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# l&tp perspectives | *transitions*

creative writing project



# I&tp perspectives | *transitions*

creative writing project

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This second collection of short stories written in winter semester 2020/2021 on the underlying topic of 'transitions' comprises the work of the students of the Language and Text Production course, Masters Programme in English and American Studies.

The pictures 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.

Whether the writer's aim was to make a statement, criticise, raise awareness or simply entertain, the reader is left with more than food for thought.

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

# gone with the wind

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by raphael bechtiger

“Hey you.” No response. “Hey asshole!” The man who the insult was meant for did not react. “Step outside the shade so I can see your ugly face!” The man had been called many things since it had started two years ago. Asshole, lunatic, nutcase had actually been some of the nicer ones. He did not care anymore – what did it matter? Nothing mattered anymore.

It had been the Wind who first spoke of change. It had come overnight, chased people into their houses and trapped them there for three days and three nights. When the brave ones ventured beyond their doorstep on the fourth day for the first time, they found that the world as they knew it was gone. Some said it was God’s wrath, brought upon the world because of humanity’s hybris, just like the Bible or some other holy book had foretold. Others said it was a virus, caused by an uncontrolled mutation in a chemical research lab somewhere in a distant country. Again others saw it as the ultimate proof of Darwin’s theory; a next – the ultimate – step in human evolution, sorting out the weak and vulnerable and paving the way for a new world with the survival of the fittest at its very core. But what did it matter? The worst was not what the wind had brought, but actually what the people had made of it. With more and more people falling ill, all the social conventions and institutions that humanity was so proud of – that seemingly lifted humans beyond mere animals – had crumbled and vanished.

Governments fell, people turned on their neighbors, money got obsolete. Anarchy became the new law, brute force its executive authority. Brutality was the new currency. Those too honest or weak to take what they needed had vanished within weeks. They left behind a world with none but one rule: Nothing mattered anymore.

It had been in these unsettling first couple of weeks when the man lost his wife. It had been a surprisingly calm night. The usual sounds of human pleads for their lives, cries of agony and gunfire that used to tear the night apart had been replaced for once by an unprecedented silence. A suspicious silence in retrospect. It had lured the man into allowing himself to ease into sleep’s warm embrace for the first time in days, if even just for a couple of wonderful,

unworried hours. Upon waking up, he had found himself alone in the house, his head hurting like hell and blood running down his left temple. Horrified he had screamed his wife's name, had looked everywhere for a sign of her but to no avail. It was as if she had been swallowed by a hole; the very same hole he had felt himself falling into. On the verge of going crazy, the man had given in to his desperation, which was spiraling him into a state between decay and existence.

It is, now, hard for the man to remember what had roused him from his apathy. Was it something so profane as hunger? Or a more complex urge for revenge and justice? What did it matter? He had lost his wife; nothing mattered anymore. But eventually he had gotten up again, had stepped through the cracked door into a totally changed world and had started to walk. It was at the garden gate where he found it. A crumbled piece of paper, nothing of importance at first glance. But there was this red stain on it, as if the paper had been smeared with blood. Was it his wife's blood? Or blood from his wife's captors, drawn by her in a last, desperate attempt to fight herself free of their iron grip?

The man crouched down and picked it up. Unfolding the paper, his hands trembled with anticipation. Would it help him find out what had happened here? Would it help him cope with it? After evening the paper with his sweaty palm, he found himself staring at an old movie ticket. "Gone With the Wind" it said; Lincoln Theatre, dated with the very day of the Wind's first appearance.

From this day on, he had roamed the world in search for this theatre. He had talked to so many strangers, threatened some and bribed others, all in the hope of finding this goddamn place and learning of his wife's fate. Many times he had thought he was on the right track, only to be left disappointed at a dead end. Two winters had come and gone and still he had not gotten any closer to finding his wife. But eventually, he was able to chase down a man who had been affiliated with the theatre and its practices. With his dying breath, the shady character had given the man concrete directions; directions which, now, had finally brought him to this ominous place.

"I'm not gonna repeat myself a second time: Step out of the shade and show yourself you piece of shit!" Despite the insult, the man was smiling. It wasn't a happy smile, though. Happiness did not matter to the man any more ever since he had lost his wife. But he would have closure soon after all. It was a smile of anticipation. This was it! This was the place, he knew it. His two-year-long journey was coming to an end.

