in separate directions but crossing the same intersection she did. At least two strangers who still dare to go out and live, Helen happily noticed.

When she will be able to enjoy the sight and the atmosphere of a lively and crowded city again she does not know. She only knows that it is not going to be her that is going to prevent this beautiful scenery full of life from returning.

And put an end to this endless break of being young.

* * *

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perfect match

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz

by hannah islitzer

IN HIGH SEAS OR IN LOW SEAS
I'M GONNA BE YOUR FRIEND
I'M GONNA BE YOUR FRIEND
IN HIGH SEAS OR IN LOW SEAS
I'LL BE BY YOUR SIDE
I'LL BE BY YOUR SIDE
(Bob Marley)

With an all too familiar feeling, this mixture of melancholy, gratitude, joy and desire she has gotten so accustomed to by now, she puts it aside - the photo album that means so much to her. The photo album that is just like her personal treasure chest, containing countless memories so dear to her.

She can feel a tear forming in the corner of her eye. She dashes it away, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry. Laugh at all the merry moments that are flashing by in her head. Indispensable moments she will always carry inside her. Or cry, because it has almost been two years now. The thought of these long gone moments she cannot go back to tears her apart.

It all started in early 2019, when she packed her suitcase and left for Ireland. She certainly did not know what she was heading for. She felt alone there at first and she felt overwhelmed by new impressions that flooded and almost drowned her mind. It took her quite some time to get

used to her new home and to get used to people she was about to spend the next year with, although she did not know them at all. Also, she struggled with this language that ought to be some kind of English but sounded disconcerting and was difficult to decode and understand. Yes, she really felt lost at the beginning. She was longing for home, for HER home, HER family and HER friends. It was weird having to live together in a house on this unfamiliar university campus with people that are complete strangers.

After the first week, while staring at the ceiling of her small room without any personal touch yet, she started to realize that she has to open herself up to this entirely new situation, to just let things happen the way they do - because they will anyways.

This change in her attitude was like opening her eyes. From that moment on, she really started to experience Ireland. She started to **FEEL** Ireland, to **HEAR** Ireland and to **SEE** Ireland.

She could **FEEL** the chilly wind that blew day and night,
almost without a pause. She could feel the rain on her skin on
her way home from school.

She could also **HEAR** the wind and all its range of intensity.
Sometimes it was solely a soft breeze and on other days, the
wind blew so fiercely and relentlessly that forced one to stay
indoors.

And she could **SEE** the lush green grass which seemed
greener than any grass she had ever seen before.

What she also started to see was the beauty in people.

Coincidence played into her hands and paved the way for her first encounter with him – on the day that changed her life. Together with a friend of hers she hurried to a gathering they were already late for. There was no single table free anymore, so they squeezed in between five guys already sitting at a table. He was one of them. The very moment his soft, brown eyes met hers for the first time was a moment only authors, gifted in language, can describe in picture books. It was a moment in which everything seemed to hold on, in which the world seemed to stand still. At this very moment, the girl lost her heart to him, but at the same time found herself. She felt as if she had ultimately and fully arrived in this beautiful, green country.

The wind seemed to be less frightening and intimidating now.

The cold rain made her feel more alive than ever.

And the grass seemed greener than it did just the day before.

The two of them spent every spare minute they could together and to her, everything felt so natural, so beautiful and so easy going. They enjoyed each moment to its fullest and for the first time in her life, she could sense what ‘living in the here and now’ meant:

They did not waste a single minute thinking about the day it would all come to an end.

They travelled through Ireland, visited bigger cities and smaller villages, spent precious days at a fairytale-like lake, experienced nature together, went on unforgettable adventures and spent as much time as possible near the tempestuous Atlantic ocean.

They bonded more and more, and Ireland, as the place that brought them together, became more and more meaningful to them.

Despite its rough shores and stormy winds, she felt safe with him by her side. She had found shelter in him and he made Ireland a home to her.

Time flew by until reality hit them like a hammer. The last couple of days ahead of them, they had to exit the bubble they had built around them, the bubble that enabled them to seize each single day and grow together closer and closer. They swore to each other that they would cherish the moments they were enabled to share together and honor this precious gift.

Knowing that it would be all over soon, their spirit was covered by a veil of melancholy and sadness these last days.

But of course, the clock did not stop moving and soon, they found themselves standing at the airport where a plane would take her home again. Sad silence surrounded them until suddenly, the melody of a song reached their ears.

IN HIGH SEAS OR IN LOW SEAS
I'M GONNA BE YOUR FRIEND
I'M GONNA BE YOUR FRIEND
IN HIGH SEAS OR IN LOW SEAS
I'LL BE BY YOUR SIDE
I'LL BE BY YOUR SIDE
(Bob Marley)

They both lifted their heads – and they both had to smile. They knew that one day, they will be standing by each other's side once again.

And with tomorrow, this day has come. She will finally see him again, embrace him so dearly that it will make up for these long two years of separation.

Tomorrow, they will be standing by each other's side once again.

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no man is an I-land

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz

by nadja schmid

No man is an island, entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the continent,
a part of the main.

What a silly poem. I have never understood why people keep quoting these lines over and over again. You have been fighting through your life alone since you can recall, and look at yourself: You are completely fine. You are GORGEOUS. You could not be happier, all by yourself. Why should you share your success, your thoughts, your adventures, your dreams, your LIFE with somebody else? I mean, the war of emancipation is not won yet. Women still feel too much dependence towards men, children, having a family. And then, in a wink, their lives are over and they find out that they have sacrificed their whole life for the sake of other people rather than themselves. Probably they surrender their career, quit their jobs or only work part time to ensure that they fulfil their duties as mothers and wives. And what is the result of all of that? They end up being financially dependent on their husbands, who then leave them for a younger and fresher girl while they are left behind with no money and, even worse, no dignity. So why are we still trying to convince people that they are not entire of themselves? Why propagate that happiness is only real when shared? Okay, I got it. Sharing is caring. However, caring is sacrificing. Sacrificing is regretting. And regret is the last thing you want to feel at the end of your days. The more people are involved in your life, the more it will turn out to be a mess and you will end up being hurt. So girl you did everything right. You do not need anybody else to be entire.

Oh, shut up old fool! What do you know about happiness? You have never experienced in your life what it means to feel loved and to love in return. So why do you give advice on matters that you have no clue about? Don't listen to her, dear. I know you are a survivor and you are perfectly able to live your life to the fullest without anybody on your side. But look into your heart and tell me if you really feel complete without anybody with whom you can share a part of yourself. You are a strong and independent woman, but even you are not immune against loneliness. Loneliness is like a cat on the hunt for its prey. It secretly chases you, follows you at every turn, without you noticing it. It approaches you slowly but surely until it finds you in a weak moment and attacks you. Sharing your life with somebody else does not mean that you lose a part of yourself, but rather you gain an additional piece that will bond into your own personality and make you grow.

* * * *

Let me introduce. The two voices in my head. The angel and the devil. The optimist and the pessimist. The heart and the head. The soft one and the tough one. And then there is me. Trying to make sense out of what they say. They are fighting with each other, bringing up new arguments to prove that they are right, trying to persuade me that I should follow their advice. And I am just standing in the middle, unable to escape or to take a rest. You might ask yourself: What are they talking about? Let me explain to you.

Since I was a child, I had to fight for myself. I grew up in a poor family, both my parents spent most of the time at work, trying to make everything easy for me. Therefore, I was used to being alone since early childhood. Mom would prepare a meal for me to warm up after school while she was rushing from one part-time job to the next. It was okay, I got used to it. I loved reading and so I escaped loneliness by swallowing one book after the other, entering new and exciting worlds every day. Soon I realised that I was different from my fellow students. I did not enjoy playing tag in the lunch break or football after school. I preferred to spend my time in the library, searching for new adventures. My classmates used to call me 'the rat', because I was usually escaping from all kinds of social activities and I would rather stay alone with the company of my books. I continued my career as a loner until graduation. The advantage of preferring reading over partying, like my peers did, was that I was a 'straight A' student. which allowed me to attend law school. The relentless competition at law school matched my lone wolf attitude which soon brought me big success and I ended up being a high-ranked lawyer.

In all these years I have never been interested in having a relationship, since I did not see any advantage in pointlessly trying to convince a man that I am worth of his attention. This does not mean that there have never been any men that showed interest in dating me. Actually, there were a bunch of guys who tried to hook up with me, seemingly admiring my mysterious charisma and aloofness. Honestly, I believe that I might have aroused the male instinct of a hunter, trying to chase their prey which is desperately attempting to flee from the bloodthirsty predator. Or maybe I simply appeal to their basic human desire to strive for things that are unreachable for us. Sometimes I wonder about the strong feeling of distress that overcomes me immediately when somebody attempts to climb my wall and come closer to me.

* * * *

And then there was you.

You swam to my island, climbed on it with a curious gaze, slowly setting one foot after the other on the unknown territory. You treated the unspoiled nature with caution, being aware of the danger that might be lurking behind any corner. But you were brave enough to proceed, driven by the very beauty that you have glimpsed through the rough rocks. The landscape turned quainter the more you advanced and you realised that the island was not as rough as it had initially seemed.

After a while, you decided to settle.

* * * *

I need to disagree with John Donne:

I am an island.

I am entire of myself.

But I do possess a harbour.

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mysterious. woman.

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiss

by alexandra miehl-siebenhofer

As usual I go to the beach. I am looking forward to the majestic deep blue ocean with its white raised foam crowns. Likewise to the golden sand that shimmers in the sunlight. This sunlight makes the sand sparkle like a thousand tiny jewels. I see seashells and seagulls. I stop and close my eyes. I hear waves crashing against the shore and seagulls screeching. I smell the saltwater and I feel the humid sea air. I open my eyes again and see the limestone cliffs a little further away. They remind me of the Dover coast. And then I am finally back on the beach. The sand feels cool under my feet. I love burying my feet in the sand.

And as always, the beach is empty.

However, something is different. I cannot name it. It is a feeling. Am I being watched? Am I not alone? I look into the distance, at the sea, with my feet buried in the sand. But I do not see anyone. And yet, I feel a presence. I turn around my own axis, no one there. So, I sit in the sand and enjoy the sun on my skin. It is so peaceful here. Here I can escape my life. Here is peace, also in my mind.

Otherwise I am so restless because I know my life has just reached a turning point. Everyone wants something from me, everyone tells me how to be, what to do. I only get away from it all when I am on the beach. I can let myself go. I feel alive here and I feel my strength coming back. Until, yes, until I return to my other life. I cannot even say this is my real life because it does not feel like it. Walking to the sea every day is like running away. But you get nowhere and always come back to the same place. *And the same marmot greets you every day.*

There it is again, the feeling of being watched returns. I feel a breeze on my skin even though there is no wind. I get goosebumps, the feeling of being touched lightly, maybe even being caressed. A feeling that fills me with new life. But it is almost imperceptible, almost as if a feather is caressing my skin. And yet, it is unnatural and scary, and yet, so good. Suddenly I see

something white, like a veil. It creates a warm, familiar feeling and yet so intangible. It circles around me and then flutters away. I am calm, but it is still a strange feeling.

Then on the cliff I see a woman in a white dress with a big white hat. The picture that presents itself to me cannot be grasped, as if it is a faded picture, as if the woman is slightly transparent, a shadow perhaps. It is like an apparition and yet she turns around and looks in my direction. She waves to me and signals me to go closer to her. I get up slowly with a queasy feeling and walk in her direction with soft knees. Brooding, I walk in her direction and wonder what this strange woman wants from me. What will she do when I am there? When I get to the cliff, she is gone. I can only find a piece of paper.

"Find yourself".

There is nothing more on it. This scene repeats itself throughout the week. I find a different message from the mysterious woman every day. These messages trigger something inside me. They help me, they are the last push I needed. They are very personal, like the first one.

They give me strength to fight for myself.

They strengthen me so that I can go my own way.

They give me confidence.

They make me strong.

They give me the courage to accept the real me.

They give me the courage to free myself.

But who are the messages from? Who was writing to me? Who could it be who knows me so well, who knows what it looks like deep inside me? Who is this woman? Where does she come from? So many questions and no answers. Actually, I just want to thank her for opening my eyes and helping me fight for myself. Every day I wait for her to appear, but she does not come any more.

And then one day ... I see her once again, but this time she just waves to me. As if it were a goodbye. I run quickly to the cliff and when I get there, she is about to disappear. I am reaching for her skirt so I can stop her. I reach into ... nowhere ... and I fall. When I wake up, I am in hospital. I was found lying below the cliff. My thoughts wander back to the white mysterious woman, but nobody seems to know her. Who could this mysterious woman be? I can still feel her presence. The first thing I see when I open my eyes is this mysterious figure. She is standing a little further away from my bed. Now she comes closer and I can see her face more clearly. I know I have seen this face but cannot remember where this was. I think hard, but it is so exhausting in my weakened state that I fall into a restless sleep. When I wake up the white woman is gone. There is another note in my post box. It only says:

"I am so proud of you."

Samantha (Kiki)

As I read the short note and I couldn't help asking myself: "Could it be a visitor from the past?" "Could it be someone I met before in another place or another time?" I will never know for sure. But the thing I know for sure is that this woman, however mysterious she might be, has really changed my life.

And suddenly I had an idea where from I could know that woman or her face. It seems to me that I have seen the face a few times on old family photos. She was a sister of my great grandmother. As a child until her youth, she was never called by her name, Samantha, but only Kiki. My mother gave me this nickname too. Maybe that is the connection, the reason she showed up. Maybe she wanted to help me because she fought for a self-determined life as well. Back then she suddenly disappeared and to this day nobody knows what happened to her. Though one question remains that no one can answer: Was she really the mysterious woman on the cliff?

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aurora square

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by laura moser

He was sitting on this old dark bench, again. Day after day he returned to his spot where he either reflected on his past life or thought of his regrets and sorrows. The people around him were just getting on with their everyday lives: going shopping, having arguments, laughing about silly things, stealing things from the market, and what bothered him the most – they all seemed selfish and self-centred, because nobody would ever take a seat next to him.

The old man seemed to be lonely, solitary, desolate, reclusive and yet he radiated something so pure, so true, so full of life, as if he were an adolescent. The passers-by on Aurora Square observed him. They looked at his snow-white beard growing longer and longer, they watched his wrinkles getting deeper and deeper, and sometimes they stared right into his soul. But they were also wondering whether he was just a lonesome man looking for someone to talk to or whether he just sat there for a good reason.

From time to time, the old man encountered a young and playful girl. When he looked at her, he couldn't help but wonder:

“What is it about this girl that feels so familiar, where does she come from, who is she with and what is she doing here?”

He continued sitting on his bench gazing into the void while being overwhelmed by a wave of busy, talkative and ignorant people. His eyes shifted and there she was, again; dancing in the middle of the square, holding a gaudy, giant lollipop in one hand and an old, ragged doll in the other. She was dancing in a ludic and yet somber way. She was rigidly holding her doll and yet she threw her up into the air. She seemed so young and little and yet there was something about her that felt old.

The man on the bench looked closely at her and he thought:

“This is a young girl with an old soul – I don't know her, but I somehow know her soul.”

Desolate, he went home, still curious about the child's provenance, but even more about her aura. At home, he sat into his leather armchair, lit a Cuban cigar, drank his Irish whiskey, read the local newspaper, and enjoyed every sip of his alcoholic drop. Afterwards he went to bed, dreamt about the little girl's soul and it reminded him of his lost wife. During the war he lost his wife due to a bomb attack. He had to leave his family and follow his troops. Every time he thinks of her, shivers run down his spine, his heart starts beating faster and all he wishes is for her to come back, just for a short moment, a second, a hundredth of a second. The next morning, he went to Aurora Square in the hope he could speak to the little girl, or maybe even get a glimpse of her mother.

There he was, on this old dark bench, again. But today, he didn't reflect on the past or thought of his regrets, he just sat there, almost rooted waiting for the young girl with the old soul. The man ignored all the laughing and shopping and arguing, he brushed off the crowd in order to catch a glimpse of the colourful lollipop or the ragged doll. And right then, when he was about to lose all hope, there she was. This time, she was not dancing or playfully throwing her doll up into the air. She came towards him; she unwrapped the lollipop and sat down on this bench. For a while, they were sitting in silence while examining each other's looks and wondering about their character. All of a sudden, the girl pointed a finger at an elegant, almost dance-like woman who was just about to buy a bouquet of flowers and she said:

"This is my mother, and we are here on this square almost every day. She gave me this doll because she got it from my grandma."

The old man gazed at the woman, almost speechless, somehow dumbfounded and replied:

"This is your mother?"

The girl ridiculously looked into his eyes and answered:

"Yes, she is the best mother in the whole wide world, but sometimes ... sometimes she is sad."

"Why is she sad?", asked the old man.

The girl sat in silence, not sure whether she should tell the truth or not, but in the blink of an eye, she answered:

"She lost my grandpa when she was as old as I am now and in the past few years, we have been travelling all around Europe to find him, but every time we move to a new city, we disappointingly leave to continue our search."

The old man sat there, still looking at the elegant woman, and still looking at the young girl whose soul seemed so familiar and so old. He only replied:

"Let's go to your mother, she is certainly wondering where her little girl is."

The little girl answered:

"I am not a little girl; I am Aurora, and I am seven years old. What's your name?"

The old man lit a cigar and whispered:

"Aurora – just like my wife."

Aurora laughed and replied immediately:

“That’s so cool. But come on, I can introduce you to my mum.”

And so, they left the old dark bench, he stubbed out his cigar, she picked up her little ragged doll, and they wandered off into the square.

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technology - connecting but separating

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by johannes ölz

There he is now. Sitting lonely and exhausted on a rock next to a fountain in Italy. Jimmy does not know anybody around here. His journey from Austria to Italy had been very exhausting. He did not take the train, plane, or car. How could he without having any money? Jimmy tried to make it to Italy only by hitchhiking. Normally this trip takes four hours by car or six hours by train. It took him 26 hours to reach his destination.

Sitting by the fountain, Jimmy starts a new chapter in his life. He has to settle down, find friends and a place to sleep. Looking around this busy place he can see that many people are walking and staring at their mobile phones.

“Hello, can you help me? Where is the next hotel?”, he asks a young woman.

Strangely, she does not reply and continues looking at her smartphone. She does not even seem to register his presence. Approaching another man, he only gets the same: No reaction at all. He screams: “Can anybody help me?” There is no single person that seems to have noticed him. He is as invisible as a ghost.

Nowadays smartphone addiction is a big problem. Studies have shown that 60% of U.S. college students consider themselves to have a cell phone addiction. Moreover, 71% of people sleep with or next to their cell phones. Some signs and symptoms of smartphone addictions include failed attempts to cut back on smartphone use, losing track of time when using mobile phones and problems with their eyesight.

The boy takes out his smartphone and starts doing some research about the place. Not long afterwards he comes across a newspaper article entitled ‘Local App Turns People into Smombies (Smartphone Zombies).’ “Hmm, interesting”, he thought. Apparently, the local government had invented an app to control the inhabitants of the town. Then he quickly goes through the Play Store to locate the app. In a few seconds, he finds the app and risks

downloading it. The boy registers for the app by entering his email address and a password and then starts using it. Strangely, he seems not to be addicted to the smartphone. After using the app he can still lift his head away from the screen.

The application also provides a chat function that allows you to start a chat with people around you. Since Jimmy feels very lonely, he starts using it. Within 500 meters he can chat with 100 different people. His first choice is a girl named Jane. They start with some small talk. After a while, Jimmy asks Jane whether she would like to meet. Both decide to meet in front of the fountain. 20 minutes later Jane writes Jimmy that she is wearing a red T-shirt and white shorts and that she is standing in front of the fountain. Jimmy raises his head away from his smartphone and sees her. He walks up to her.