"Where is she?", he growled, while that smile turned into a hideous sneer. The words were spoken so quietly, they were almost impossible to make out against the wind that was howling outside and was whispering through the cracked windows of the movie theatre. Still, they left an unmistakable effect on the second man. It was as if he had fallen ill in that very moment, as if the question had been an ill curse, draining life from his body until he crumbled to pieces. His face grew even paler when the man finally did as he had been asked before, and stepped out of the shade into the dim light of the movie projector. He took off his black, worn baseball hat, revealing a hideous scar from his left eye to his left temple.

"I remember you", he cried out, staggering back.

"Yeah? Then you also know what I came for. WHO I came for." Standing in the light, looking down onto the other man, it was hard to believe that this creature now crouching in front of him, scared shitless of his appearance, should be responsible for the disappearance of his wife

and his own agony and sorrow. He reveled in his opponent's misery and fear, fully aware of every second he could hurt the man, just as he had been hurting ever since this damned day two years ago. "Where is she?", he snarled. "Where is my wife?"

"She's gone", came the reply. His back to the wall, palms stretched forward in a half-protective, half-pleading pose he added, "The Wind took her... Shortly after we found her and brought her here... She fell sick, we had to get rid of her before..." He broke off, silenced by the man's hot, white fury in his eyes. The man himself could feel it, too. Anger, frustration and desperation were washing over him, were trying to push him back over the edge into madness. For an instant, the only thing he could sense was the disruptive power of all the emotions brewing inside him, just like the storm that was brewing outside the theatre.

He had not necessarily expected to find his wife alive, but the finality of the other man's revelations were tearing at him, threatening to break open the hole that he had forced himself to climb out of two years ago when he had set out to look for her once again. But he could not give in just now. His wife was gone. There was only one thing left to be done.

"Who is we? Where are the others that kidnapped my wife?"

"They are gone, too", the man cried in agony. "Some also got sick, probably from your wife. Others died in fights with other traffickers. I am the last one remaining." What irony, the man thought that they had brought upon their own doom by taking his wife. For a moment it was comforting to think that she had somehow still gotten her revenge. And he would get his any second now. The wind outside had grown into a full-scale storm; the theatre rang with the sound of smashing window shutters and falling furniture.

"You see, I am already punished. Doomed to live out my days alone, too scared to go outside. Please have mercy, let me-" "BANG!" The man slumped down, a pool of blood spreading from his stomach onto the wooden floor. Wide-eyed, he stared at his murderer, but the man had already turned around and was walking towards the doors. Carelessly, he dropped his revolver – he wouldn't need it any more – and stepped into the storm. It was done. Nothing mattered anymore!



Two women in white scrubs are walking down a corridor. One displays a comfortable, knowing demeanor, pointing left and right while constantly talking to the other woman in a smugish tone. The second, younger woman, obviously being given a tour, is hurrying to keep pace with her guide while jotting down notes.

"You gotta be on your toes when dealing with Mr Simmons. He'll always tell you that he took his meds but don't believe him one second. Make sure you are physically present when he does and double-check afterwards if you don't wanna find yourself strapping him to his bed in the middle of the night when his nightmares start reappearing."

"Double-check Mr Simmons," the younger woman mumbles, "Got it!"

"Mrs Gayeski always takes a nap after group therapy and loves to play ping pong at 4pm. If she can't, she'll get cranky."

"There's a ping pong table in this facility?" Both women have stopped and the older one is now looking incredulous at her protégé.

"My dear, we even have a little movie theatre for film nights," she says and pushes

the door behind her open. The women step into a medium-sized room with a couple of rows of lounge chairs on a slightly slanted carpeted floor. The chairs all face the wall to the right of the two women, with a huge white screen fixed to it. An old, black-and-white movie is playing; it evokes a faint memory in the young woman but she cannot really put her finger on it. Only one seat is taken; a man in his forties, with a shady, black baseball cap on his head and his eyes fixed on the screen.

“So you have not had the pleasure of meeting Mr Thomas yet either, have you?”

Upon hearing his name, the man stirs in his seat as if he had just been called back from a place far away, and faces the two women. The younger one gasps when she sees the scar, disfiguring the man’s left side of his face, before he turns back and, again, appears totally absorbed by the movie in front of him.

“Poor soul,” the older woman says. “Lost his wife in a mass shooting while they were on a date in a movie theatre. He was only grazed by a bullet, hence the scar. Blames himself ever since.

Apparently, he had chosen the movie and has gone crazy over the idea what would have happened if he’d let her choose. But his meds keep him relatively calm. He’s normally not a problem as long as you let him watch.” She turns around and heads for the door. The young woman stays behind, transfixed by the man’s appearance.

“What movie?”, she asks.

“Hm?”

“What movie did he choose for their date?”

The other woman turns around, her index finger outstretched, pointing at the screen.

“Gone With the Wind.”

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## wander tale

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by sara mohamed

My name is Ella. I came from a country well known for its great temples and ancient history. After my mother's death, my father married a cruel woman who, after his death, forced me into servitude in my own house. I have two stepsisters Anisa and Doria and they both hate me. They are jealous of me because they think I am prettier and more popular than they are. I always tell them that if they treated others with kindness and respect, they would be popular too, but they are convinced that people love me just because I am pretty. I feel sorry for them because their mother controls every single detail in their lives. She decides for them what to wear, where to go, when to talk and what to say. She has even convinced them that their only goal in life is to find two rich men and marry them. Thankfully, she does not care about my future. It is a blessing that she never compels me to join them in any of the gatherings and parties organised by aristocratic and “high-society” families to find myself a rich future husband. Finding love and getting married was never my life’s goal. Before finding love I should find myself first or else I will not be the protagonist in my life’s story, I will be just a chapter in someone else’s story.

I have always dreamt of leaving that house and going on a solo trip around the world, but my stepmother does not allow me to even talk about that wish of mine. She told me that all my dreams are illusions and will never come true. I never believed her. I believed in my charming illusions which were, on the one hand, a means of escape from my humiliating existence and, on the other hand, a renewed hope in my soul for a brighter future.

Tonight, is a special one for Anisa and Doria. The king is giving a ball, to which all the ladies of the land are invited, and a rumour is going around that the prince is looking for his future wife and one of the invited women might be the lucky one. “Ella, would you not be glad to go to the ball?” Anisa said. “No” I said, “yeah, I forgot that getting married to a prince is not on your to do list, only cooking and cleaning.” Doria said that and they both laughed loudly. I

stopped arguing with my stepsisters since I get punished every time they complain to my stepmother. “I have the whole world on my bucket list and one day I will be free to go” I said to myself and went back to the kitchen.

After they had left, I went to visit our old neighbour. She is my godmother and my closest friend. I bring her some food every day and clean her tiny house for her because she can hardly move. She is like a mother to me. Every day I tell her about my daily hassles with my stepmother and her daughters, and she always makes it easier on me by saying that nothing lasts forever and one day all my dreams will eventually come true. After I had finished cleaning, I made us two cups of tea and sat at the end of her bed chatting and laughing. I was about to leave when she told me to stay because she had something for me. I wondered what it could be... She did not let me wait for long and with a wide smile on her face, she handed me an old yellow envelope that she was hiding under her pillow. I opened it to find out that it was full of money!

She gave me her life savings to fulfil my wanderlust. I could not believe my eyes. I thanked her a thousand times and before I left, she said, “I told you that one day your dream will come true, Ella. You are a courageous and smart young lady, your wanderlust and desire to learn will take you to places you have never heard of before. You will get to know parts of yourself that you did not know that existed. But I have some advice for you before you start your journey sweetheart. At some point your travels will come to an end but the journey of self-discovery is eternal. It has a beginning and no end. This journey is the treasure. Every experience will lighten up your way towards one truth about yourself. Do not try to speed up the learning process, it is not a race and there is no destination in the journey of self- discovery. A destination means to stop. Don’t stop learning and be patient with yourself”.

“I will keep these words in mind and will be forever grateful for this precious gift”. I kissed and thanked her again before I ran back home. I will never forget that day, every word she said is carved on my mind with golden letters and will never be erased.

I had never been so excited to go back to that house as I was then. I entered the house running and let the front door slam shut behind me. Without thinking I packed my clothes in a small bag, and left my stepmother and sisters a note saying: “Dreams come true. Good luck with the prince.” I went back to my godmother’s house to say goodbye to her and left for the harbour. I hopped on a ship that was ready to leave without even asking where it was heading. I stood on the deck of the ship, 10 meters above the sea level and looked at the choppy waves from above. I took a deep breath, filled my lungs with the salty air of the ocean and felt for the first time in my life that I am FREE.