“Hello. How are you?” No response from her side. Once again and louder “Hello! How are you?”

Strangely Jimmy is not even noticed by Jane. She is physically there but mentally far away. The boy writes to her in the chat:

“Why are you ignoring me? I just said hello and you did not even respond.”

Jane sends him a message that she recognised him but is not able to raise her head away from her smartphone. She seems to be addicted to the display.

Jimmy decides he must do something against this addiction and starts thinking of a plan. His goal is to deactivate the app so that he can finally have some encounters with people living in this city, but especially with Jane. After some research, it turns out that a small company in the city is the developer of the app. The owner of the company, Mr Jackson, has recently been in the newspaper because of questionable animal experiments where he tried to control mice through smartphones. Finally, Jimmy makes it to the company which is completely secured through fences and security guards. He manages to get over the fence and finally makes it into the laboratory. On a computer he finds Mr Jackson’s plan. What is happening is just a pilot project. The crazy scientist aims to control all people around the world with the help of this app. Suddenly, a guard approaches and Jimmy tries to hide but fails. He knocks the guard down, then snatches his card and the uniform. Finally, the boy makes it to the server room. To turn the server off, is easier said than done. The problem is that there is no single key to turn those servers off. He thinks about how to crash these servers when he suddenly sees the fire alarm. After having activated the fire alarm it starts raining from the ceiling and all the servers crash. People are running around hectically and trying to get out of the building. Since Jimmy is wearing the guard’s uniform he looks like one of the company’s employees. No one notices him.

After the nerve-racking adventure, Jimmy finally makes it safely out of the company and goes back to the fountain where he meets Jane again and speaks to her as normal people do. Nobody in the city knows what had happened, though they finally do lift their heads and see the real world once again. Jimmy has managed to save the population of the city from turning into Smombies.

Finally, Jimmy and Jane have a real conversation, and she offers him a room. They become best friends and live together. He is the unknown hero and everyone enjoys life as it used to be before the dangerous app. Back to normality.

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my journey to freedom

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by nadja schütz

It was a long time ago when I noticed that I was robbed of freedom; seven years to be precise. Now that I recall the events from our past it is pretty obvious; our relationship was *toxic*. How could I have been so blind? How could I have never noticed what you were doing to me? To all of us?

I remember clearly when it all began. It was exactly seven years ago when we had our first encounter. In a small shop in the shopping mall, you were leaned against the wall, wearing a black skin-tight coat when I first laid my eyes on you. Serotonin and endorphins rushed through my body when I first touched your smooth skin. *Is this what everybody is talking about? Is this love?* Not sure where this was going, but enjoying this intense and uncharted feeling, I decided to commit to you - and that was the moment you took over my life.

At the beginning all of this seemed quite ordinary to me. You were definitely part of my life – at least that was what I thought. We went everywhere together. Paris, London, Berlin - you were always with me, even when I just went to the baker's right around the corner or to get the mail, you were always there, always by my side. You were the first thing I looked at when I woke up and the last one before I fell asleep. I never felt bored around you because you could keep me entertained for hours. Not to mention how smart you were! Whether it was science, sports, languages, or the latest news... You possessed knowledge about everyone and everything.

For me, all of this was just natural. For several years I was in this first stage of infatuation, floating on cloud nine, seeing you only through those rose-colored glasses. All this time I thought that our relationship was perfect... that you were perfect. But appearances can be deceptive.

It was exactly one year ago when this realization came. We were in Barcelona and I really wanted to go out and explore the city. Of course, I wanted you to come with me, but I could tell that you were exhausted and drained of energy from the long flight, so I decided to leave you at the hotel room in order to recharge your batteries, and I went to the center by myself.

I had barely left the room when I felt something was missing. At first, I did not read too much into it, however, I just could not shake off those distressing and uncomfortable feelings, which intensified from second to second. Even when I was standing on the famous La Rambla, the most prominent and most popular strolling area of Barcelona, amidst a thousand people, all I felt was loneliness and emotional distress. *What is going on here? What is happening to me?* I seriously pondered.

All I could think of was YOU. All I wanted was to be near YOU. YOU were the only thing on my mind. I started to look around, trying to distract myself but all I could see were entities of YOU. Every single person had wrapped their fingers around YOU, staring at YOU instead of soaking up the beauty of the place. And if you hadn't been too tired to accompany me, I would just be like one of them, with my eyes glued on YOU.

Just as I thought I will lose it, a feeling of epiphany rushed through my body and suddenly everything was clear... This was the moment when I first saw YOU without the rose-tinted glasses I was continuously wearing. This was the moment when I realized: YOU are everything but flawless; in fact YOU are the most toxic thing that I have ever met, and everyone is possessed by YOU – including me. Knowing that this needs to change, I immediately rushed back to the hotel. I busted into the room where you were lying calmly exactly where I had left you on the bedside table.

“We need to talk”, I said. No response. “I have to break up with you”, I said. Again, no response. *So that's how much I mean to you, hm?*

Before I could change my mind, I packed everything until YOU were the only thing left in the room. I took one last glance at you, but then, with a rather unsure feeling about this impetuous decision, stepped out of the room and shut the door behind me.

Was this the right decision? I asked myself repeatedly while walking along the long and empty corridor to the elevator. But with every step I took away from this door my uncertainty diminished, and with it all the negative feelings that were captured in my body.

Having arrived outside, I was confident; this was the right decision. Suddenly I was at peace with myself. I felt present in the moment and I knew that no single thing would ever control my life again.

I was finally free.

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head in the clouds

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by adelheid alma nora krause

Clara is standing in the busy airport terminal. Gripping the handle of her suitcase with the right hand, holding her boarding pass in the other. Her best friend is with her at the airport, and to Clara it feels as though they are standing on an island surrounded by waves of people – coming towards them, floating by but never close enough to disturb their privacy. Looking at her with her head slightly tilted, Charlotte’s light blue eyes are looking directly into Clara’s dark brown ones.

“You are absolutely certain you want to do this, aren’t you?”, Charlotte asks her, her voice barely audible amid the chatter of the groups standing around them.

Even though her hands are a bit shaky, Clara nods vigorously as if to convince herself. A twinkle in Charlotte’s eyes and a very slight grin tell her that her friend is seeing right through her façade.

By taking a long and deep breath, Clara calms herself. She knows that it is a bit crazy, that others might see her decision as irrational – but her determination outweighs rationality and doubt. She lets go of the suitcase and shows her hand.

“See, no jitters.”

Her hand has stopped shaking. Charlotte bursts out into an amused giggle that turns into laughter. Pulling Clara into her arms and hugging her heartily, she says:

“I will miss you, you little mad girl! Come back soon. If anything happens, I will jump on the next plane and come get you. You know that, don’t you?”

Clara snorts, “Yeah, sure you will”, but she is happy about the reassurance nonetheless.

She squeezes Charlotte tightly, grabs her suitcase and makes her way to the security check. As she is waiting in line for her turn, she feels nervousness and exhilaration alike rushing through her body. It seemed only like a few days ago that Guillem had contacted her. She had been surprised and delighted. They hadn't been in touch for three years, since she had come back from Barcelona from her summer internship. The internship had been a year after leaving school and Guillem's school had had a student exchange too. During the exchange, he had stayed at the place of one of Clara's best friends and they had gotten along quite well. They had also met when she went to Barcelona for her internship, but after that, the contact had faded and they would only write each to other twice a year, on his birthday and on her own.

A couple of weeks ago he had contacted her, pretty much out of the blue, and told her that he was in Munich with two friends.

Would she like to meet up with them?

She had been quite busy with work, but they met on a Saturday morning to go for a walk and have lunch together. When she got to the main station, where they would meet, Guillem and his friends had not arrived yet.

As she was waiting by the main entrance, Clara searched the crowds pouring out of the great hall in a constant stream. Clara spotted Guillem first. She saw that he was looking for her, turning his head left and right. Clara caught his attention with a small wave of her hand and smiled as they walked towards her. She did not know one of them, but she recognised the second friend from their exchange; Oscar, if she remembered correctly.

As the trio approached Clara, she was astounded. She had never believed in love at first sight – well, rather second sight in this instance. But as they were coming closer, she took in Oscar's features.

Oscar had a natural tan that made it seem like he was sun-kissed, and the light blue shirt he was wearing emphasized his golden-brown skin. His large blue eyes were shining like an ocean in the summer sun. His dark, wavy hair made his sapphire eyes stand out even more. When his gaze met her stare, Clara noticed a warm feeling spreading in her gut. Her hands got sweaty. She tried to dry them on her jeans while simultaneously checking that her lower jaw was in its correct place – and not on the floor, where she felt it was. Then, the group was standing in front of her.

“Hola! Cuanto tiempo, no? Como estás?”

“Bien, bien, y vosotros?”, Clara replied a bit lamely.

Her Spanish was a bit rusty, admittedly. They greeted her with kisses to both cheeks, a custom she had nearly forgotten. Clara blushed, and she could have sworn that Oscar's cheeks were a shade darker as well. She tried to downplay her nervousness and suggested they get a coffee somewhere, which gave her head time to cool down.

During the short walk to the coffee shop, the tenseness seemed to vanish and soon the four of them were chatting, talking about what had happened since they last met, what they were studying and what others whom they had met during the exchange were up to.

They had walked quite a bit and decided to get something to eat and have lunch next to the river.

Clara remembered how they had been eating in the sun and how, somehow, she ended up talking with Oscar. She couldn't even remember what she had talked about with Oscar anymore, but they had ended up laughing uncontrollably, having to wipe away tears from their face.

The other two had brought them back to earth when they announced that they had to leave. She went along with them back to the main station. On their way, Oscar had, almost shyly, asked her for her number and if she wanted to meet up the following day. Clara had tried not to let her excitement show, but she really did not have a poker face and so they had stood in front of the main station, exchanging numbers while grinning at each other idiotically. After that day, time seemed to fly.

She and Oscar had met every single day, with and without his friends. Clara thought that he, too, must have been surprised by the speed with which they had developed feelings for each other and the immense intensity of them. After some days, she had begun to sleep over at the guys' vacation home. Then, a couple of days later, when he had blurted out that he loved her, she thought a younger version of herself would have been taken aback or would have laughed. But when she said it back, it felt natural, like it was meant to be.

They had been on cloud nine for two whole weeks, not wanting to realise that – or hardly even remembering that – their time would soon be over, when Oscar had to take a flight back to Barcelona.

They were lying in bed the night before Oscar's flight, clinging to each other and taking each other in, unsure when and if they would see each other again. Suddenly, he sat up, his large blue eyes piercing her.

“Why don't you just come to Barcelona?”

She burst out in laughter. It seemed so absurd! But when he asked her again, with an imploring tone in his voice, Clara knew he was serious. And as she was thinking about it, she asked herself why she should not do it. Sure, they had only met (again) two weeks ago. She would have to stay at his parents' place. Her Spanish was far from perfect. It did seem like a crazy idea.

But regardless – shouldn't she go?

Even though her head was reluctant, her heart had already decided for her. With shaking hands and a pounding heart Clara booked a ticket for two weeks later, a direct flight from Munich to Barcelona.

“Next please!”

The shout from the airport security guard disrupts her indulging in reminiscences. She heaves her suitcase onto the counter, opens it up to put her washbag into one of the grey trays provided and hands over her boarding pass. When they gesture that she should proceed to the security scan, she steps forward. And although she is not on the plane yet, her heart and her head are already high up in the clouds.

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‘umbrella term’

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by elisabeth zocchi

She laughed, closing her eyes, laying her head back into her neck, turning towards him, and telling him: “You know, happy is only an umbrella term. It gives us an idea of how one feels, without knowing what lies beneath”. He looked in the opposite direction, down onto the ground, wrinkling his brows, not feeling mad about what she had just said but rather thinking about it, pensive, surprised, trying to make sense of her words. What was it that he really felt? Did he really feel happy? What was happiness after all if not being with her on this lush day in summer? He felt a breeze of wind coming in, making the sunrays burning down from the clear, blue sky bearable. He wished for a sunshade, one of the many he saw over there, on the beach next to them. Hundreds of them, colourful, bright, and diverse, sticking out, rising from the dull sand beneath them.

His thoughts wandered off, away from Sue and the beach. He had to think about an encounter which happened earlier that day. He was waiting by the bus stop looking into his phone, scrolling around on Instagram. He was not quite sure what he thought about this app. When it comes to his own person, he was quite certain and thought of himself as a reflective man, someone who knew what he did. He knew about all the follies and unrealistic perspectives people tend to show on social media platforms like this. He was not one of the many users to be bewitched by the virtual reality presented in this app. No, he was not one of them. He had taken a few courses on this topic at university and knew about the algorithms, the bad influence on people’s well-being, the problems of total anonymity, people giving themselves different names and living a life opposite from their reality. He thought of himself to be media literate. Indeed, the fact that he knew about all of these issues and that he knew what it means to be *media literate* was proof enough to him that he was.

The bus arrived and he got on it, activating the screen lock, and slipping his phone into the left pocket of his brown leather-jacket. It was quite crowded. He had to stand and hold on to one of

the handles in the part of the bus where there were no seats. He looked outside the window – houses, trees, people flashing by, just like an unreal movie-world behind a rectangular lens of glass. His mind was just about to wander off again, when he noticed a young man, reflected in the windows of the bus. He realized that all the time he had been standing behind a man who sat in a wheelchair accompanied by a woman, standing and supporting the wheelchair, so it would not jiggle too much as the bus moved.

He felt the urge to get his mobile phone out of his brown leather-jacket to check on Instagram whether Sue had posted anything in her stories, but instead, his mind circled around the young man in the wheelchair. He really was a considerate man. His leather-jacket was bought second-hand in an old store in Italy when he was on a trip with his friends. He also thought about the reusable cup he carried around in his briefcase. When going to university, he always had it with him. He would not have coffee out of a single-use cup, and had his coffee with milk substitutes only. Whether it was oat milk, rice milk, or soy milk, he would not mind, as long as it was vegan. That's how thoughtful and well-aware he was.

Even when it came to people with disabilities, he thought to himself, he was well-informed and reflective. He knew about the fact that it was okay to address the issue of disabilities and to talk about people who were affected by disabilities. One should not say “*disabled people*” or “*the disabled*” but one should rather say “*people with disabilities*”. He knew about people-first language and all that stuff, that's how self-aware he was and how much he cared about everyone and everything around him. He even knew, that if he told people about his thoughts, they would think of him as being arrogant and sniffy.

Wouldn't that make him as self-aware as one could get? Wouldn't questioning his knowledge, behaviour, and thoughts be everything one could wish for when it comes to self-awareness?

The bus kept moving up and downhill, passing by buildings, stations, supermarkets, pedestrians. The traffic became heavier and heavier, making the ride bumpier and bumpier, which in turn made it hard to hold onto the handles. The bus was just about to start again after a red traffic light, when a motorbike took over, forcing the bus driver to jam on the brakes. He watched the whole scene, which let him be partly prepared for the sudden halt. He tried to grab the handle with his right hand, but he lost his balance and tumbled down, almost reaching the floor. Fortunately, as he fell he managed to grab the wheelchair of the young man, which saved his head from crushing on the floor. Even though he was surprised by his fall, he immediately got up, wiping away any dirt that might have blemished his brown leather-jacket. He then looked up. All the people on the bus tried to get back in order, as all of them were caught by surprise and almost fell onto each other just like a row of domino pieces on Domino's day.

He knew he must have hurt the man in the wheelchair somewhere between the process of falling and grabbing his chair. He felt a feeling of awe rising inside of him, somewhere between feeling sorry and not knowing what to do next. He looked at the man's companion, the woman who quickly tried to fasten the wheelchair further in order to make it safer for the young man for the rest of their journey.

He was confused. Did the woman not realize what had just happened? “I, I-II-I ... I think I hurt him. I am sorry.” She looked at him irritated but then nodded and smiled. He did not understand her reaction. “I am really sorry! I could not hold onto the handle and then his armrest was the only thing I could grab! Sorry!” The woman, again, did not really take notice of him, making him feel guilty and uncomfortable.

“Next stop, Bournemouth Beach.” The announcement was forcing him to get off the bus before he could spend any more thoughts on this situation. The doors opened and a huge crowd of people got off the bus, carrying sun shades, sun hats, beach chairs, beach bags, ... He prepared himself to get off the bus too, holding onto another handle, ready to leave. He looked back to the young man and the woman, both observing the people at the beach and the waves reaching the shore. He moved past the threshold, stepping down onto the street. The grass and the pavement were lightly covered with sand. The doors closed and the bus began to move forward again. It was only in this moment when he realized how foolishly he had handled the situation on the bus. How stupid he was! How could he be this ...

“What are you thinking about?”, Sue asked, bringing his attention back to the beach and the sand, the present moment. He shook his head in order to avoid talking about what was on his mind. “Hey, you’re doing it again! You’re not letting me in and you try to avoid me getting too close to your thoughts. How should anyone be able to really get to know you when you always try to appear perfect from the outside?”

Her voice became more serious and her facial expressions sterner. How did she do that? How did she exactly get what he was all about? It made him feel deeply uncomfortable but it amazed him at the same time.

“I hurt a man in a wheelchair when I was on the bus and nearly fell down.” ... “Haha, that’s what you’re thinking about when you’re with me? Haha ... You’re thinking about other people?”, she asked surprised and laughed. “No, seriously, I get that you’re feeling bad but couldn’t this happen to anyone?”

“Yes sure, but that’s not what strikes me”, he answered, still pensive and very serious. “I did not say sorry to the man but I rather apologized for hurting him to his companion who wasn’t sitting in a wheelchair. Isn’t that f***ed up?” He paused, looking down to the sand, angrily stirring a piece of driftwood into the ground. He went on: “It’s as if everything I know and everything I learned about people with disabilities has been thrown overboard in that particular moment. I always thought of myself being considerate and reflective, that I would handle a situation like this more appropriately. Do you get what I mean?”... “I wish I could just go back and apologize properly and behave more respectfully, you see?”

It felt weird talking about these feelings, and he felt embarrassed to even bring this up to her. He got up, walked towards the shore, and let the water reach his feet. He stared into the deep blue water when he suddenly felt Sue’s hand on his shoulder. It made him feel calm and warm.

“Well, I guess you can’t go back to this moment, you can’t change what happened, but I’m glad you told me ...”

He kept staring at the water, not sure what to think or to make out of her words.

“I think you’re a good person. And you’re very reflective, indeed. That’s what I like about you. You’re just always so over-considerate.”

She laid her hand around his lower back and her head onto his shoulder. The wind came in from the sea, blowing into both of their faces, giving them a soft shiver.

Isn’t that what everything is about? To be accepted and to accept? To accept oneself and one’s own follies in order to be open enough to accept and appreciate everyone around oneself? Being self-reflective might be important, indeed. It might be what is needed to make a change and to get towards an inclusive society. But aren’t *‘reflectiveness’*, *‘self-awareness’*, and

‘*conscientiousness*’ all umbrella terms? Terms that sound good and thoughtful and make people think they’re better than anyone else?

What truly counts are people’s actions, how they behave, and how much of their thoughts they put into action. Language, terms, and phrases are what can impress people but it’s what people do that makes a difference.

Guess, what? I have an overall umbrella term for this, for all of those big and small deeds, the very problems people disabled by what society considers to be the “norm” have to face on a daily basis in an exclusive society like ours. The overall umbrella term for this is “*ableism*” and that’s what lies beneath all of this.

The moment we start to truly be self-reflective and accept our own proportion of this very problem is the moment the story turns. It’s not only the missing ramps, the blocked guidance system in the streets, the absent videos of sign-language interpreters on websites – it’s you and me.