I am free to do whatever I want but this is not the end of my journey, it is just the beginning of it. Freedom is a means, not a goal. It is the first step on my journey of self-discovery. Now my choices will be based on my free will which means that I am the only one who must take responsibility for these decisions and life choices.

The past five years made me a new person. I met people from all over the world who introduced me to their cultures, to different ways of thinking, and opened my eyes to a whole new world of ideas and possibilities. I grew wiser after every experience and learned that openness and acceptance expand minds, create understanding, and bring people together. I learned to accept myself as I am; my weaknesses and flaws, my former mistakes, and the ones that I will still make. I learned that what happened to me in the past made me the person I am today. I learned that people are good at heart and that hatred weighs the heart heavy and



burdens those who carry it. I forgave my stepmother, my stepsisters and most importantly I forgave myself. I stopped victimising myself and instead believed in my ability to change my life for the better.

I have been to many countries. I tried so many different foods, hiked green, white, and brown mountains, swam in every ocean, and worked in every country to afford all of this. Inside a huge castle in a small village that is hugged by the icy topped Alps, I worked as a cleaning lady and unexpectedly found love there. He was a co-worker. I first met him when I lost my shoe and he helped me find it. Since then, we got to know each other better. He taught me a new language and introduced me to philosophy. After saving money from our jobs, we travelled together around Europe for a year in which we laughed, cried, and learned together. We planned a future in which we live together in a country of our choice. We chose to settle down in his homeland where the magical nature surrounds the city from every corner and every season paints the trees and the mountains in beautiful new colours that please the eyes and revive the soul.

Here I am again on a ship but this time I am not alone, and I am not aimlessly wandering. I am going to create a new home for myself with a person that I chose with my mind and my heart. This is not the end of my story; it is the beginning of a new chapter in my life. I know that it will not be easy, but I am ready to face its challenges and difficulties and I am sure that the results will be fruitful.

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## mrs. zero alias medusa

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by sonja weithaler

Everyone in town is looking at me... I can't hide from the gaze and their judgemental way of looking at me. My story is all over the newspapers and no-one seems to realise that I am the real victim here and, know what, I am not sorry for what I did... honestly. I would do it again. Again and again and AGAIN.

Now I'm sitting in this room. Whatever is going to happen – soon I will be free. Free for a lifetime. Free like a bird. I will escape this cage and rise like a phoenix from my ashes. I thought myself to be dead for decades but now I am ready. Ready for everything that lies ahead of me. I broke those chains for a reason. I will be driven to an undisclosed location and there I will be free. I just want to know what happens next.

Black is the robe of the man sitting next to me. The lines of his face are perfect.

I used to be attractive. This was before I met Evan. Love gone bad. Showed me a Gorgon. I stared at a dragon. Look at me now! Excuse me for plagiarizing but this is what I am. You can look at me from a feminist perspective or take on an autobiographical approach. I don't care and you never gonna know... I don't know it myself, I swear.

“Miss, remember, you are under oath”.

I solemnly swear that the answers I am about to give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God. Getting what I am going through? Contradictions, pros and cons... Should I try? Recap. Pause. I'll start again.

“The defendant will resume the stand.”

I married young you must know. I used to be a Siren and he was under my spell. “This lipstick doesn't suit you”, he said. And it all started with this simple phrase. It's still in my head and it is getting louder and louder. Faster and faster until it turns into one

shrieking single cry. Edward Munch himself couldn't have captured the essence. I wanted to make it stop.

“Objection!”

“Denied!”

Over time, I found that stupid switch. I clearly overused it. In the end, it was the accumulation of repressed feelings. I was detached. Detached from all the messy world around me. I was addicted to it and, therefore, I didn't have the energy to drag myself back to reality. The stars were swimming above us I waited for him to say something, but he didn't say anything. I tried again. Soft, tender, warm – and imagined him holding me... I listened to the rhythmic pounding of his heart. But he didn't say anything. Instead, he turned off the light. I had nothing to hold on to, no certainty. My life was gone. Forever.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may and will be held against you in a court of law”, they said back then. But I didn't care.

I did what I had to do.

“May I approach the bench? I am showing you diary entry 08.08.2008”, the black man said.