But how great is that? When it’s us who cause the problem, then it’s us who can solve it. It’s us who can make a difference.

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contrasts

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by clara blanck

The warm, red-orange light of the sunset was shining through his ears while he was walking in my direction. We had made out yesterday, and something in his warm expressive eyes told me that the best was yet to come, at least for the two of us.

It was my third day in Valencia. My best friend Monica and I had come here to enjoy the last week of the holidays, both looking for relaxation, a lot of sun, the beach and fun. Our expectations were more than fulfilled – at least so far. The weather was wonderful, and the people were so much fun. Especially that one guy, who was just coming in my direction. His name was Juan and we had met each other the night before at this beach bar.

“Hey, how are you?”, he asked. – “Very good, and you? Do you wanna sit down?”

He took a seat at the table where I had been sitting alone; my best friend had left half an hour ago and I didn’t have any clue what she was doing. But in that moment, I honestly didn’t care; I could just notice my heart beating a bit faster and the excitement to meet Juan again. “Eres guapísima”, he said while looking deeply into my eyes. I don’t know why but *your’re very beautiful* in Spanish sounds even more charming than in English. We ordered some beer and had a really nice time talking. He suggested going for a walk along the beach.

“I would love to”, I replied, “but I first need to check where Monica is.” I called her on her phone, but she didn’t answer. That was really weird. “Okay, it doesn’t matter. She probably met someone and will call me back later.”

Shortly after that, we made our way to the seashore. Juan took my hand while we were walking away from the beach bar towards an inlet. The sun had already set, and the half moon was visible in the night sky. What was about to happen was quite obvious. In a small indentation of the rocks, Juan and I made love twice and, although this might just have been a very short

summer love, I knew I would remember for quite some time the sound of his voice, the feeling of his skin, the way he kisses, and, above all, his warm eyes. It doesn't often happen that I feel that attracted to someone.

It was around midnight when we made our way back to the city. I had completely forgotten about Monica, which is why I only checked my phone now to see if she had called; but she hadn't. I started getting really worried. I tried to call her again, but she didn't answer.

“Juan, I have to check where Monica is.” - “Okay, do you wanna go check in your Airbnb?” – “I don't think she's there, because I'm the only one who has the key. If she's there, she must be waiting in front of the building. But her phone is not switched off, so if she was waiting there with her phone, she would have called me. Where the f*** is she??”

Soon, we were back at the beach bar and I asked the guy at the bar counter if he had seen a girl who matched the description I gave him about Monica. Tall, red hair and very beautiful – someone who's easy to remember. Indeed, he could remember her and that she had forgotten her phone, which he had found after she had left the bar. I was really confused now and could feel panic welling up inside of me. But I had to pull myself together and find my friend. Juan suggested we look for her towards the other end of the bay; and he was right.

20 minutes away from the bar, we found her behind a rock, crying silently. “Monica, oh my God, what are you doing here?”

I was relieved, extremely worried and scared at the same time. She started crying more loudly, unable to speak. I took her in my arms, holding her close. What might have been half an hour felt like an eternity to me. The only sounds Monica would emit were pitiful sobs. Juan and I didn't really know what to say, trying not to add insult to injury. Eventually, Monica started to share what had happened to her – it took my breath away. She had met someone at the bar, who had invited her for a drink. Given that she hadn't eaten before and that she was very sensitive towards alcohol, she had been quite drunk and had accepted to go to the beach with that guy.

“It felt so exciting and I would have never believed him capable of doing something without my will. What happened before is just a blur to me now but when he started to take my clothes off...” Her voice broke. “I was suddenly completely awake, but I couldn't defend myself.”

The cat was out of the bag. I started crying too, while I was holding Monica more tightly. “I am so sorry, Monica, I am so sorry that I didn't look for you earlier.”

How was it possible that two friends were experiencing something so completely different at the same time at the same place? My evening had been so beautiful and hers so horrible...

Luck and misfortune are completely out of balance in this world - distributed in such an unequal and arbitrary way, that if there was something such as fate, it would be a lousy traitor.

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photo: violet stathopoulou-vaïs

the re-encounter

by **sabrina mayr**

Nervousness. Tension. Worry.

I was on a plane home. I hadn't seen my whole family in person for years. I had moved to New York to go to Columbia and right after that, I had already had a great job opportunity. I had always been in contact with my family, but I had never taken the time to fly home – I had never wanted to. I had loved my life in the city. And I had been trying to avoid *him*; my former best friend, then boyfriend. He who had left me without saying goodbye to pursue a career in South Africa and who had come back soon afterwards.

Now I had to go home because my mother was getting married – again. I had, however, mixed feelings about it. Did I pack everything? The dress? The presents? Did I pick the right clothes? What will they think of me? Will *he* be there? I hope not, but then again ...

“Please put on your seat belts. We are about to land.” The flight attendant interrupted my thoughts.

More nervousness. More tension. More worry.

The plane finally landed, but I did not get off right away. I let everybody else leave first. Then I stood up, picked up all my stuff and stepped down the ladder. Having finally arrived at the baggage claim, I immediately spotted my two pistachio green suitcases. “OK, Margret, everything went fine until now, so this is a good sign,” I told myself before leaving the airport in a yellow taxi.

I was standing in front of my mother's house. I could already hear the preparations in the back yard. I hadn't been here in so long. My heart was racing so fast that I thought it would jump out of my chest. I could literally hear the pumping of my blood. I stood still in front of the massive white front door, but my hand wouldn't touch the doorknob. Was I allowed to go right in, just like in the old days? My eyes flickered to the doorbell. I had never noticed before how

beautifully decorated it was. The little round knob was made of metal and was surrounded by wood carvings. The ornaments fitted perfectly to the ones on the door...

Then suddenly the door opened and who else than my mother stood before me.

“There you are! Why didn’t you come in?” She hugged me tightly. “I’ve missed you so much.” The first thought that popped up was that she didn’t smell like in my memories, but after a few seconds all nervousness, tension and worry just melted away and I found myself hugging her back.

“Come in, I have to introduce you to everyone. Of course, I have told them all about you...” my mother mumbled on and on while dragging me through the house and into the garden, where the wedding would take place. A number of people were there helping her with the preparations. Some of them were putting up a huge white tent for the reception, others were lining up chairs or decorating the three birches with little paper lanterns. Everything was clad in white and a light shade of pink. It was beautiful. It was exactly how my mother loved it.

“This is Fred, he is your sister’s boyfriend.” I heard my mother saying. I turned my head towards the two of them and realized that I had been rude.

“Oh, hi Fred. I have already heard a lot about you. Nice to finally meet you,” I answered. I had already seen pictures of him on my sister’s Instagram, but, damn, he was fine.

“Nice to meet you too.” I smiled at him politely. In that moment, I turned my eyes, looked behind Fred and stared directly into *his*.

He must have been watching me coming out with my mum and talking to Fred. Fred and my mother followed my gaze. “Do you know each other?” Fred asked curiously, but my mother interrupted and said apologetically, “Oh, I’m so sorry. I forgot to tell you that Oscar was also coming. But I could not *not* invite him, you know, dear. You know, his mother is my best friend.” And then from one moment to the next, there it was again:

Nervousness. Tension. Worry.

I shook my head, excused myself, turned around and went inside. The familiar scent of home calmed me down a little. I looked around. Everything was the same. The big bookshelves on the left, right next to the big dusky pink sofa. The same old cushions ... I grinned quietly to myself. Mum just loved pink.

“I was wondering when you’d be coming home. Briefly, I even thought that you might skip your own mother’s wedding,” I heard him murmur behind me. I closed my eyes, summoned all my strength and turned around. He hadn’t changed a bit.

“Well, it is her fifth wedding after all, and I don’t think that this one will last any longer. I still had to come. She’s my mother, you know,” I answered calmly. He smiled at me. My heart began pumping rapidly again. I smiled back.

“You haven’t been back since you left for Columbia, have you?” “No, I have always been very busy with my studies and now with my job, which I really like and you know I have always wanted to live in the city ...” I rambled on.

“Yes, I know,” he interrupted me. He could definitely tell that I was nervous. He knew me too well. “I’m glad that you’re here though.” He took a step closer, and his familiar scent wrapped

around me. Perplexed, I closed my eyes and inhaled sharply. I started to answer something, I didn't even know what, when I was saved by my sister.

“There you are. Mum told me that you were here. Come here.” She pushed Oscar out of the way and hugged me.

When she let loose, he was gone. Surprisingly, I felt disappointed. Where did he go? Then I spotted him darting outside. Without even thinking, I went past my sister, hissed “sorry” and ran after him.

“Oscar, wait! I'm also glad to see you here. Do you want to talk?”

THE END

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unknown paths

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by julia lindinger

He never thought that he would embark on such a journey one day. He was not that type of guy who liked to question his life. He was not even religious. But that was before everything had changed. Before his entire life was turned upside down in just one instant. Before they found her and her letter.

They gave it to him shortly after it had happened. She knew he would need a long time until he could move on. She also knew that he would need a little nudge in the right direction. Therefore, the letter. She knew him all too well. His heart grew painfully heavy. But eventually, he was able to pull himself together and pack his backpack. And now he was here at the meeting point. Here, he would meet a group of other pilgrims who dared embark on this journey.

“I’m really not sure if I want to go”, he said to his friend who had agreed to accompany him. He put his heavy backpack down. It was huge, a real monster. Why would pilgrims take such a thing with them on such a journey? Wasn’t it about leaving old burdens behind?

“Of course you go”, his friend replied while checking their bikes one last time. One of them would take him to his destination, Santiago de Compostela. Over 2,000 kilometers away and about three months to go.

“We have been planning this too long for you to get out of it.” His friend looked up and he could feel his burning gaze on him. He already knew what he would say now. *Please, don’t say it*, he silently prayed in his mind. *Don’t say it....* “Do it for her.”

It still felt unreal after all those months. He always thought his love for her would be enough. But she was like a trapped bird. Only that she was trapped in her own dark thoughts. He couldn’t hold her, nobody could. She’d decided on her own when it was time for her to go. He let out a shaky breath. Since she was gone, he has felt lonely and empty.

At first, he didn't know how to get along without her. He was used to being the stronger one. He had to be strong for her. But paradoxically it was her who gave him the strength to keep going, the strength not to despair. She always said he was the only one who could ever make her happy. He would have done anything for her, anything with her. Even when she came up with this stupid idea of making a pilgrimage to Santiago. A journey of over 2,000 kilometers! Of course, he had promised her to go with her. How could he ever deny her a wish? He just never thought that he would not be able to keep his promise.

Instead, he had to go alone. That's what she demanded from him in the letter. It was her last wish. He groped for the familiar shape of the envelope that was stowed in the side pocket of his backpack. He would take her with him.

His friend patted him on the shoulder. "Sorry", he murmured. He must have realized that it still hurt him too much to talk about it. His look was pitiful. "Let's go meet the others."

While his friend headed for the small group of pilgrims who were already eagerly studying the map in front of them, he grabbed his heavy backpack and propped it against a giant oak with a sign attached. He read *Santiago de Compostela* at the very top of it. From here, he would set off for Northwestern Galicia on the *Camino de Santiago*, the Way of St. James. He would travel over 2,000 kilometers on his bike and cross three different countries. Switzerland, France, and Spain.

And in the end, he hoped, he'd finally be able to start over. He wasn't sure what to feel. He wasn't sure what to expect. And he didn't know if he was ready yet. Ready to let her go.

He was torn from his thoughts when he heard someone approach.

"Are you studying the sign?" A young woman grinned at him. Her eyes shone bright like two jade stones in the sun. She studied his face while he lost himself in those eyes. They stirred something in him, something he thought long forgotten. "I love adventures, so I am really looking forward to this trip", she continued. Maybe she felt his inner turmoil because she slowly turned away, not expecting his answer anymore. Finally, he found his voice. "Aren't you afraid of the unknown?"

She stopped in her tracks and gave him an amused look. "Isn't life all about unknown paths?" she replied smiling. A small smile crept over his face. Suddenly, something in him made him feel lighter. Hopeful. Almost cheerful. A feeling he hadn't experienced in a long time. As she set out, he simply followed her.

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walking

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by veronika theurl

When I was a child, I hardly had any friends. I had a few really good ones, that's true. I'm still in contact with my two best friends from high school. But my one best friend from middle school wasn't good to me. She was insecure and wanted to show that she was in power of something, that she was in power of me. I now think she was a sorry figure back then. Trying to manipulate and change her best friend in order to make her own life better, to make it bearable. She was ill. She had anorexia, maybe some mental illness as well. I sometimes wonder what became of her. But then, I don't even want to meet her again. What might she look like now, fifteen years later? Was she able to find her own way? Is she still walking on, trying to find her own place in the world? Is she still using other people to make herself feel better? Worthier?

Another friend, another time. I loved going out with her, partying all night long, talking about boys and about all the silly people at university. *Did you know that Sarah was sleeping with Phil even though she still didn't break up with Mathew? Did you see the red dress Miriam was wearing yesterday? I wouldn't dare wearing something like that with her body. Oh, and I almost forgot! I have another date on Friday! Look, that's Oliver, he's 26, lives somewhere in the city, and is an electrician or so. Isn't he cute? I know I didn't want to go on dates after Jamie broke up with me. But it just happened and this time I really think it might work out. Well, we haven't met so far, but I'm sure we're meant for each other. You don't care that we can't go to the cinema now, do you? You understand that Jamie only has time that evening, right? He works and doesn't have time on other days, but you don't mind, yes?*

Alright, another friend lost. I can bear that. I'm strong, I don't need her. I have other friends. We aren't that close, that doesn't matter. Anyway, I'm strong, I can keep on walking. Walking on my own.

Some years later, some years wiser. I was in love with him. For the first time in my life I felt like the only person in someone's universe, like someone's true treasure. Paul was my first boyfriend. We met at a party, he invited me for a drink. I hated beer back then, but I didn't even get what it tasted as I was so absorbed in what he was telling me. He was a professional climber, travelled a lot, and loved dogs. I was more of a cat-person, but that wasn't a problem. I enjoyed his company a lot. And the company of his dog, Fleur. We moved together after being a couple for two years. With his help, I started being able to finally talk about my past. About the things I tried to avoid thinking about. I have to admit, I sometimes felt extremely lonely before I met Paul. I wasn't aware of that.

Friends ... false friends ... was one chapter in my past. Another chapter was my brother. A brother who needed all of our parents' love and care because he was ill. Of course, they had to be with him and hold him in their arms when he was a toddler and had to be in hospital for the first time. Of course, our parents had to protect him against the kids in his class; they were mean to him. Of course, our parents had to tell him that he'll get better, that he'll be able to be an artist, that they're proud of him and they believe in him. Of course, there wasn't much energy left for our parents' second child. For me. The second one was fine and didn't need help. Our parents were proud of the second child, of course. And they were happy that they didn't have to look after that child as well. The girl anyway never had any problems with other children. She always worked hard, put a lot of effort in her studies, and, most importantly, she kept on walking without anyone's help. There wouldn't have been enough energy left to support that child as well. Our parents didn't have enough energy left for me. I understand.

And now? My brother is an artist, he's quite famous, wealthy, has a wife and a few affairs for all I know. He's doing well. I think. I haven't seen him for years. And my parents? They're happy to have my children as their grandchildren and a daughter who cares for them, now that they're old. "It's so good of you to look after your poor old parents like they looked after you when you were younger. We were such loving parents, weren't we? And our son surely will come back one day. We know. We are certain. We are to see him again before we close our eyes."

And I? I'm strong. I have a loving husband, Paul, two amazing twin girls who I love with all my heart, two parents who are grateful for my support, a silly little dog. And a cat. One of the girls had a fight with her best friend yesterday. I should probably contact the girl's mother and see if we can fix the problem, whatever it is. The other one has lots of friends, she never complains about anything. How happy I am for her! How happy I am that I have the chance to help my other girl. How happy I am for all the people I met along the way. They made me who I am now. They made me become the strong woman I am now, the woman I started to like, the woman I am proud of. The woman who can walk by herself.

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exposed

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaïs

by rachel gerling

White porcelain. With a blue stripe. Three little holes and a few grains stuck to the top.

“Not straight from the shaker. Shake some on your hand first and then you can control it better.” Two little heads huddled together, kneeling, hunched over on the sidewalk.

Little masochistic hand stretched out hovering above it, palm up.

A tiny pinch. It starts to bubble. A little more.

“Not too much!”

“Do they make sounds? Do you think it’s screaming? You know, in science class today, Ms Paulus said there is a whistle that dogs can hear but people can’t. Do you think they scream but we can’t hear it?”

They watch as it bubbles and boils and seems to disintegrate. Watching it burn. Watching it boil to oblivion. Little fingers. Little pinch of salt after little pinch of salt.

I

What is it about the foetal position that is so comforting? I understand you spend the first arguably 40 weeks of your life in there. So what? So now that position is supposed to bring you comfort? I don't buy it. Why we find ourselves curling up into a ball still perplexes me. Doesn't matter where it is, middle of the gym, bathroom floor, laundry room, on a rock, on a bench — I prefer in bed with the covers up under my chin because comfort is, after all, the goal here. I guess it is working now. Small bits of comfort to keep me hanging on. Just barely. Stone-still on the outside. Turmoil on the inside. Is this what paralysis feels like?

She got there early and waited. She was prepared. It was snowing. His car pulled in the parking lot. She watched him from the window. Here we go. He walked up to the door, opened it, stomped his feet and pulled off his sock hat. She stood up. *Act normal. Don't give anything away. You have done this a thousand times. Just one more time. You are a machine, a robot, automatic, autopilot.* She smiled sweetly, greeted him with a kiss as usual.

“Let’s get coffee.” She led him to the counter, and they waited.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, looking into her eyes.

No one was at the counter. It was early and it was empty. They stood and waited. She didn’t answer.

“What’s wrong?” he repeated with an earnest look.

She looked at him. Paused. *This is not ideal timing, but...here it goes.*

Heart pounding. It really does pound, doesn't it? There's no other way to describe it. Echoes deep in the chest. Like reverberations from fireworks you can feel deep in your heart. Pounding along till the grand finale in a fireworks show but this show doesn't seem to have an end. Clichés, but so spot on. Pounding. That's exactly it. Drums of war.

She opened her eyes and looked directly into his.

“I know.”

He hesitates. Barely furrows his brow. “Know, what?”

She lowers her voice and states, more slowly, definitively, “I. know.”

He hesitates again, his eyes bouncing back and forth between hers.

She does not waver; she does not break. She holds firm.

“What are you talking about?”

This time she pauses. **She** controls the pace. “I know about all the other women,” she waves her hand with a sense of finality.

And just for a moment, she sees the blood drain from his face and his stomach fall 10 stories like an elevator in a horror film. A fraction of satisfaction creeps into her before the moment is interrupted —

“*Was darf es sein?*”

“*Zwei cappuccino, bitte*” she turns her head toward the cashier and answers in an automated voice without missing a beat.

*Pull yourself together. You can do this. You **have** a ladder; you can see it even. It's right there. Climb out of this pit. Knees to chest. Covers up under her chin. Paralyzed. Trying to get even smaller. Mind circles back. And around again. Why do you keep thinking about it? Does pouring salt on a wound somehow help cure it?*

Now this is awkward. They stand there, side by side at the counter. She can feel the panic building inside him. It's radiating out despite his best efforts to try to save face because they are in public, in his neighbourhood.

"6.20, *bitte*."

She turns to him. Normally she would pay, but there's no way in hell she's even going to reach for her wallet and even pretend to offer to pay today.

He bows his head, slowly reaches into his pocket. She continues to stand tall and wait. They wait in silence as he drops a tenner on the counter, his hand suddenly seemingly too heavy to hold up as it plops with a thud. The cashier replaces it with a number. She reaches for it and turns and starts moving to find a table. He doesn't move. She stops. Looks back at him.

"Come on", she says airily and jerks her head in the direction of the tables and starts again. He hangs his head and drags his feet behind her. They sit down across from each other, facing each other.

Silence and stares.

"Looks like **someone's** been on my computer. **Why** were you on my computer?" He made the first move.

Not missing a beat, she replies, "**Why** have you been lying to me for the last 6 years?"

"**Why** were you on my computer?" the accusation continues.

Shrugging her shoulders, she replies: "Why have you been **lying** to me for the last 6 years?"

"**Why** were you on my computer?"

"Why have you been lying to me for the last **6 years**?" she says, even more lightly, more nonchalantly.

"**Why** were you on my computer?"

This was clearly going nowhere, but she did not back down.

She hesitated.

Now she had it.

"I'm sorry (she actually wasn't sorry at all), **you** told me 'You don't need to keep asking me to use my computer. You can use it whenever you want. What is mine is yours, sweetie.'" And it's true. She had **always** asked before using his computer. Every. Single. Time. It was respectful. She was respectful.

Now she knew she had him. She didn't have the upper hand, she was holding the whole f*cking deck.

Sometimes, it just hits you. You feel the arrow pierce the skin, right in the middle, right between the two sides of the ribs, just below your sternum. You can feel the burn, the poison spreading. You can't stop it. Your chest tightens. It moves up to your throat, it chokes you, it reaches your face, but the barrier breaks and you burst. You don't try to hold back. You let it roll over you. You feel it. Deep in your soul. It sears it. It brands you. Smokes a little as it

burns. And you let it. You **allow** yourself to feel it. *Let it sting. This will pass. This will pass.* And eventually...it does.

She folded her hands on the table in front of her, ready to play her first card. She had studied. She knew the timeline. She knew the order. She knew their names. So she reached into her little breast pocket of knowledge with finger and thumb and picked out the first name in the line-up and verbally, carefully, dropped it on the table in front of him.

“Who is S-?” she asked, matter-of-factly, knowing full well that ‘S-’ was someone from almost 6 years ago.

His face went blank. He looked down into his lap as he answered.

She listened and finally responded “Oh, I know, I read all the emails. I saw all the pictures...”

She continued, “Did you sleep with her?”

“Yes.”

“How many times?”

He answered.

“Did you like it?”

“Yes.”

“Did you love her?”

He paused, looked up, directly into her eyes. “No. ...I love **you.**”

He looked so sincere, his crystal-blue eyes soft and puffy, his face familiar and comforting, but she knew better. She nodded, jutted her chin out with a little downward frown acknowledging the information. She reached back into her pocket with finger and thumb and pulled out the next name, and the next, and the next, and the next. The full line-up. The full list. In chronological order. The same line of questioning with each name. The same answers. Always ending with his piercing blue eyes locked in hers sincerely saying, “No. I didn’t love her. I love **you.**”

“You need to re-evaluate your definition of love.”

Piercing silence.

“You have two choices,” she continued, “You can decide if you want them, and your mom, to hear it from you...or from me. It’s your choice.”

He didn’t say much.

She did most of the talking. Her voice never raised. Constantly calm and in control.

Numb. She hears voices but she’s not listening. *I feel nothing. It’s weird to feel nothing. I should feel something. I blend in with the wallpaper. I want to disappear. Maybe I can find an invisibility cloak.* Time slows down. She can just sit, in silence as the world goes by, as time goes by. Hours.

“You need to eat something, darling”, she says in a soft voice as she places food in front of her and a maternal hand on her shoulder. “Try your best to eat something.”

She has no appetite. She takes a bite, tastes nothing, dry mouth, zombie stare, and forces herself to swallow. It hurts going down. She needs more water. She’s terribly dehydrated.

They sat in silence.

She said all that she had in her. Never raised her voice. Never even welled up.

“I have nothing more to say.”

She walked out to her car, already packed to the brim with her belongings.

Now she turned to him and hugged him. She felt that arrow hit her between the ribs, and she let the poison take over. *Now that sonofab*tch is going to feel how much he hurt me.* She cried on him, and she did not hold back. She let him feel her choke on her breath, leaving slobber and snot on his collar. It didn’t last long. It stopped as suddenly as it had begun. She raised her head. *That was it. That was enough.* She pulled back, looked him in the eye and said, “Goodbye.” She turned, got into her car, looked into the rear-view mirror at him standing in the parking lot in the snow, put on her blinker, turned, and didn’t look back.

“What happened to you? I have not seen you out in ages! Where have you been?” he asks above the pulsating music, noticing she had changed.

“If you really want to know...” She takes a sip and proceeds to tell him in one sentence, keeping it short. Didn’t want to ruin the party.

“Whoop! Good for him!” he celebrates by raising his eyebrows and his glass and takes a sip. She glares at him in disgust and disappointment. *Just add him to the list.* She turns, and walks away. Sometimes silence is the only sound.

She paced around the kitchen shouting colourful words at the top of her lungs to no one. It was a guttural, tribal yell. She had never heard herself make such a noise. She was spitting and snarling. She felt like vomiting, face flushed. She gagged and grabbed her stomach. *Let it sting. Allow yourself to feel it. It’s OK to want to physically injure. It’s not OK to actually do it. Nobody went to jail for their thoughts.* Thinking about all the things she **could** do, and then deciding **not** to do them, gives her some sort of pleasure, and control. Power. Pride.

“I know we don’t know each other very well, but I’m having a hard time reading you. You are sending mixed signals and I don’t know how to proceed here”, he admitted.

She thought for a moment, *was this their second or third date? Are you even sure you should be dating again? You are not ready.*

“You know in Disney’s *Sleeping Beauty*? Remember when the fairies are fighting over what colour the dress should be? One says, ‘Pink!’ and turns it pink, and the other says, ‘Blue’ and turns it blue? Then in the end they both cast spells on it simultaneously turning it a disaster of half pink and half blue? That is how I feel. Both warm and icy. Both hate and love. So, when I say contradictory things, it is just me expressing these two ‘colours’ clashing inside of me. My heart alternates between pink and blue and pink and blue. It might sound like I have Tourette’s

Syndrome, unable to control what is coming out of me because it's so contradictory, but... it's just me expressing the complex feelings brewing inside of me. Does that make sense?"

He just stared at her, blinked, completely lost.

She turned and walked away.

II

"It's no secret, so... I think it's time you know." She doesn't mind sharing. It helps people understand her behaviour.

She told him the whole story. He had tears in his eyes. "I am so, so sorry. I don't know what to say."

"There is nothing to say. It happened and I'm still dealing with it. It's a process, but I'm processing."

"What an a**hole."

"That's quite an understatement, but thank you for saying it."

This story is part of her. Not all of her, but still part of her. It will not make her. She was healing. And this one, he was helping.

*The waves crashing around me. The sand slips out to the sea. I let them come... I can see and feel when they are coming. They warn me before they crash into me. And I think, here comes the storm. I let myself feel it, even if it hurts. I bunker down and wade out of it. But progress. Now, now I have decided not to survive them but to **invite** them. To feel them. To feel the sadness. To feel the injustice. To feel the anger. To feel the hurt. Not only do I feel them, feel them deep, but I open the door for them. I invite them in. I invite them in, process them, and then let them pass and let them go. And each time, it gets easier, and less intense. And then healing happens, ever so slowly, until eventually, after lots of work, the waves are mere ripples. I know how it works. I know what comes next. I've done it before.*

"I know you've been hurt", he continued. "I know it will take time. I will do everything, every single day to prove to you that there are good people in this world, and I am one of them. I would never, ever do anything to hurt you."

"Promise me," she said with teary eyes, "promise me, no matter how hard it is to tell me, promise me you will tell me if you are ever even slightly interested in anyone else. Promise me you will tell me first before you do anything. I won't be mad. I just want to know. It will be OK. Just promise me you will tell me before you act. Promise me." She repeated herself in desperation. But she was strong. She was the most resilient person she knew.

"I promise, from the bottom of my heart. I will never, ever, do anything to hurt you. You will never, ever have to live through that again. As long as you are with me, you never will. You are safe with me. I promise."

They hugged.

Thinking back now, she can't remember how many times she heard that promise come from his lips. It took a while, longer than most. But she believed him.

And regret eats at her insides.

Headspace. Simultaneously full and empty. Circular and yet somehow linear. There is no eject button. It circles back again. And again. And again. *You are a guest here now. And now I will respectfully escort you to the door.*

She greeted him with a robotic kiss when he walked in. They hugged like they had every time one of them came home, routinely, for the last five years.

“Your heart is pounding. What’s going on? Are you okay?” he asked, her chest pressed against his in the embrace.

She rested her chin on his collar bone. Their cheeks touch. She put her hand on the back of his neck, gently holding him, cradling him.

“Remember when you promised me? All those years ago. Remember when you promised my family you would never hurt me? Remember how you cried for me when you heard about my past? And remember how hurt I was when we first met? Well, I’m feeling that way again – and it’s because of you.”

“What are you talking about?”

She pulled back, arms still around each other. She opened her eyes and looked directly into his.

“I know.”

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the power of noise

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by regina penz

Here I am. Standing in the most crowded street of Tokyo, but unable to move – only my eyes are following the course of this delicate soft petal, shimmering in the awakening light of the sun, displaying an array of mellow colours like rosé wine, white and a tinge of crimson at the tip of the petal, while floating softly in the wind above my head. I wince when I hear the horn of the car right next to me. Cars and people are rushing by at a fast pace. The buzzing sound of the hectic city is drawing my attention. Right, I have to get to school! Time to run.

There she is. With her cheeks lightly flushed and her beautiful dark eyes pinned to the ground, she slips into the classroom before anyone could notice that she wasn't here in time. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her sitting down in the last row. I wonder why she is late this time.

I meet my friend Amaya under the enormous maple tree at the back of the school garden, as we do over every lunch break. Here it is usually more peaceful and quieter than near the entrance or the sports field. Amaya has been an amazing friend to me since we met in kindergarten and she loves the soft sounds of nature as much as I do. And it seems like we are not the only ones seeking tranquillity. A

classmate of ours is usually also around. He seems to enjoy the time just for himself. It feels good to be seemingly far away from the bustling city. The sunlight is twinkling through the leaves above us and the grass is soft underneath our bodies as we lie in the shade of the maple tree. I love this silence.

It is a pity that she is always hanging out with her friend, since I'm not confident enough to start talking to her in front of the other girl. I had my chance, back in the days, when we were all new in this school, and I didn't take it. That day, when the fire alarm was set off, our teacher commanded us to leave the classroom and to wait in front of the school. The siren was unbelievably loud. I noticed that she hadn't even moved, although everyone else was walking towards the classroom doors. The thought that I could just go and talk to her without anyone noticing, crossed my mind. But I didn't do it. I left. Later I couldn't find her in the courtyard, and she was also missing when we were back in the classroom. The entire school was chatting about her disappearance for weeks after that. But she did not seem to mind. Sometimes she still looks dreamily out of the window, the way she did back then. I could have talked to her, but I didn't dare, which might have had something to do with her intimidating beauty. After that, I have never had the chance again. But soon, we will go on our school trip. Maybe then...

I've already been worried since Amaya told me that she would not be able to join the school trip, but now... This is a whole new level of being worried. I'm on my own now. I mean, I like my classmates; they are all friendly, but they think I'm weird and tend to keep their distance or just don't care. To most, I'm invisible. But they all remember my first day in school. It was a long time ago, but still... They remember.

She seems stressed. Her whole body looks stiff and tense. I watch her entering the train right in front of me. She tries to keep her distance from the other classmates, but can't really go that far because the train is quite crowded. There are hardly any vacant seats, so we all stand in the open space. The wagon we are in looks like it was built a hundred years ago and makes a rather decrepit impression. The carriage is rumbling loudly on the rails. Whenever there is a bump that jolts the entire wagon, I notice her quiet whimpering. My

thoughts are racing, while I'm desperately searching for a way to help her, but I just don't know what to do.

It is too loud, too much. My usual strategy to concentrate on something motionless in order to calm down, doesn't work this time. Not even with the old-fashioned patch of cushioning, which is visible because a man is leaning down to pad his dog, but is gone as soon as he straightens up again. So many people are in this tiny space and there is so much noise. I cannot focus.

As soon as the train disappears into the darkness of a tunnel, the rattle grows extremely loud. Then I hear her screams. For her the noise must be intolerably loud! Her hands are clasped tightly around her ears. I jump to her side and gesture to the man sitting nearby that he has to move immediately. Guided by my hands, she finds the now empty seat, sits down and curls herself up, still moaning. Fortunately, my backpack still contains my noise-cancelling headphones, which I forgot to unpack yesterday evening. Without hesitation, I pull them out and put them over her ears, rearranging the position of her hands, so that she can clasp my headphones. Soon after, her sobs minimise to a soft whimpering. Then I go looking for the open window. Or at least I think there must be a window open, otherwise I can't explain the origin of this deafening noise. Pushing past some annoyed passengers, I finally reach the open window and try to close it. Only with the help of another man, I'm able to do so and return to her seat. The place next to her is now deserted, so I sit down, put an arm around her and hold her tightly until her shivering fades.

Suddenly, it is quieter. It is now that I realize that I'm seated. And when I open my eyes, his gaze is on me. I feel the weight of his arm around my shoulders, taking away the heaviness of the moment. I look at him and I feel calm. I feel safe. Finally.

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sleepless nights

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by romana pfutscheller

It was another one of those nights. He couldn't sleep once again. He crawled out of bed, got dressed as quietly as possible so as not to wake his wife and children, and sneaked out of the house. He shut the bedroom door quietly behind him and tiptoed down the stairs. As he was closing the heavy front door, he certainly felt a little relieved. He took a deep breath and continued with his nightly adventure.

This had been going on for a year. Since that ominous night, the one he could never forget. This night only HE could remember and nobody else. Maybe nobody wants to remember and just acts as if nothing ever happened? But as soon as he got into his bed at night, every single night, all these thoughts came up and he didn't understand why no one but himself could remember it. How could everyone forget the screams, the horror that was in the air? How could everyone around him just ignore what had happened? It seemed to him as if the memory of everyone around him had been erased. All the people involved in the tragedy seemed numb. Blindly continuing their lives. Deafly listening to the sound of their thoughts.

He walked for half an hour completely caught up within his own thoughts not following any specific direction. It was only then that he noticed that he was walking past the old cemetery. This particular cemetery. It had always been creepy to him. The old trees, the long branches hanging down almost as if they wanted to reach the ground. The atmosphere muffling this whole place like a veil covering the face of an ugly bride. He had already felt this way as a child. This oppressive feeling following him each and every time he got close to this place. Only once in his life did he dare to walk in there. A test of courage. After that he had nightmares for weeks and he would wake up drenched in sweat.

The cemetery had been desecrated years ago and it was known that it could be haunted. Well, no wonder people thought that. It looked exactly like that. Since no burials were taking place

here anymore, the site was no longer maintained and because of that, it looked even creepier. The old tombstones had been covered in dust since he was a child.

He returned from his thoughts to the present, shook himself and put a forced smile onto his face. As he was about to go on, he heard a soft voice: "You will never, ever forget this!" The words were so soft that he could hardly hear them. The voice was calm, as if someone was only reading an instruction to him. But he had the feeling to have recognized his wife. That could not be! She was fast asleep at home. He began taking wider and faster steps, almost running towards the opposite direction. Just away from this eerie place! It must have been only his imagination.

The further he strolled around, the more he sank into his thoughts once again. How could it be since no one remembered. When it comes to his children, he could understand it. They were still very young and there was the possibility that they could just forget, or simply their brains had never processed such a thing. But his wife, how could she forget those cries and that indignation and the danger! He simply could not believe how she was able to do it! Or was it HE who had lost his mind and had imagined everything? Could it simply have been his imagination? He has always had a very vivid imagination.

He returned home. Undressed and got into his bed. His wife still lay deeply asleep. Actually, for a year everything has always been shrouded in darkness. And strangely enough, all the memories always arose only from the moment he got up and felt this urge to get out ...

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the accident?

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by verena totis

After the crash, she sat still. Black smoke surrounded her old Ford Mustang. She was staring at her shaking hands still holding the steering wheel tightly.

She could feel her heart racing as fast as that one time when her friend convinced her to try bungee jumping for the first time years ago in San Francisco, when she was still a teenager. She felt hot and dizzy, way dizzier than she usually does when she drinks a little too much red wine. *What in the world has just happened?* She tried to free her face from the curly black hair, which, mixed with the cold sweat running down her forehead, seemed to stick like glue on her pale skin. But her hands were shaking so uncontrollably, she had to grab the steering wheel again.

What in the world has just happened? Breathe Lola, breathe. Everything looked blurred.

Where am I? She looked out of the front windshield and recognized the street. She had reached almost the end of Fillmore Street, which meant that she was only 14 minutes away from her office. However, today, the sight of the small, muddy street crossing her favorite pine-tree forest, was covered by a frightening huge black cloud of dust. The very cloud that did not allow her to see much of the outside world. She looked to the right, her neck felt sore. Maybe she shouldn't have, too dizzy. Splinters of glass covering the floor of the passenger seat was everything that was left from her lunchbox. One part of her hummus sandwich was stuck on the dashboard and pieces of the mixed salad she had prepared the evening before were scattered everywhere.

Usually, Lola has lunch at the small cafeteria right in front of her office. She always goes there with Mike, a work colleague, whom she recently also started to consider as one of her best friends. He makes the long hours of daily paperwork at the office more enjoyable and brings her a double espresso each day at 4 p.m., which is much needed in order to avoid falling asleep on her desk between an overly formal email and a phone call with another complaining client.

But today is Monday, and on Mondays Lola always brings her own lunchbox to work, because the cafeteria is closed. Still staring to the right side, she could see that the book she had started reading last week had also fallen out of her leather bag and now lay open on the passenger seat. *The Accident* by Linwood Barclay. A thriller her ex-mother-in-law had given her for Christmas in 2011. Having broken up with Luke, she put all the things reminding her of him in an IKEA box in the attic and two months ago, while she was moving to Grabtown, a small town on the outskirts of San Francisco, she found it again and decided to finally read it. Even though she did not like Luke anymore, she still loved thrillers. But *The Accident*? She has never been the type of person who believed in signs, but ... *Stop it Lola, try to focus!* She still felt way too dizzy for rational and logical thinking. *What has happened? Focus!* She looked at her shattered new apple watch (*damn it!*). It was 7:53. Usually at this time she already sits in her comfortable office chair sipping her second coffee of the day, scrolling through her work plan or is in the middle of small talk with Paulina, the loud and moody but somehow friendly cleaning lady with the strong Italian accent. This meant she had been sitting unconscious in her shattered, dusty car on the side of Fillmore Street for quite a while now. No wonder nobody drove by and tried to help her, because during this time the road is usually empty. During almost any time, actually. *So how could this have happened?* Lola knew she was a good driver, a fast but still a good driver. She has always loved the feeling of adrenaline and she has always loved a drive on her own, while listening to good old music, like Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones or Janis Joplin - especially Janis Joplin. Now, the radio was off. She had never been involved in a car accident before. But was this an accident? There was no other car involved, right? Again, Lola tried to wipe away the curls from her face, this time managing to put at least most of them behind her ears, feeling the sweat of her face on her trembling fingers now. This time she put her hands on her lap and anxiously rubbed them against her washed out jeans. *Was there a man standing in the middle of the street? No, that does not make any sense.* Why couldn't she remember what had happened? Was it because of the Sauvignon she had drunk last night with her neighbor Laura or was it because of her head having been smashed against the steering wheel? She felt dizzy and could not think straight. But all of a sudden, she started to feel an overwhelmingly strange feeling in her chest. Something was not right. Lola could not identify what she felt at that moment. *Fear?* She was slowly reconnecting the blurred pieces of memories she had about the moments right before the crash.

She saw a man standing in the middle of the street, firm, not moving, staring straight at her and she had to abruptly turn the steering wheel and swerve to the right. This did not make any sense. Was her mind playing games on her due to the shock she was experiencing? One week after her move, Laura told her that there was a man, who had always lived in Grabtown and has always been perceived as strange, because he was a loner with no friends and because of other reasons Lola did not care to remember. Her friend had also told her that after his wife had died, the people in town said that he had turned mad. Small-town gossip, Lola and Laura thought and laughed about it with their first glass of Sauvignon on Lola's new front porch. Her favorite wine, the one she had been given by Laura as a welcome gift.

Was it him? She occasionally saw him on River Street, the main street near her house and she could recognize him because of Laura's detailed descriptions, which she always found dull and unnecessary. She has never been interested in gossip and, instead of talking about people she did not know, she preferred having deeper conversations about the meaning of life, freedom, novels, astrology or travelling.

Last Friday, while she was petting her slightly overweight cat Luna, on the kitchen's windowsill, the man Laura had told her about, was looking at her from across the street. Lola

did not think much about it, as she was on the phone with her mom, talking about how stressful it had been moving and working at the same time, but reassuring her that she was happy to finally live outside of the fast-paced city and enjoying the quiet small-town life.

Now it all seemed to make sense. People living in Grabtown were saying he had turned mad, and she had also felt rather strange when talking about him. He appeared frequently... and now is he standing in the middle of the street? *Did he want me to get hurt?* No, it does not make any sense. The strange sinking feeling was getting worse, and Lola felt the urge to call someone. Mike, the Ambulance, the Police, Laura, my Mom? Whom? *Anyone*. Her phone was nowhere within reach. She was nervously and hastily touching everything she could reach, still sore from the crash, hoping to get hold of her phone.

After having forgotten her phone at home in San Francisco and realizing it while on the flight to Costa Rica five years ago, she has never, not once again, forgotten her phone at home. *But where is it then?* Her hands started shaking more uncontrollably than before. Now she could identify her feelings, it was not the wine of the night before, the adrenaline or the shock - it was *fear*. It was her gut feeling telling her that something was just not right, and her gut feeling had always been right. But she couldn't think rationally. *Calm down, Lola. Calm down.*

In that moment, there was someone knocking at the side window.

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colonialism

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiss

by anna brunner

“Captain Brrrkekt, we have spotted something krrr rather peculiar on our morning patrol”, said Lieutenant Trreknat with one of her six legs raised to an orderly salute.

Trreknat had only recently been promoted to the position of First Lieutenant. After having worked tirelessly as a soldier for two months and having proven herself as a remarkably competent platoon leader, Trreknat knew that this promotion was well earned; but she also hoped that it was only the start of her long officer career in the Antillary. So, it was only natural that she did her best to suppress the nervousness she felt shaking through her six legs as she addressed Captain Brrrkekt for the first time outside of a designated training environment.

“Lieutenant,” Brrrkekt slowly adjusted her antennas, “Trreknat, what seems to be the problem? Any signs of attack on the southern borders?”

“No Captain, last week’s counterattack was successful. No sign of the enemy at the southern borders. But on today’s morning patrol, my platoon has spotted an undefinable entity close to the south-eastern water border, which I am unsure of how to deal with,” Trreknat responded while hastily lowering the almost forgotten saluting leg.

“An undefinable entity you say, krrr... . Can you describe it? Do you suspect it could be harmful to the colony?” the Captain inquired.

“Certainly Captain. It is situated on one of the deceased and deformed trees the bipeds have imported into our territory. It is bendy, similar in colour to flower pollen, and the length of approximately 38 soldiers lined up next to each other. One side is very firm and resilient to touch as well as bite, the other is significantly softer, stickier and similar to pulp; this side also has some long strings. Since it is placed on the bipeds’ tree, I suspect it belongs to them. While I am not completely sure of its purpose, it is emitting a strong sweet odour and one could thus

suspect it to be the bipeds' food source." Trrekmat internally nodded, pleased with this well-rounded report.

"I see. Since this does not appear to pose any immediate danger, I assume you are contemplating whether this object could be of use to the colony?"

"Exactly."

The Captain tapped each of her hind legs twice: "Since you suspect the entity to stem from the bipeds, caution is warranted. Nevertheless, some of their strange belongings are well suited building materials. Send out a troop of soldiers to bring it to the colony. I will have to see it myself before making any further decisions." Before awaiting Trrekmat's closing salute as response to the order, Captain Brrrkekt had already turned her abdomen towards Lieutenant Trrekmat and rushed through the masses of off-duty soldiers to eventually disappear into one of the many tunnels leading out of the bigger chamber.

Trrekmat beckoned a soldier, who had listened to the interaction from a respectable distance, closer and ordered her to gather a transport group, ready to leave before the next shift change. She could sense from the soldiers slightly drooping antennas that she was not happy about putting in the overtime caused by the discovery of the undefinable entity.

* * *

After having successfully transferred the unfamiliar entity to the colony's entrance, Trrekmat's soldiers were gladly discharged into their well-deserved and long overdue break. And Trrekmat would have been lying if she were to deny longing for a decent meal herself.

Nevertheless, Trrekmat wanted to prove her dedication to the task by waiting for the Captain and her advisors to finish their observation of the pollen-coloured something; even though she was certain that another company would be tasked with whatever the next steps would be. Still, she watched as they scuttled around and on top of it, as they pinched it with their many legs, touched it with their antennas and lastly even dared to nibble at it. All things she had already done in the early morning.

Such a close examination was necessary as the colony was reasonably suspicious whenever they encountered something that was connected to the bipeds. For since the advancement of the bipeds into the colony's territory, many a curious thing had been left behind: From thin, smooth leaves that reflect the light in a similar manner to morning dew to brown sticks that, though being much softer and lighter than branches, were enveloped by a smouldering smell, similar to the one emitted by trees that are suddenly lit up by a blinding ray of light during a rainstorm. Discoveries such as these did not serve the colony any purpose and were either left at their places or, if obstructing an important route, carried to a more remote spot. However, sometimes what the bipeds left behind was discovered to be safe to consume and thus served the colony as nourishment.

While the Captain was still busy examining one of the sticky ropes, the curious crowd of onlookers suddenly fell silent, and a path was created from the entrance of the colony's nest to the Captain. Slowly making her way through the crowd, Lieutenant Trrekmat spotted someone towering over the rest of the onlookers. The Queen. This explained the sudden silence. Her royal highness very rarely left her safe chambers in the lowest parts of the nest. She approached the mysterious entity and touched the stickier pulpy part with one of her front legs,

which caused her antennas to wiggle intensely. After an authoritatively brief exchange with the Captain, she strode back along the same path. Thereby vanishing in the same manner she had previously appeared: Quickly and quietly.

Trrekmat was just close enough to hear the Captain giving orders to 40 soldiers, who should break up the entity into smaller pieces that were to be transported to the Queen's chambers. Almost imperceptibly she heard Captain Brrrkekt mumble: "Well, the flies seem to like it. That's a good sign," before she tapped each of her hind legs twice and hurried past Trrekmat to the colony's entrance.

* * *

Finally, Trrekmat found time to have a meal and while doing so also catch up with her sister. Technically, all workers in the colony were sisters of course, but one usually does not refer to others as their sister unless having hatched from eggs in the same chamber. While Trrekmat had gone into the Antillary, her sister Prrknet had developed an interest in farming. Given the size of this colony, counting roughly two million individuals, farming was by no means a small-scale endeavour. Large areas around the colony had become designated farming zones holding large herds of aphids. Trrekmat found Prrknet at her usual spot, where she could easily oversee a medium-sized herd of aphids chomping away at the juiciest part of the plant's stem Trrekmat was currently climbing up on.

"Prrknet! So good to see you. How are you doing?"

Prrknet turned around and wiggled her antennas excitedly: "Hello Trrekmat, I've just finished milking. Are you hungry? I have some time before I need to bring them into their nests." And because Prrknet knew her sister too well, she did not even wait for an answer before gathering some honeydew from the parcel she would later take back to the colony.

"I'm starving. You wouldn't believe the day I –," Trrekmat started before being rudely interrupted by shouts coming from the bottom of the plant.

"Lieutenant Trrekmat! I have heard back from my cousin, the one who krrr lives near a biped colony¹. She warns that while the bipeds and other species use the pollen-coloured thing as sustenance, its outer shell that can be very harmful krrr when consumed in larger quantities²," the soldier reported hastily.

Hearing this, Trrekmat had to swallow hard.

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¹ Though ants are generally very hard-working, they do love to gossip, also across their own colony's borders. Over time, this has developed into an efficient information system, where each colony set out runners that deliver messages to friendly neighbouring colonies if need be.

² Banana peels are commonly used among hobby gardeners to repel ants. The fruit's skin contains a compound called tannin that is also used in insecticides and thus poisonous to ants when consumed.



gastarbeiter

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiss

by emilija kodić

Today is one of those wonderful, blissful, sunny spring days that make me terribly miss you all. I am over the moon happy for you. I am happy that you are happy, and healthy, and that you have everything that you need for a decent life. I guess I just wished you were all of those things here with me.

I'm sorry if I am bothering you too much. I am nothing but an old man desperately trying to stay in touch with his family. I am also desperately trying for my family to stay in touch with me. I would shatter to pieces if I ever lost you.

I was born in 1961. Our village was in an area that was considered pretty rural at the time, the nearest hospital was pretty far away, and I was born right there, in the house that I grew up in. Of course, it didn't look nearly as nice as it does now. Nothing that you know of this house had been as it is now. Now, when I think about it, it almost feels like I was living in some other world that ceased to exist long ago, as if I was in another dimension.

Times were tough when I was born, and I had always been aware of it. From as far as I can remember, I knew it – we were poor. We barely had enough to lead a somewhat decent life. Four of us lived in a two room house – your great-grandma, great-grandpa, great-great-grandma, and me, your grandpa. We did everything in those two rooms; we cooked there, ate, slept, had guests over, celebrated our saint patron's day...

The yard was different too. Unlike now, there was dirt everywhere and much less grass. A big mulberry tree was standing right next to the house, but you don't know about it because we cut it down way before you were born. Even your father barely remembers it. I loved that tree. I miss it terribly.

At that time, we had a cow, some pigs, and a couple of chickens. We had milk, and meat, and eggs. We made our own cheese. We had some land that we used to grow corn, some fruits and

vegetables, clover-grass to feed the animals. But that was about it. That was all we had. We couldn't really afford anything else. I had two sets of clothes - one for school, and one for home.

But, nevertheless, my parents managed to raise me. Whether they tried their hardest is a tough question to answer. In all honesty, I avoid thinking about it because I am scared. What if I realized that they didn't try hard enough, that they could've done more? I don't know if I'd be able to cope with it. But I did realize at an early age that I had to try harder if I wanted to provide my family with everything they needed, and more than what they needed.

In 1991, your father was born and I was absolutely overjoyed. I felt happiness unknown to me before. But I was also terrified. I was terrified of not being able to provide my child with more than two sets of clothes. Oh God, how scared I was. So I started working harder than ever. I took extra jobs, I worked 12 hour shifts, I saved money as much as I could. Sometimes, if I was far away from home, I would sleep right there on the construction site, on a piece of styrofoam. Usually during winter I would have no money, and in those instances, I borrowed it from friends. And, little by little, your grandma and I, we managed to build our own house. A house that had more than two rooms. Truth be told, it took us around ten years, but the feeling of having something that is ours, something that we worked for and managed to achieve with nobody's help was indescribable.

Did I try my hardest? I sure hope I did. Once again, I was scared of thinking about it. Because what if I realized that I could've done more?

Years went by and your father kept growing. He had always been a really happy child. And as he was getting older, he was becoming more and more aware of just how hard I and his mother had been working in order to provide him with things we did not have. He played football as a child and had all the equipment he needed for it. I could only dream of that when I was his age. He went to school trips with his friends, and later, when they got older, on summer holidays. He had a computer and a cell phone with a camera. He had a bicycle and roller blades. And he got an education that I and his mother never got. And he was grateful for it, of that I am sure.

I was pretty happy to see that he had a strong work ethic. Once he graduated, he started working with me, and I was really glad that it turned out that way. And he had a really good salary. Not because he was my son, but because he really earned it.

He got married in the meantime to your mom. And in 2018, you were born. My first grandchild. Everybody in the family was ecstatic, especially your mom and dad. But you know what? I looked at your father and in his eyes I saw the same terror that I felt when he was born. Will I be able to give my child everything she needs?

You see, the situation in our country had never been perfect, but people somehow managed. Over the years, salaries became lower and lower, and getting a job was becoming harder than ever. And you had just been born. Your parents had someone to raise and take care of now. And a couple of months later your father got an offer to work in another country and he took it. I remember the day you packed your bags and left as if it was yesterday. I felt like everything around me was sped up and I was moving in slow motion. To be completely honest, I have no idea how I survived that day, and all the days after it. I was drowned in sadness.

And that, my dear, is why I miss you so much today. Because you live in another country now, one where your parents will be able to provide you with everything you need. A country where you can have more than two sets of clothes.

It is a beautiful day outside. It's May, it's getting warmer, the grass is getting greener, and I can hear the birds chirping. I am sitting on the balcony when my cell phone dings telling me that I have a WhatsApp message from your father. I open it and instantly smile. It is a photo of a drawing that you made. "Look!" he writes. "She drew you and her together in our garden back at home."

I talked to your father last week and he told me how you all miss home. And just as I believe that you and your mother are both eager to come back here, I also know that he's excitedly and impatiently counting the days until you do.

I know how much it hurt him to move to another country. I know how hard it was for him to leave everything he had ever known behind him and go somewhere he had to start from scratch. I see it in his eyes how much it hurts him not being with his whole family and his friends. Believe me, I am perfectly aware of all that. But one day, in 20 years, when he sees the wonderful person that I'm sure you'll grow up to be, he'll truly understand why he had to do it.

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wilting hearts

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by ksenja žnidaršič

July 23

The sun began to set as he sat down on the bench, his hand tracing along the half-rotten wood that seemed to hold so many untold stories. *It's a sight to be seen*, he reminded himself once again as his pants slowly turned into tranquil breaths. The sun cast its rays on the lake, creating a perfect reflection on the icy-like surface. The trees seemed to bloom with such a vigorous green that he could feel life trickling back into his worn-out body, pumping out of his fragile heart that sometimes felt like a ticking bomb in his chest. Above the lake, huge mountains rose with such sharp peaks that you were almost afraid of the sting as you ran your hands through the view. He chuckled, shaking his head as his eyes lingered on the cane in front of him.

“I see you have beaten me to the punch,” a hoarse voice said behind him, causing his heart to almost skip a beat. He did not need to turn his head at the person behind him. He had known that voice for over 60 years, he had known it even when it changed from a childlike one to a more mature one. It was the most beautiful voice he had ever heard, full of love and compassion. From no one would he hear such a welcoming and kind voice but the old wrinkly man who sat down beside him.

“I always do,” he responded, admiring how more wrinkles appeared under his friend’s glasses as he shot a smile towards him.

“Do tell me,” his friend started, stretching his arm on the rest, “will you ever let me be the first one here?” he asked, diverting his gaze towards the lake that seemed to slowly swallow the sun with all its beauty.

James laughed lightly, putting his hand on his friend’s shoulder. “I do not think I will, Frank.” He tapped him lightly and put his hand back on his knees, feeling the warmth of the trousers that clung to his injured leg. “Do you remember when we went up that mountain? The view

was breathtaking,” he reminisced, getting lost in the memory that was now so distant that he thought it did not even exist.

“I remember you falling on your nose when you wanted to impress those two girls,” Frank snickered, turning his head towards James, and raised his eyebrow. The last bit of the sun’s rays stroked his old skin, illuminating the wrinkles on his aged face that seemed to hide all secrets of life. “We were young back then, and full of energy,” he then said in a melancholy tone and sighed loudly, diverting his gaze back towards the scenery in front of him.

“I do not know about you, my friend, but I am still young and full of energy!” James joked, vigorously shaking his head as if he wanted to shake out the feeling of lost time. He was absolutely certain that everyone his age believed that they had wasted their time, that they had let themselves down as they let time slip by completely unnoticed. Perhaps it was the fear of the unknown end, or perhaps he actually regretted how everything turned out. He did not know and could never know. All that he was certain of was that he could not change anything, the past was the past and no amount of worry and regret could alter it.

Frank smiled, yet it was one of those sad smiles that broke your heart in a million pieces. A smile of remorse, of lost time, a smile of forlorn hope. “You know, old friend, there are plenty of things that I regret in my life that I wish I hadn’t done, the demons of the past are constantly swarming above me, waiting for the chance to swallow me whole,” he turned to James, his eyes glimmering with grief, “yet everything does not feel so bad when I am with you, sitting on this bench right here, enjoying the sunset above the place where we grew up.” The misery disappeared from his eyes and was replaced with a small glimpse of faith so persistent that it could never be put out.

James did not want to admit it, yet those words warmed his frail heart to the core. It was moments like these that made their friendship last decades, complete and utter support was never put under question with Frank and he was convinced that it never would be.

“Now, let us not get all teary,” Frank interrupted, withdrawing James from his deep thoughts. “I must leave you now, my missus is expecting me home for dinner.” He slowly stood up, leaning all his weight on the bench as he pushed himself away. His posture was a bit crooked, giving away that he had been on this Earth for many years, which had taken a great toll on his body. With a bent physique, he turned away from his friend and started to toddle away, only to stop dead in his tracks as his friend called after him.

“What are you having for dinner?” James yelled, his voice coming out hoarse and cracked.

Frank turned around with a youthful grin plastered on his face, “my favourite, sauerkraut and schnitzel! I guess I have been good since my old lady has decided to spoil me a bit,” he added with a sly wink.

James raised his hand in the air, feeling how the cold breeze began stroking his pale cheeks, “until tomorrow!”

“Until tomorrow.”

July 24

It was starting to lightly drizzle. Small drops of water covered the bench, the drops soaking into the wood that barely held the bench together. Dark clouds covered the mountaintops, creating a gloomy atmosphere that swallowed you into the darkness without any remorse. The lake remained still, as if it were dead, with only occasional ripples that disrupted the calm water. James was already seated at the bench, his unsteady hand holding a black umbrella above his exposed head. He liked the smell of rain, how it covered the asphalt and left such a distinct smell that reminded you of summer dreams and loves. It was a smell full of memories and happiness that spread alongside him like a wool blanket around a small child, offering nothing but comfort and affection.

“My, my, not even a storm would stop you from coming here,” Frank uttered as he sat down beside James, trying to regain his breath that slipped out from his lungs. He leaned back on the bench, slightly tilting his head towards James’ as to shield himself from the rain.

James chuckled, moving the umbrella closer to Frank to make sure that he would not get wet. “I could say the same thing to you, my friend. I have been coming to this bench for many decades and I do not intend to miss it even for one day,” he remarked, his voice full of pride and boast. This had been a secret deal that they had made many years ago, it was not necessary to actually utter this promise, yet they vowed to meet each day at exactly 8 pm on this bench and they took this promise quite seriously.

“Ah, James,” Frank sighed, extending his hand away from the umbrella to catch the raindrops in his palm, “do you ever think of death?”, he inquired, his eyes glued on the raindrops that bounced off his hand.

James narrowed his eyebrows and shot a questioning look at his friend, wondering why he brought up such a dark topic. “I do, Frankie,” he admitted, his voice sounding defeated and sullen, “I think everyone our age thinks of death almost every day. It is waiting for us, stretching its hands around our bodies, anticipating the time when it will be allowed to squeeze.”

“Are you afraid?” Frank asked, shifting his gaze to his friend. His eyes expressed such sincerity and sorrow that could not be described with simple words.

James recognised the peril that his friend was feeling, yet in that moment he was of no help. How should he answer such a question, should he be sincere and tell him how terrified he was? Or should he try to make him feel better and lie through his gritted teeth until his friend would be calm? He did not know and so he opted for the one choice he knew was right: acknowledgement. “I know you are afraid, Frankie,” he started, taking a deep breath as to gather courage to continue such a bleak conversation. “I think everyone is afraid, even though they say otherwise. Perhaps it would be easier if we knew what happens afterwards, if we could just prepare ourselves for whatever is waiting for us. It is the not knowing that kills us in the end.”

Frank shrugged, pulling his hand back from the rain and placing it on his leg. “It just seems so unnatural, you know. To think that one day you will stop existing just like that, one day you are there and the other you are not.” He sighed loudly, tracing his hand through the remaining grey hair that he had left. “I was convinced that I would be ready when I got old, that I would accept death as an old friend and go willingly. I thought this was something that comes with age, but it does not, James. I am afraid and I am not ready to go.”

James's heart was breaking as he listened to Frank's darkest fears. He always had a perfect picture of him, one that showed a proud, fearless man that could achieve anything that he set out to get, yet that painting shattered and all that was left was a small man that could not let go of his troubles. James put his arm around Frank and lightly squeezed his shoulder, signalling to him that he was not alone. "Oh, Frankie, do not get worked up because of this, you have plenty of years left, do not worry. Besides, I still have not gotten that dinner from you; the one you owe me after you lost the poker game!" James laughed, tracing his hand up and down Frank's shoulder in an effort to comfort him.

Shaking his head, Frank took a deep breath and leaned back onto the wet bench. His eyes never left the scenery in front of him, they only transformed into a sparkling glimmer of hope, "you know Valerie is pregnant," he told James, who could barely contain the enthusiasm that shot through his body.

"That is amazing, Frank," he said with a slight laughter evident in his voice. He knew that Frank was looking forward to having grandchildren, to finally having someone that he could spoil and shower with affection.

"They already picked out the names," Frank then proceeded, tearing away from the scenery before him and turning to James. "If it is a girl, she will be Edith, you know like that French singer to whom we used to listen, when we were in the army."

"Ah," James sighed, looking up at the grey sky above him, "Edith Piaf, the one love that we actually shared," he chuckled, shifting his attention back to his friend, who stared at him with eyes wide open. "And if it is a boy?"

"And if it is a boy, his name will be James," Frank softly stated, the corners of his mouth turning slightly upwards as he observed the surprised expression on his friend's face.

For a couple of seconds, James lost his ability to speak or even to breathe. The air got stuck in his throat, pushing out the tears from the corners of his eyes that slowly trickled down his crimson cheeks. "You mean to tell me ..." he started, finding himself unable to proceed with whatever nonsense he was about to say.

Frank slowly nodded his head, taking in the bewilderment that overtook his friend. "They asked me to choose the name, they only wished that it is meaningful. In that exact moment I knew that it has to be James for no other name do I like more than yours, my old friend, and it would be an honour to have someone carry your name forward and grace the planet with such kindness as you did." He paused for a moment, eyeing James, whose eyes were full of tears and whose lips trembled with force. "Now, now, do not get too cocky about this," he continued, changing the tone to a more playful one. "He will also have a middle name, Frank, so do not think of stealing all the thunder!" he exulted, wiggling his finger at James, who burst out in laughter at his remark.

"You know, that boy is in for quite a wild ride if he gets both our names!" James finally declared as Frank began to stand up, leaving the safe haven under the umbrella. "I do hope you will not teach him all the tricks that we used to play," he then added, standing up as quickly as his old legs permitted him so as to not leave Frank exposed to the rain.

"On the contrary, my friend, I intend to teach him all we did and much more, you just wait and see," he chuckled, tapping James on his shoulder, and looked towards his path home. "Now, I

must go. Same time and place tomorrow?” he asked, lingering for a moment, as if he was not ready to leave.

“I would not miss it in the world, Frankie.”

July 25

Over the night, the clouds disappeared and sunshine once again blessed the world with its presence, rising the temperatures and bringing out all the wild animals who were in dire need of water. They spent their day by the lake, quickly scurrying away whenever an intruder appeared, disrupting the celestial essence of tranquillity, and reappearing when they could not hear even the slightest crackle of a leaf. The lake was like a secluded piece of heaven, vibrant in colours and rich with sounds that could be heard only by someone who listened most patiently and sharply.

Perhaps that was the reason why Frank and James decided to meet on that exact bench by the lake. It offered them a safe haven, a place where all the worries of the world disappeared and all that was left was them, alone, undisturbed and content. No matter how many years would pass, how many people would come and go, how many trees would grow and fall, they would remain, safely enwrapped, in their own personal bubble of mirth and buoyancy.

Slowly, James came trotting over to the bench, inhaling deeply as he sat down on the same exact spot as he did every day. He put his cane in between his legs and rested his hands on the handle, enjoying the sun that stroked his face, warming up his rough skin. As he observed how the birds flew by, his mind wandered back to the previous day, and a slight smile was drawn on his lips. He was touched, deeply touched by Frank’s statement, yet what made him even more happier was the fact that Frank would finally get a grandchild. Nothing meant more to James than to see his friend overjoyed and excited. James let out a slight chuckle, squinting his eyes in disbelief as he ran his hand through his hair. He could already hear his wife’s nagging voice in his mind, fussing over how he always put Frank first instead of her. He had tried to explain to her numerous times that he had a strong bond with Frank, a friendship that lasted for decades, but it all fell on deaf ears, resulting in stubborn silences and ugly glares.

James sighed loudly, glancing at the old watch that was wrapped around his wrist. Frank was already a couple of minutes late, and even though that was something completely ordinary, James could not help but to feel a bit anxious. Small drops of sweat began to trickle down his forehead, leaving behind a sticky surface that sent itching spasms throughout his face. He traced his thumb back and forth over the palm of his other hand as his heartbeat began to pound more vigorously with each passing second. He could not understand why he was overreacting, why this strange feeling that twisted the insides of his torso was present in his stomach. He must be worrying about nothing, he thought to himself, trying to think about anything else other than Frank’s tardiness.

The sun slowly began to set, sending a gush of cool breeze over the lake, urging the birds to find another place to nest. The lake turned into the utmost bright pink and orange shades, making it look like it was on fire. Water splashed against the shore, urging a fierce battle that it was bound to lose as the earth swallowed it instantly. Suddenly, everything came to a halt, and for a minute there, James thought that the world had stopped spinning; for he had, finally, realised what his heart had been telling him all this time.

His breath got stuck in his throat, tears came splashing out of his eyes racing down his cheeks to see which one would fall on the bright grass first. James raised his hand and wiped away his tears with his index finger, trying to calm down the tornado of emotions that was present in his mind. He took three deep breaths, exhaling loudly each time, wishing that his anger and grief would also leave his body. He leaned back on the bench, tracing alongside the free spot next to him that was occupied by his best friend only the day before. The bench that used to give him so much happiness and enjoyment was now suddenly surrounded by anguish and poignancy. With each stroke that his fingers laid on the dark wood, his heart broke a little, leaving behind an old and sad man. With sullen eyes, he turned once more towards the lake, wondering how it could remain so beautiful on a day that was now branded by grief and misery. James did not know what to do nor what to think, he kept wishing and hoping that Frank's voice would pull him out of this nightmare, yet somehow he knew that that was not possible, it would never be possible. His mind tried playing tricks on him, giving him false hope that perhaps he was mistaken, maybe Frank forgot about their meeting, but those were only empty words full of deceit and treachery. He knew Frank and he was completely sure that he would never miss their meeting, no matter what, unless ... No. He could not say it, he could not think it, it was too much for his poor fragile heart. He inhaled deeply and grabbed the edge of the bench with both his hands, feeling how the wood began to crack under his pressure. His eyes were full of water as he looked at the image before him, his mind wandering to all the conversations that he had with Frank right there on the bench. For a second, his heart fluttered at the lovely memories playing in his head, before once again settling down and becoming dark and hushed.

With unsteady movements, James pulled himself up and balanced his body on his weak legs. Placing his hand over his heart, he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, seeing the images that the smells pictured in his head. Finally, he opened his eyes and began to walk away from the memory-filled place, before stopping in his tracks to take a final glance at it.

“Non, je ne regrette rien.” And so, he limped away from the one place and person that offered him solace in an overcrowded place, vowing to return there each day for the rest of his life.

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...flowers,
...gray towers,
...flowers,
...imbowers
...Shalott.
...halo
...ou.
...low-veil
...
...Side the
...By slow hors
...The shallop + flit
...Skimming dov
...
But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz

kaleidoscope

by maria eberl

“Slipping from unsteady hand;
shattered, to the ground it went.
Broken, like the shiny crystal ...”

Damn it, what rhymes with crystal? I felt the urge to take my notebook and rip it apart. If only I could throw it against the wall and make it shatter, like the smashed gemstone from the poem that just did not want to flow from my hand onto the page...

This was me about a year ago, looking at my almost blank page, trying desperately to transfer my complicated, fragmented thoughts onto a piece of paper. Writing the story of your life is not easy, you know, neither in word nor in deed. You get lost, you make mistakes, you lose control. And the past is what it is, and it can't be changed. But my poem, at least, was under my control and back then, I was determined to find the perfect words – the words that would do my feelings justice and allow me to finally express who I was, who my past had made me.

While I was still pacing around the room, almost crying from frustration over not being able to articulate myself, my phone rang. I didn't feel like answering, especially when the display showed a number I did not recognize. In hindsight, I am glad I did pick it up. This phone call changed a lot. I would even go as far as to say that it helped the fragmented pieces of my life come back together. In the end, this call was what enabled me to complete my poem.

To make you understand what my writing has to do with this unknown caller, I need to take you back in time, to the day, last year in July, when I was sitting in a café, nervously waiting for the caller to appear.

I had already arrived half an hour before the time of our meeting. I had chosen a table outside, right under a large oak tree that provided shelter from the summer sun. Shaking, I grabbed my cup of tea, trying to quiet my overactive nerves with the soothing taste of camomile. It wasn't

working and I had already regretted my decision to order a hot drink on a hot day. Herbal tea usually calmed me down. Not today. Holding the cup containing the steamy liquid made my sweaty hands even sweatier, and my heart was beating like crazy. Were it like the pace of a rabbit's heart before, it immediately sped up to match the pace of a colibri's when I saw a young girl approaching my table. She was fourteen years old, the same age I had been when my whole life had changed. Beautiful - with her long and shiny red hair, her slim figure, and some subtle freckles on her cheeks. She smiled at me and took the empty seat at my table.

Being a teenager can be challenging, and terrifying too, at times. Being fourteen was terrifying for me. To be honest, I probably faced more challenges at fourteen than the majority of teenagers do at the same age, and most would say that I only have myself to blame for that. They are right. It was my fault and I do blame myself. However, I don't hate myself for it. Yes, I made a mistake. But who doesn't? Show me one teenager who has never made a mistake or done anything against the rules. I dare to say that such a person doesn't exist. The only difference between them and me is that my mistake had longer-lasting consequences. It would have been nice to get away with a telling-off from my parents and a week of house arrest. But life doesn't always work this way. Some errors can't be undone that easily.

When the result of my error smiled at me there at the table, I started to ask myself whether 'mistake' was even the right word for what had happened. We looked at each other awkwardly. "Hi, I'm Amelia", she introduced herself and stretched out her hand over the table for a greeting. I shook it and finally found the courage to smile back at her when I responded with: "I know".

Amelia. It was the name I had chosen for her fourteen years ago.

It had all started with a sleepover at my house. My parents were out of town for the weekend, and they had allowed me to throw a pyjama party with my three best girlfriends under the condition that the house would be clean on their return. What they didn't know was that we had also invited a few boys and that one of them was 17; old enough to buy us a few bottles of wine. When two of those bottles were empty and we were already fairly drunk – being far too young and not used to the effects of alcohol – we decided to use one of them for a game of spin the bottle. Long story short, the oldest boy and I started making out and eventually retreated to my bedroom while the rest of the group kept playing and giggling in the living room. I was old enough to know that babies weren't delivered by storks. In other words, I was well aware of the consequences my actions could have. But I was also drunk and didn't think about these things right then. It was all just a worst-case scenario buried somewhere in the back of my head that would never become reality. I only remember that I felt a strange sense of pride for being the first one in my circle of friends to lose my virginity. Thinking about this now makes me feel terribly embarrassed. But well, the past is what it is, and it can't be changed. When you are young, you care so much about what others think of you. I'm glad I am no longer a teenager.

After said sleepover, him and me decided to go our separate ways. He was from a different town and went to a different school and we were too young to be interested in a serious relationship anyway, so it was easy to keep on living life as usual, as if nothing had ever happened. A couple of weeks later, I noticed for the first time that I had missed my period. Not unusual for a fourteen-year-old to have irregular periods, or so I told myself. I ignored the obvious because I didn't want it to be true.

Five weeks later, still no bleeding. Time to face the music.

The only person I told was my best friend. Louise was a real friend. In fact, she still is. She was there for me through everything, and she never judged me. Back when I suspected to be pregnant, she offered to buy the pregnancy test for me because I was too ashamed to do it myself. I will never forget the judgemental look on the sales assistant's face when she handed Louise the test – a look that was actually meant for me, not for her. While I, who always acted cool around everyone else, wanted to hide my face in shame, the usually shy Louise just grimly stared back at the woman and told her to mind her own business. I wanted to kiss her, and I am still deeply grateful for her support to this day. Now, she's the unofficial auntie of my two other kids.

She was the one who hugged me when I broke down in tears over the two pink lines on the test.

Although this moment had felt like the end of the world for me, it was only the beginning of the difficulties that lay ahead. Telling my parents and explaining to them how it had happened was the first hurdle. It turned out to be the most manageable one. After their speechlessness and shock, they were supportive and reassured me that they would always love me, no matter what happened. In the following months, I often watched my mom doing chores around the house with a worried expression on her face. Whenever she noticed me, she tried to hide her frown and assured me that we would manage somehow. How – I think she did not really know herself. How... I did not know either. With me still in school and both my parents working full time, who would take care of the baby? I sometimes raised this question with my parents. They never gave me an explicit answer, but they always hugged me and told me that we would figure it out – together, as a family. What would I have done without them? They gave me the support I needed to keep me upright during this period of my life.

Dealing with the reactions of my classmates was far harder than coping with my parents' initial reactions. Some acted in a sympathetic way, others openly made fun of me, but all of them, without exception, talked about me behind my back. At least I could count on my three best friends, especially Louise. When someone said a bad word about me, she defended me like a lioness. The three of them made the situation bearable and looking back at it, it wasn't all too bad.

The hardest part came at the end, and I am not talking about giving birth. The worst part was holding my baby for the first time, after sixteen hours of blood, sweat, and tears, and having to make the most difficult decision of my life.

I had always seen myself becoming a mother one day. I had always wanted to have a daughter; I just didn't think that my dream would come true so early. But there she was, my little girl, looking at me with bright, intelligent eyes while I marvelled over the little miracle in my arms.

I had tears in my eyes when I told the nurse that her name was Amelia. I named her after Amelia Earhart, the brave, strong woman who had been the first female to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. That was what I wanted my daughter to do – I wanted her to fly. And if she was supposed to get a chance to spread her wings, I would have to let her go.

With a heavy heart I entrusted her to the nurse, leaving her and my contact data at the hospital, just in case my daughter ever wanted to find out where she came from and why her mother had given her away. The following year was the hardest of my life. I felt empty and like I had lost a part of myself. I cried more in these twelve months than in the subsequent thirteen years combined. Afterwards, I slowly but surely recovered and gained strength from the conviction that I had done the right thing.

The hardest part while growing up was starting new relationships. How do you tell a potential partner that you have a child somewhere that you don't even know? It always cost me quite an effort to find the right words to do so. But eventually, I found the man of my dreams who is now my beloved husband. I'm telling you this to make it clear that I am happy with my life. I have everything I ever dreamt of. Sometimes, I can't even believe it and need to pinch myself to make sure I am not just dreaming. But apparently, it is reality. I, who had felt so lost and broken in my youth, managed to piece my life back together and to make it something I love.

The only thing that always confused me and cast a slight shadow over my otherwise perfect existence was the fragment from my past that had been lost for so long.

While I was still reflecting over my personal history and got lost in spiralling thoughts once again, the beautiful girl in front of me was babbling away happily, telling me about her life, her school, and her parents. Her parents ... How strange it was to have a child without being a parent. I may be her mother, but I would never be her mom. Somebody else had filled that role. I did not make this observation grudgingly. Amelia had spent her childhood with two loving parents instead of a single mom who was still a child herself, and that was exactly what I had wanted for her. As she told me stories about her friends and her interests, I started feeling at ease. She had such an infectious smile and a way of brightening my mood just by talking to me. I wondered whether she had that effect only on me or on everyone else she interacted with. I cannot describe how happy it made me to see that my daughter had a good life.

And it may be selfish, but it also made me happy to realize that she didn't hold any grudge against me for putting her up for adoption. Her lack of reproach encouraged me to tell her my entire story when the question about my past and about the reasons why I hadn't kept her came up. I, once more, had to convince myself that I was actually awake when she told me that she understood.

It amazed me even more to see her eyes light up when I told her that I was happily married and that she had two little half-siblings. "Maybe I can babysit sometime", was her comment. I was so glad; I could have cried.

Encountering her for the first time after so many years was hard to describe. Having a child at such a young age may have felt as tumultuous as travelling on a sea stirred by a heavy storm, but seeing her now, colourful as a rainbow that emerged after the storm clouds disappeared, made the whole journey seem worthwhile.

I learned a lesson that day, one that seems obvious to me now but wasn't before: Rainbows do not exist without rain. Giving my daughter away had felt like losing a fragment of myself. But everyone struggles, and everyone is broken in some way. Even light needs to be broken in order to make a rainbow. So, I finally stopped seeing my past as a cloud that hangs over my present, and I understood that life is not a perfectly shaped crystal. It is more like a swirl of colours, like in a kaleidoscope where fragmented pieces work together to form a beautiful whole. After this realization, I let go of my need to find the perfect words to express my feelings. What is perfection, anyway? Let me tell you, perfection is an imperfect concept and striving for it leads nowhere.

Soon after I gave up on my perfectionism, my fourth child was born. It is called 'Kaleidoscope' and it is my finished poem.

Slipping from unsteady hand;
shattered, to the ground it went.
Its perfect shape, its splendour – dying,
cold and broken it was lying,
in million pieces on the floor.
Its beauty – gone – forever more.

The crystal's scattered shards of glass,
tell a story of the past.
Of how one moment, one mistake,
can make a whole existence break.
So there the crystal on the floor,
was mourning what's gone – forever more.

But then a little ray of light,
lit up the room, all warm and bright.
And there it found, in dismal state,
the mess the crystal's fall had made.
It soon decided, for empathy's sake:
“To help the poor creature, I, too, will break.”

And the light showed the crystal a truth unspoken -
that rainbows are born when light is broken.
As thousands of colours danced through the sphere,
a wonderful fact became crystal clear:
While perfection is rigid and easily breaks,
real beauty is able to change its shape.
So the light and the crystal went on and on,
dancing to their silent song.
Telling a story of colour and hope,
in the spectrum of the kaleidoscope.

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*But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?*

photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiz

black sapphire

by sabrina eder

‘Mommy, do you want to play with me?’, a strident voice echoed through my bed chamber, tearing me out of my beautiful daydream about the good old days.

‘No, Matilda. Not now, please let me sleep. It’s Sunday’, I replied to my daughter’s question in a commanding tone. She nodded with an insincere grin on her pale countenance and closed the door behind her.

It’s been a year now since my dear Alfie paid the debt of nature. One day, he woke up with fever, coughing and sweating continuously. The doctor diagnosed him with tuberculosis, which guaranteed his death. It was heart-breaking to witness his physical condition deteriorate with each new day. For him, death was a release... but for me, it was the greatest loss of my life.

All that is left of him is our wonderful four-year old daughter, Matilda, a box containing some of his personal belongings, and the burden of our financial problems. This year has been extremely difficult. The death of my parents when I was only a young lassie left me with no relatives in Birmingham. As a result, I am trying to raise Matilda on my own and at the same time, manage a full-time job as a French teacher. I am fortunate that I can earn enough money to provide for food and a roof over our heads. However, I have had to take on the burden of Alfie’s debt. I knew we couldn’t stay in our house any longer. The landlord is continuing to increase the rent and I simply cannot afford it anymore. The only valuable thing I have left is the marriage gift, the sapphire, that has been inherited within Alfie’s family for four generations, but I vehemently refuse to sell it since the sentimental value that it carries is priceless to me.

“My sweet Alfie... what a kind and loving father and husband you were! You never failed to put a smile on our faces”, I mumbled to myself, in grief and in my heart the feeling of utter desolation and emptiness.

We both miss him dearly. And while I was dwelling in the past, tears were running down my cheek. Alfie was, indeed, a charming, clever and cunning gentleman but, unfortunately, involved in dirty business. If he really wanted something, he showed the willingness to do anything that was necessary. Although he never breathed a word of his business – I believe he tried to keep me out of it as much as possible in order to protect me – deep down I knew with certainty he even went as far as hurting others. There were days when he came back from work with bruises and wounds all over his torso. The thought alone of his excruciatingly displeasing sight makes my stomach turn. I can only imagine how much his body must have hurt. Though, he never even dared to groan and always masked his pain. He was a strong man.

* * *

It was almost midday, and I finally decided to get out of bed in order to solve Alfie's riddle. I pulled out the box with his personal belongings that I hid under our marital bed, at the side he used to sleep on. In the box, there was a letter he had written to me before he passed away.

I took it out and looked at the passage where it said: "Mah dear lassie, I have one more gift fur ye. On page 200 of mah favourite book – ye ken which one – it says where ye will find it. Yer wedding gift will hulf ye."

I have read his farewell letter over and over, every day since his death. The book he is referring to is *Arsène Lupin, Gentleman Burglar*, by Maurice Leblanc – there is no doubt about this. When he was still alive, he used to talk a lot about the book and how fascinated he was with the title character, Arsène, a French gentleman thief and master of disguise. My intuition tells me that his businesses and this book are not unrelated. For that, he read it too many times. It was not mere reading for pleasure, but rather a study and scrutiny of the text. He highlighted passages that he regarded to be of importance and made notes. The problem I encountered was, however, that on page 200, as he said in the letter, there was nothing written. Pure nothingness. Just an empty, blank piece of paper. Hence, I decided to have another look at my wedding gift. When Alfie and I married, he gave me a necklace with a dazzling royal blue sapphire – one of the most beautiful and rarest gemstones in the world. It is a family heirloom as it had belonged to his great grandmother, Elizabeth.

I looked for a black velvety jewel case that had my name, Amelia, on it and in which I stored the gemstone. After I had sat down at my desk in front of the window and opened it, I took out the necklace, holding the sapphire up in direct light and closely beholding it one more time. I was particularly examining it for possible indications such as engravings or something along those lines – but in vain. 365 days have passed and I have failed miserably in solving the enigma of Alfie's message. Disenchanted and furious, I burst into tears, accidentally dropping the sapphire onto the open page of Alfie's book.

All of a sudden, I was able to spot white and glowing letters through the sapphire on what I had previously been convinced of being a blank sheet. I leaned down in order to take a closer look. The gemstone, which had before been blue, abruptly turned its colour into an intense and deep black. It was now sparkling and shining magnificently as the sun rays were entering through the window. I had already been aware that this was, indeed, a very unique gemstone, but I had no idea how unique.

I was deliberately trying to finally put the pieces of Alfie's puzzle together while words were just streaming out of my mouth: "Alright! Think, Amelia, think! The sun rays. It must have something to do with the sun rays!!!"

After minutes of sharp thinking, I came to the conclusion that the sapphire must have undergone a lengthy process of grinding and polishing so that it changes colour and breaks light, when cast onto it, in such a particular way that it reveals secretly hidden information written with an apparently specially mixed ink invisible to the naked eye.

“Oh, Alfie. You’re a genius!”, I shouted and hopped out of my leather armchair, overwhelmed with the pure feeling of joy – something I had not felt in a very long time.

Filled with euphoria, I tried to pull myself together and took a deep inhalation, feeling how my thorax lifted and lungs filled with oxygen. I sat down on the chair and looked at my husband’s ultimate message. I took a pencil and a sheet of paper, writing down every word while reading his letter through the sapphire.

Mah dear wife,

Since yer now reading this letter, it means that ye found out how to use mah great grandmother’s sapphire. Take good care o’ it!

During mah lifetime, I admit I had many secrets, clatty secrets, that I wanted to keep from ye ‘n’ Matilda. Mah work was dangerous ‘n’ risky ‘n’ everybody that knew about it was automatically involved.

I would have ne’er forgiven myself if anythin’ happened to ye. I ne’er wanted to put that burden on yer shoulder, filling ye with fear ‘n’ worries... so I believed it was the only right decision to keep mah family out of mah businesses. Forgive me, mah love!

But mah businesses earned me a great fortune that I hereby bequeath to ye. It’s buried in a safe place in Craig Dunain. I need ye to pack yer things, leave Birmingham ‘n’ find it. Take oor daughter, Matilda, with ye. Ye can stay with mah family in Inverness as long as ye’ll want to. Do ye remember the place where we first met? We were beholding the dancing daffodils aroond Craig Dunain loch ‘n’ sitting on a wooden bench, on which we scratched the first letter of both oor names.

‘AA’ – Amelia ‘n’ Alfie. This is where ye will find the treasure. It’s buried beneath the bench.

W’ do not be sad that I ‘m not ‘ere. Remember! I will always be near. I loved ye ‘n’ always will. No, death did not defeat oor love, mah dear. Ye ‘n’ me, oor love persists for all eternity.

Yer loving husband,

Alfie MacGowan

A week has passed since I read Alfie's letter. I did what he said: Packed my bags and left the city. Matilda and I had already boarded the train to Inverness the day before and expected to arrive within an hour. I decided to bring her to Alfie's parents first so that they could take care of her while I would be looking for the bequeathal. I noticed that I was becoming more and more nervous the nearer we got to Craig Dunain.

The tension was constantly rising and I kept wondering what could be inside the buried box: "Maybe money or gold?" In order to calm my mind, I was softly touching Matilda's head that was resting on my lap, stroking through her red golden curls. She must have been quite tired because she has been sleeping deeply for some time now.

'Toot toot', the horn of the train sounded loudly, signaling our impending arrival. "Matilda, darling. You need to wake up. We are arriving at the station." I spoke to her in a quiet and gentle voice. Slowly, her sleepy looking eyes opened.

After a long yawn, she stood up, we grabbed our belongings and got off the train. The train station was crowded, loud and noisy. Matilda and I made our way through the throng, got into a taxi and headed to my parents-in-law.

"Here we are!" announced the driver.

After he had helped us with our luggage, I paid him and he drove away. As my daughter and I were standing in front of the house, I began to wonder whether they would even recognize Matilda. The last time they saw her was when she was a baby. I knocked on that door and was greeted with a friendly, smiley face. It was the MacGowan's housemaid.

We stepped in and Iona, Alfie's mother, as soon as she realized who it was that came for a visit, rushed over to us in order to give me a heartfelt embrace: "Oh, mah dear! Mah dear! Is it really ye? Amelia?" She looked down to Matilda, frowning and beholding her closely. Ostensibly, it took her a moment to realise, but suddenly her eyes widened and mouth opened. "Oh, mah goodness! Mah bairn Matilda! What a bonny lassie ye have become! The eyes of yer mither, the hair of yer faither", she said, while pinching Matilda's rosy cheeks.

I was relieved that Iona welcomed us warmly, although years had passed since we last met. The maid showed us around and carried our suitcases into our room. It was a lovely house, very cluttered but, still, cosy. During dinner, I informed Iona about the occasion of our unannounced visit and that I'll be traveling to Craig Dunain the following day. So I asked her to look after Matilda while I was away. Of course, she agreed.

* * *

At the break of dawn, I left Inverness, taking the necklace, Alfie's letter and a small shovel with me and heading in the direction of the place him and I made our first encounter. During the entire ride, I was staring out of the automobile's window, admiring the beautiful landscape of the Scottish Highlands, passing by endless greens and crystal-clear blues until at one point, I had the strong feeling of a déjà vu. But it was not a déjà vu. Indeed, I had seen this lake before. It was Craig Dunain loch. I told the driver to stop and continued on foot. I could not remember well on which bench Alfie and I had sat on that day, so I had no other option than walk from bench to bench and check whether the initials 'AA' were scratched on it. To my great fortune, the weather decided that I needed cooling. In addition to the freezing wind that was already blowing and causing my teeth to chatter, it commenced to rain heavily. I had walked around half of the lake, soaking wet and shivering, and I had not yet found what I was looking for. My

legs became weary, every step hurt, so I decided to take a break as soon as I would reach the next bench.

And it was as if fate had mercy on me. The next bench turned out to be the one. I immediately noticed the letters ‘AA’ carved in wood. I threw my bag to the wet and muddy ground, fiercely rummaging in it. I took out the shovel and started digging and digging until I hit something hard. The shovel clashed with an iron box, producing a shrill and unpleasant metallic sound which made the hair stand on the back of my neck. I put aside the shovel, grabbed it with my already dirty hands and used my sleeve to wipe it clean. I tried to open it but it was locked.

The lock’s keyhole, however, did not look like one where a normal key would fit but rather something else, something oval-shaped, and an idea rushed into my mind: “The sapphire... the sapphire is the key!” So I untacked the gemstone from the golden necklace, put it into the hole, and to my surprise, it fit.

Right after, the gemstone turned dark black again, just like it did a week ago when the sunrays went through it, leaving me completely speechless. The box opened itself and I beheld a bag made of crimson velvet fabric, pondering about what would be inside it. I pulled the bow’s cords that were tied around it and carefully shook out its content on my left hand. Five gemstones in total were twinkling in the most beautiful colours I had ever seen: two diamonds, a transparent and a turquoise one, a ruby, an emerald and the notorious Black Orlov.

I was overwhelmed with emotion, torn between laughing and crying. I didn’t need to be an expert to understand that the five gemstones Alfie bequeathed me were worth a vast fortune, so much that I would be able to embark on a new beginning, a new life with our dear daughter, Matilda, ... a life without worries... without debts.

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photo: violet stathopoulou-vaiss

*But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?*

new stories

by anna haid

*But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
The Lady of Shalott?*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1842)

Emily brings her poetry collections with her everywhere. Her mother named her after no other than Emily Dickinson herself, after all. *Thanks, mom, for not putting too much pressure on me*, she joked with herself when she once again wasn't satisfied with her work. Of course, Emily had decided to study English, even though after four years of studying, she still does not know whether she based her career path on her mom's choice or her own. Perfectionism isn't a choice for her, as everyone expected her to be perfect.

She looks up from the poem as the bus driver hits the brakes more intensely than usual. "Are you too stupid to drive now?" the woman in the seat opposite Emily shouts to the front. An auburn brown curl falls on her face as she turns around and continues to type on her phone. The screen is so bright, it lights up her face even more than the flashy neon lights of the bus. The bus driver seems to fidget with the buttons, not even realising the lady's insult as sweat drips down his forehead. Emily can almost smell the man's nervousness. "First day..." he just offered as an explanation for the people sitting in the back waiting for him to start the bus once again.

Switching on her phone to see the time, Emily can feel the tension seeping out of the bus driver. As always, she heats up a bit and her heart rate increases. She should not check her smartwatch, but she does so anyway. 120 beats per minute! *Why am I like this? I am not in control, but that's fine. No, it's not. I need to calm down.* The one thing she hates more than doing something wrong is not being in control and, even worse, being too late.

“You okay, sweetheart?” the woman who just shouted at the overwhelmed bus driver asks, nodding at her.

“Of course”, Emily answers hastily.

“Doesn't appear that way... I'm Seven, by the way.”

Seven... what a laid-back name. Seems like a lot less pressure being named after a prime number than after one of the most famous poets in American history.

Emily looks at Seven sceptically. Her brown curls are tied up in a messy bun except for those two strands that keep falling on her face. The septum piercing fits her indie vibes. Emily would never even dare think about getting a septum. Only imagining her mother's reaction gives her the chills.

“I can assure you I am fine, Seven.” *Why is this woman talking to me anyway?* Emily would never address a stranger on the bus unless it was an elderly lady who looked like she needed a seat. Moreover, the interaction would stop after “Would you like to take my seat.” - “Oh, that's so kind of you. Thank you.” - “You're welcome.” And then Emily would go on with her day, preferably with reading poetry.

“Doesn't look like it, honey”, Seven says, rolling her eyes.

“Can you please stop calling me such names? I'm Emily so at least refer to me that way.”

“Thanks for telling me your name, I guess. Look, Emily, you seemed pretty stressed out after that stop. You went all pale. Almost looked like a ghost.”

“Yeah... I could be late for my presentation today, and I am never late.” Emily started fidgeting with her book and started to feel her heart beating even faster.

“Oh, so you are a student then?”

“Yes, I study English literature and want to become a lecturer at my university.”

Emily continues to observe Seven as her eyes open wide, and she leans forward. She watches Seven fix her colourful and flowy dress. Suddenly, Emily feels a shift in Seven's behaviour. Almost

as if Seven has something to prove to Emily. But what that something is... she cannot put the finger on.

“Wow, so who’s your favourite writer then?” Seven asked with raised interest.

“Emily Dickinson.” Emily brought her book closer to her chest, almost cuddling it like a plushy. Emily Dickinson was the name everyone wanted to hear when they asked that question, so better give it to them.

“Are you actually as self-absorbed as you seem? Just because your name is Emily doesn’t mean you are the same genius Dickinson was.”

Emily looks up in shock. Blinking several times. Mouth open. Emily was hurt. But why? For Emily, it felt like she was stripped down naked by Seven’s statement. But then again... why?

“Self-absorbed... you don’t even know me! Look, I might not be an Emily Dickinson, but I was named after her, so I better live up to those expectations.” The shock was written on Emily’s face after Seven’s remark, but she was even more shocked by her own shot back.

“Honey, relax. I was just commenting on your ramrod straight behaviour. You look more rigid than you probably are.”

Emily loosens her grip on the book, turning her head to the side and looking up at Seven with more scepticism than before. “What are you then? A wannabe shrink who tries to psychoanalyse strangers?”

Seven throws her head back as she bursts out laughing. “Actually, you are not too far off. I work at a local Starbucks, and it’s not one of the busy ones, which leaves me with observing people as an occupation”, Seven responds, still giggling.

“For someone who does not even know how to write common names properly, you seem to be quite familiar with poetry.”

“Touché”, Seven replied with a grin.

Emily is still looking at Seven sceptically. She has a mysterious glare in her eyes. She almost looks as if she is hiding something.

But Emily seems as if she wants to keep her little secret, so Seven has to ask: “What are you reading there? You seem like you can’t let go of that book.”

Emily loves poetry... she really does. But she would never tell someone that she just carries around books to look more intelligent.

So instead, she replies: “Ah, that? It’s a poetry collection, my mother’s gift. I always like to read some poems when I’m on my way to university. It makes me feel prepared. Just before you screamed at the bus driver, I started reading *The Lady of Shalott*... not like you would know this ballad.” *You probably don’t even know what a ballad is*, Emily almost wants to add after Seven’s blunt statement. Emily still couldn’t believe that this stranger called her ‘self-absorbed’.

“Ah, *The Lady of Shalott*, the wise lady who is finally freed by a knight who appears in a mirror in shining armour, just for her to die lonely on a boat. Women could do better than that if only we wrote our own stories.”

Emily looks at her in disbelief.

“Believe it or not, but I like reading Melville, Woolf and Wilde. Not like you’re going to believe me though. Most people don’t even believe me when I say I read *Game of Thrones*”, Seven adds, rolling her eyes.

Something in Emily clicks. Emily realises that she had clearly underestimated Seven. *Women could do better than that if we wrote our own stories*, an echo-like voice sounds in her head.

“You’re right”, Emily admits. “I can only repeat myself: For someone who doesn’t even know how to write names correctly, you are quite intelligent. Ever tried studying English literature instead of layman’s psychology?”

“Gosh! It’s a company policy, so people remember the brand. Now leave me alone with that cliché. And do I really look like I could afford to study at university?”

“To be honest... no. But my university offers free study programmes. Maybe you should look into that.”

As Seven looks Emily in the eyes, Emily can tell Seven’s thoughts are aligning like gears turning in a clock. Emily looks up to the front of the bus, where a screen shows the upcoming stops. The driver seems to be calmer now. Sweat isn’t dripping down this forehead anymore. Just like Emily. She doesn’t feel the need to recheck her pulse.

“And maybe you should get rid of that uptight mentality of yours”, Seven now answered with more seriousness to her tone.

“This is my stop”, Emily blurts out reluctantly. “Thank you, Seven.” She gets up and walks to the door closest to her.

“Thank you, Emily”, Seven murmurs to herself.

Six months later...

We women can do better than that if we write our own stories.
This echo did not ever silence, even one month after Emily had met Seven. So she decided to re-evaluate.

In the last few months, Emily added more writing classes to her schedule. She concluded that it would have been a waste of money and time not to finish her degree. Additionally, she could bring her degree to some use. Instead of carrying a book with her, Emily now takes her laptop. She still loves literature but maybe not the way her mother imagined. Raunchy and cheesy romance novels are more of her thing than Emily Dickinson's complicated writing.

Contradicting her mother's idea of having a big celebration like everyone else, upon graduation Emily decides to just pick up her diploma at the registration office.

As she enters the department, a weight is lifted off Emily's shoulders. She doesn't need to stay around campus. She can be free. Walking towards the front desk, she notices a woman with brown hair tied up into a messy, curly bun – and a colourful, flowy dress hugging her figure. She is first in line. Emily steps up right behind her.

“Which classes would you like to enrol in, sweetheart?” the lady at the front desk asks the brown-skinned woman first in line.

Emily clears her throat, so the woman in front turns around. Seven looks Emily in the eyes. Eyes so bright and shining with pride, not like the dull ones Emily remembered.

The two women smile at each other and nod.

“Us women can do better if we only write our own stories”,
Seven and Emily say simultaneously.

Unlike Lady Shallot, Seven and Emily did not die when they were freed. They found themselves living life to the full, more than they did before, writing their own stories.

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needles and the damage (un)done

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by maria indrist

When she steps out her front door, she is not sure what to do on this dark and cloudy afternoon. The only thing she knows, is that she needs to get away for a while. Away from her parents, who always treat her like the typical 16-year-old girl they think she is. On these days, even her own room, her only private safe heaven seems to shrink and suffocate her. It feels like all the walls are moving towards each other, trapping her, and ultimately quashing her with an iron fist. No! In these moments, the only way out of this mess, is to leave the house.

The rainy and overcast weather does her a huge favour, as only few people dare to go out on the streets. A man, stricken with old age, is walking his tiny but very well-fed Yorkshire Terrier down the sidewalk. Well, who is walking who, remains unclear, judging from the dog's affirmative dragging towards every pole and every fence. The only other moving entity outside is a huge wet black sweater, embosoming his bag and swiftly rushing towards her. She is not sure who is hiding under it, but it does not matter. Every person means scrutinizing and disapproving looks. Looks that feel like needles are hovering and waiting around until they find a sensitive spot and are ready to attack at any time. These are the times when being invisible to other people, would have its charm.

It is way too windy to put up the umbrella, so she pulls down her T-shirt and heads down the street. With no place in mind, her feet unconsciously guide her to a park nearby. Meanwhile it has stopped raining and the sky does not look so menacing anymore. She suddenly stops. Absentminded and angry as she is at that moment, it takes a few seconds to survey her surroundings.

She tries to ignore the needles ready to sting and wonders why she has not put on a thicker jacket as her eyes catch the sight of pictures. Hanging on a fence, they seem odd and in contrast with everything else around her. The sun and the rainy weather, the sandy white beaches and the noisy city, the calmness depicted in the pictures as opposed to her hectic life.

She cannot describe it, but she is drawn to the pictures. She has to take a closer look. She must know if there is anything else on these pictures. So, her feet do not stop until they are right in front of the picture with the palm tree. But this is not merely close enough.

She looks around nervously and pulls her T-shirt down once again. No soul seems to be around. Her eyes immediately travel back to the one particular picture. Forgetting the possible dismissive looks of the people and the icy gusts of wind ruffling her long brown hair, she raises her hand to touch an imposing palm tree, whose palm leaves are swaying gently in the breeze. Her forefinger touches the canvas as the hovering needles seem to disappear all of a sudden.

With that, all her senses become numb. Her vision gets blurry; her forefinger loses contact with the picture and she feels weightless for a couple of seconds. When she finally opens her eyes again, she cannot believe what is in front of her.

It takes her a couple of seconds to make sense of the surroundings she is looking at. However, something seems terribly wrong. First of all, she cannot move, because she is standing hip-deep in something sharp-edged. Moreover, the majestic palm tree she admired just a few seconds ago, now towers above her with overwhelming height. Even though she recognizes the tree it takes her more than a few moments to realize that she is actually on a sandy beach. It comes to her like a flash of genius. Big chunks are all around her. They look like stones and she is right in the middle of it all. And she has lost a couple of feet.

She panics. Losing weight is always good, but losing height?

That is one step too far.

With a huge amount of strength, she manages to wade forwards and crawls onto a larger rock. A vastness of rough terrain meets her eyes; from rather small rocks to huge pieces of shells, the variety of different shapes and sizes is endless. Exhausted she sits down on the rock she is still standing on and glances around. Over the course of hours, the wind becomes stronger and stronger. She has to take shelter as a strong gust of wind nearly blows her away. The one she chooses turns out to be the home of a hermit crab and she has no other option but to make herself scarce.

This marks the first time her inconspicuousness and shyness stands in her way. At night, she is unable to sleep. Eventually she falls in a deep dreamless sleep in an old used plastic cup.

The next morning, she wakes up with gnawing hunger and starts to look for something to eat. After hours of exhausting climbing up and down, she finally sets eyes on a coconut. However, due to her height she is unable to crack it open. Imploringly she tries to find someone to help her. But the crabs to her left refuse to notice her as they undeterred keep moving away from her. Also, the seagull sitting to her right on a sunny rock, shows no interest in her. Rather arrogantly, it avoids even looking at her. Her increasing frustration is fuelled by her poignant hunger. “Really?! You cannot even look at me? Thanks for nothing”, she expresses her frustration.

For the first time in her life, she wishes for any kind of attention. The looks no longer seem like hovering needles which are ready to attack. Actually, she is in desperate need of them and would give anything for just one single glance. She would embrace it instead of avoiding it at all costs. She is more elated and confident than ever before. These emotions are overwhelming, she attributes the sudden blurry vision to her hunger.

She dauntlessly climbs up the highest rock she can find, straightens herself and takes a deep breath before shouting as loudly as she can: “Here I am! Please help me!”. The blurry vision gets increasingly stronger, her feet lose contact with the rock underneath her and the all-encompassing feeling of zero gravity knocks her off her feet.

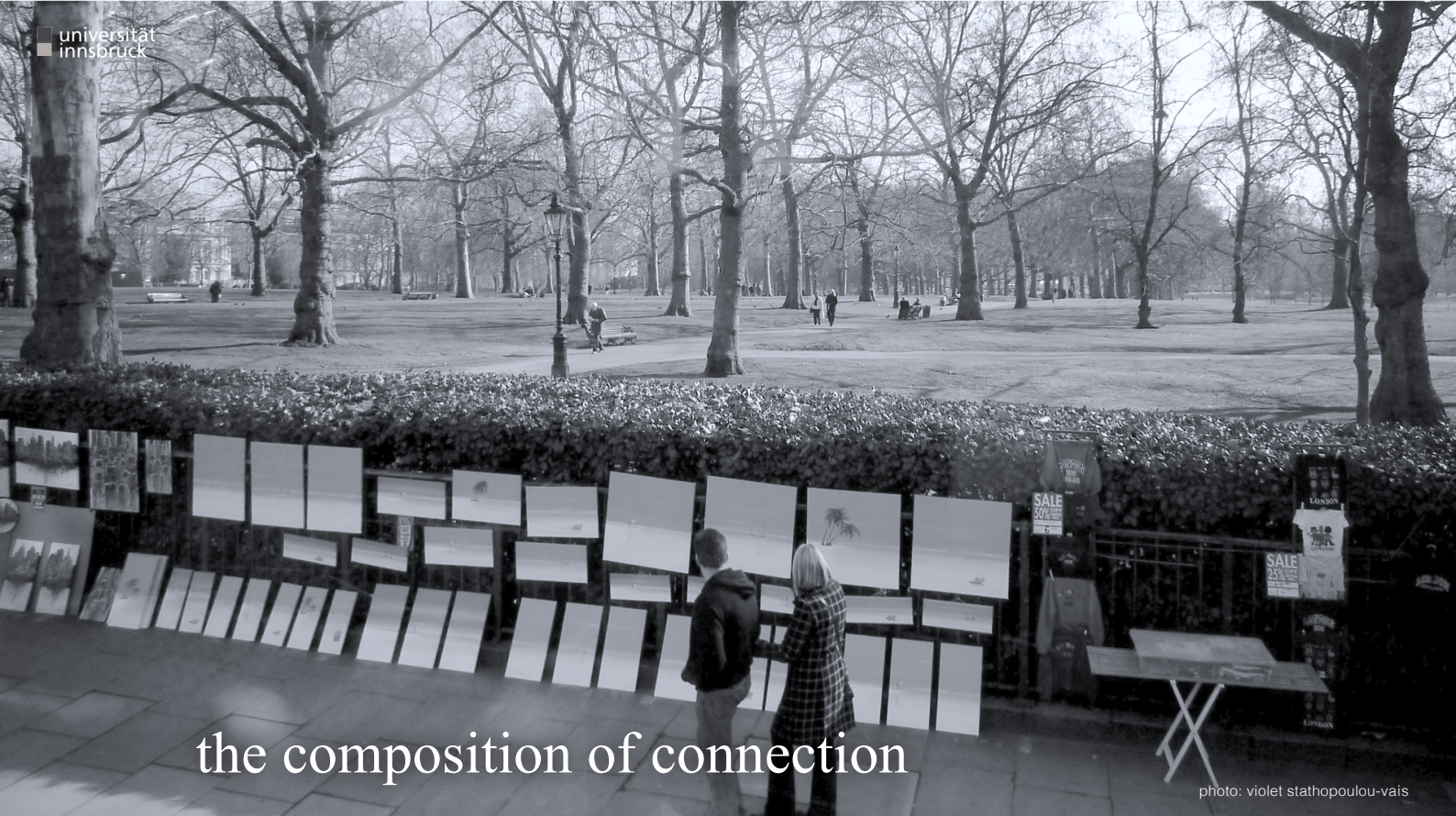
Before she opens her eyes, she takes a few moments to brace herself for the things to come. Her aching butt, the cold wet air and the well-known noises of honking cars are all evidence that her senses seem to work perfectly. She opens one eye, then the other, and looks at the pictures. These fascinating pictures hanging on a fence. The same as before, but still so different.

She stands up awkwardly and only now notices the confused looks of onlookers. However, instead of panicking, she lifts her head and confidently starts walking away. The needles are no longer threatening. They have lost their power over her. Now they are only curious friendly glances.

Chin up, chest out and with a confident smile on her face she straightens up...

“Hey! Wake up! You’re going to be late for school. AGAIN!”

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the composition of connection

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by anna-maria mayr

It was a sunny morning. A summer breeze in the air. That kind of morning you wake up, look out of the window and are stunned by the wonderful colour of the blue sky. You know it is going to be a simple day, sunny, easy, light, nothing to do but much to experience.

The air was still fresh in the early morning hours; the sun, however, was already shining golden. Soon it would be fully up, prepared to burn down on the streets and parks, beautifully but relentlessly.

The city was still asleep, only some lonely souls found their way through the streets. Perfect for a walk in the park, green fresh grass, beautiful songs composed by some jolly birds and the feeling of brand-new air, air that has never been consumed before, rushing through my lungs.

The park was already stirring as people and wildlife were facing the day, being set in motion. People were jogging before work, and others were stumbling around, remainders on their way home from a long and boozy party.

Amongst all this movement, a lady sat there, small and old, depleted, clothed in rags, grubby but also welcoming and benevolent. She was surrounded by a series of pictures. Colourful. Blissful. Grateful. They were arranged as if it was an album. I couldn't stop but looking at them, a magical allure demanded it.

‘Are they for sale, ma’am?’ I said.

‘Oh no! No, no, no. They are everything I have,’ she replied.

I was puzzled.

‘Well, okay. They are lovely, really. I love all of them,’ I said to her.

‘Thank you. You know, these pictures recount my story. They tell everything I know, everything I have lived through, everything I can tell. By giving them away, I would give away part of myself, of my soul, so I can only show them to people and tell them, so they can see,’ she spoke, slowly, melodically. ‘If you want to, sweetheart, sit down, I can tell you a little story, so you can see too.’

I ended up spending my whole day in the park. I had planned to go swimming with the boys, but I was so occupied, so carried away by stories and feelings. I had felt so light, as if I could fly away like the cigarette smoke I just exhaled. Then the next moment, I had felt heavy, sad, a big lump in my throat had formed. What Amalia had told me was a story I can never forget. She took me with her on a trip through life. Her life. She used to be a great pianist once, evoking the greatest of all feelings with her music, but so she could do with her stories.

This experience was similar to a thrilling film you watch, afterwards you are puzzled, you don’t know what to say, you want to tell everybody about it, but you also want to keep it to yourself as if it was a secret reserved only for you.

Her life seemed to me like a greatly composed song, pitches so high that they reached the lonesome top, composing a ballad of happiness and blissfulness. But suddenly so low as if the notes plummeted deeper and deeper, into the darkest chambers of hell, clanking, hollow. No single life is perfectly unblemished. To enjoy the greatness of life, misery has to be experienced as well. That was what she said at the end.

But it made sense, it all makes sense now. Poco a poco.

Sometimes now, I sit in my bed, lights turned out, watching the sky when day becomes night. I listen to piano music and think of her. Of the way she saw people and the preciousness of life. She grew on me. Only a few hours spent together but a connection made to remain for a lifetime. I wanted to hear Amalia playing the piano, wanted it so badly. I wanted to hear her timbre, her melody, her. But she left. Left this place to bring her word to another one I cannot reach right now. Da Capo. Maybe in my next life I will be able to hear her, finally.

She told me she will let me know. In whatever form that may be, but I am ready, ready for her to approach me again.

So, take my advice and listen.

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beyond

photo: violet stathopoulou-vais

by hannah elisabeth fisher

In 2011, life stopped for a moment; no time, no sound, no thought was available. The first thing one can hear after such a majestic, magnificent and moving event is the intensive ticking of the watch. She decided how and when this would happen, like always. Her stubborn mind twisted it all; diagnosis, prognosis, efforts. She waited. She calculated.

Everybody had left, after their work was done and for their work elsewhere to start. Her weak body remained on the cushions, her thoughts silent and her consciousness in a blur. It was only what was left of her and her daughter, a duplicate of her; cursed, crushed, calm. Between them is no room for pity for her [or, and] her. Salvation and relief are close for her *her*.

“Close your eyes. I take care of it.”

Soft whisper, harsh command, benevolent encouragement, selfish impatience, patronizing guardian, hopeful salvation for her *her*, for everyone. Breathing and eyes are one, simultaneous; up and open, down and closed, up and open, down and closed. Noisy, violent, yet, not energetic. Energy disappeared a long time ago, during the night after the best evening. For whom? She is ready. It will be perfect. It is perfect. It was perfect. No time, no sound, no thought. How did she know?

She was home. More than ever before. Unbearably much, for her [and, or] her. A life restricted to a couch in the living room and a couch on the terrace. A territory of 40 square meters, at most. Not a cage, nor a domicile, but a queendom. Elegance and grace preserved in every aspect. She was home. She was ready to welcome visitors, friends and family. She took care of her nails – long, well-shaped, strong, dressed in flames of red. She took care of her hair – short, effortless, tamed like a tiger in the Serengeti desert. She took care of her queendom – assembled memories of decades of appreciation, deviation, strength, will.

She has been feared by the ignorant. She has been loved by the knowing. She has been valued by all. There have only been few people around lately. She knows better than her daughter who would have naïve negative emotions. Knowledge of age or experience or expectation. She doesn't show her emotions like all the subjects. She is a royal majesty, a queen.

It's been one of the last warm evenings of summer, on the terrace on the couch. The black rattan was still warm. There were three wine glasses on the small cubic table, two empty bottles on the floor, one half-full bottle on the same table. It was a rosé. Sibyl was with her *her* for an hour already and offered the refreshment. She is a loud laughing lady, gifted with the power of seduction. She seduced *her* minds and spirits. The three were equally cheered up, bathing in each other's company. The stories were both meaningless and pointless; about men, events, gatherings and other nonsense. These represent the highest form of entertainment among all women, but it requires a fully skilled professional for pure joy. Sibyl was that kind. As tears ran down her *her her* cheeks, the sun was kissing the peaks at the horizon, covering them and them in a soft orange that only occurs when majestic red robes melt with a wide childish smile. *Joie de vivre*. She went inside for another bottle and blankets.

“I'm glad you're here.”

Her husband intrudes the company, immediately recognizing her longing for this gathering to continue. Their conversations don't need words, yet, never miss the messages. He leaves as quietly as he came but with a smile.

“Do you need anything?”

Her consciousness was in this particular state of fogged tranquility, at ease, beyond the painful restrictions of everyday life. She is well aware that, most likely, there won't be another evening like this one. Most likely this will be the last week of summer; forever. But certainly this evening will be among the last thoughts, in the end.

“The man of all men. He certainly knows. Is he on rent?”

“He's all mine, but who knows what will be next year.”

“No offence, but yours is as good as gold, too.”

“By this time next year, promise to come back. Promise to cheer them up.

Promise me as a friend.”

She was in her room, recharging the devices, re-filling the goodies and chatting. Her hair was long and wild. No make-up, no nail polish, no decoration, but for a simple golden cross hanging around her neck. A woman who knows what no one else knows. Two queens of two kinds.

“My daughter told me about yours. They went to school together.”

“What a coincidence. I have to ask her.”

Nobody knew that her daughter had left her, or lost her, or lost herself. What has she done wrong to be punished in such a cruel way? There was no time to think about that. There were still some duties left.

“You shall have my husband. But not before I’m dead. He is still mine.”

She was shocked. Her face turned pale as the blood disappeared. A queen’s order for a queen – though the latter feared her plans. The plans were transferred silently and secretly, encoded. Both knew what the trade meant to them, for her. Again, she wouldn’t leave anyone high and dry – especially not her beloved soul mate, best friend and companion, father to her children and knight, whose armour has been reflecting the smallest sparks onto the ceiling into a cloudless mid-summer night. Though, each dream has an end and this one’s end is close. She and she agreed upon the time beyond. Beyond the inlet, bayou, bay that she was leaving. Leaving for something, someplace, someone else. Elsewhere, to live in peace and quiet. Who wouldn’t?

She was in the kitchen preparing a salad. Her daughter came in, her head lowered, walked all the way up to the counter and waited to be addressed. The air was filled with tension, regret and sadness.

“I am sorry.”

She wanted to say the words, pledge for forgiveness, restore the bond. She couldn’t. Her mouth wouldn’t open. Her eyes met hers. The same eyes. The same thought. The same desire. It’s been a while since she returned, was allowed to reenter her queendom, and lingered around like a wounded animal seeking for a shelter. She knew that she had made a terrible mistake and that she behaved against her upbringing – inferior and unworthy.

“I am indeed glad YOU came back BEFORE I received the note. I wasn’t sure if I could ever let you but I will.”

Her *her* eyes were ice blue, intensive, inquisitive. None started to cry, though both wanted. Their bond hasn’t been cut. Relief. Love. Generosity. She is truly superior. Regardless of her own temper, emotions and heart. She taught her a lesson. She gave an example. She expects nothing less of her. She has to improve in order to regain her respect; affiliation, appreciation, approbation.

They have been staring at her. Reluctant to do a service to a lady. Full of haste, hate, hubris. Their looks cut deeper than their distance. Their expressions revealing that they can’t see. Her crown, her turban, her head wouldn’t stay in place for a swift moment during that incident. Her knees aren’t made to bend, but did during that incident. Her hands – noble and strong – aren’t made to touch anything outside their comfortable range, but did during that incident. Her pride was shaken for a moment. Where were her servants, assistants, mates?

No tear would fill her eyes, no peep exit her mouth. She got up, straightened her dress, and restored her posture. Her fellows awaited her at the place she had ordered them to. They could see that something had happened to her from the vanishing shine in her eyes. Escaping the public sphere in the middle of masses, she briefly explained:

“They laughed at me. ‘Look at her with her turban; blocking the road; falling over her own pride. Haha.’”

Despite the crowds around them, she let his – but only his – warm words comfort her for a second and strong arms guide her for a while.

She had been feared by her daughter’s boyfriends because of her eyes. Her daughter, too. Blue with a light grey shadow that become ice blue upon strong emotions, but show a darker shade like a deep mountain lake upon relaxation. Though, what people recognise is the intense sharp light blue. Only few know its meaning. Whoever looks into them, knows that it is futile to lie or find excuses. Honesty is the most noble character trait of hers and must be seen as basic understanding when talking to her.

Equally feared and beloved. Harm and kindness united. Blessing and curse in perfect symbiosis. Strength, linearity and stoic encounter warmth, forgiveness and reflection. What will remain in the end? What won’t be forgotten? She will find out what *she* will never been able to do. She lives in her.

No time, no sound, no thought.

The watch is ticking reluctantly like a soldier’s heavy boots stamping in the distance, approaching harshly. What is time? What does it matter? She can’t cry. She wants to feel mourning, sorrow, grief; at least hate. She can’t because she knows now. She understands the importance and significance and beauty of this moment. She smiles softly.

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