08.08.2008

*I woke several times with that same feeling of losing my mind. He whispered something, touched my hair. My blood froze, I shook. My body began to ache, and I realised that I was at the edge. When he was finally done, he whispered: “Darling, this is between you and me.” I lay there incredibly still. This is the rest of my existence and this is when I started to realise that death would feel the same.*

I guess, now you have a little impression of my childhood, my youth and my last years of marriage. It was him, Mr. Zero. So many people united in just one. Regardless who it was – my father, his colleagues, or my husband – it doesn't matter. I am a Gorgon. Maybe it was my fault. Or not. It doesn't change anything. But I changed. From a protected childhood to Mrs. Zero – I am a no one because it doesn't matter. Do not pity me. You are shocked, right? Why be shocked? This story could be the story of anyone. So many women have gone through it. I am their symbol. Mrs. Zero – one for all and all for one.

No, Evan, I am not mad at you. But I must say .... Well, it's time I pointed out to you that you have overstepped a boundary. You thought I wouldn't care after so many times, but I did care. Ha! Your mistake. I told you you would regret it. You called for Medusa. Would you feel surprised if I told you it had all been planned? I wasn't even late for work that day. Still managed to catch the bus... Not even a compliment from your side? Well, I didn't clean up the mess... but consider the time management and the careful planning... and as for the knife, hiding it wasn't difficult, after all. The kitchen was my domain. You never touched anything. So, it was unlikely for you to even notice it... this Swiss knife... even if, it could have simply been there for cooking. Ignorant! But I am a creative user. The fertility of my imagination has always been my strong point: very smooth texture, ergonomic design, it had the optimal fit. You can use a knife for peeling, cutting ... carving and SLICING... my imagination went wild. I was going to create a piece of art.

*Transition. Ambition.*

*Life is transient. And this is your end.*

Who is the victim now?

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## composed upon millennium bridge

picture: violet stathopoulou-vaïs

by mirjam pircher

a short story

inspired by William Wordsworth's poem

“Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802”.

*Earth has not any thing to show more fair:  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty:  
This City now doth, like a garment, wear  
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;  
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.  
Never did sun more beautifully steep  
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;  
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!  
The river glideth at his own sweet will:  
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;  
And all that mighty heart is lying still!*

I seldom feel calm. The bustle of the morning; loud, hectic. I am certain that the sunrise is beautiful – all bright and glittering in the smog-filled air – but all I see is water below me and shoes on top of me. They block my view of the sky. All I know is them.

“Hurry up, Harry! We’re late!” Harry is not bothered in the slightest. Small shoes hop across the tiles. The boy attached to them hums an unknown melody. It attempts to fill my bones but is quickly lost within the vibrations of hundreds of busy steps.

John-from-accounting’s clattering loafers momentarily distract me. I know he is in a rush, and he will not stop. The days of our loose friendship are long past. Now we are but mere acquaintances who acknowledge each other’s existence when we pass each other twice a day. He does no longer smile at me. His voice can only be heard on the phone. “This is John from accounting.” I, too, stay silent. But I do not mind. I have thousands of visitors. I am never lonely.

Not even when the morning rush is over. No, that is when my day really begins. Loud voices shout over my own silent humming. I believe they are excited. A new day full of adventure! Sturdy boots with soft soles tread carefully but determinedly. “Follow me!”, their owner calls. A gasping and giggling choir of ballet flats and designer sneakers obeys, and for minutes I can only hear the collective noise of its soles and tongues. I anticipate Paul sighing behind me. When peace finally seems restored, the scene begins anew. I do not recognise the language of the shoe-owners, but that is irrelevant. I am deeply familiar with the universal phenomenon of steps.

In all the bustle their presence passes almost unnoticed. Only when it quiets down for just a moment, I acknowledge them. They are loyal visitors. It takes them so much longer to leave me behind than it does the hurrying crowd. Slowly, but oh so heroically, they make their way to the other side of the river. Step by step by step. Two soft pairs of shoes next to one another, in perfect harmony. They are accompanied by a soft thud. It goes more like this: thud – step – step – thud – step – step. They pause right in the middle, their owners turning first to one side and then to the other. They sigh. Soft words are spoken that I cannot make out. A person chuckles. I feel peaceful in their presence. They are tired but content.

On slow days I might follow them across and try to catch a glimpse of their lives, but today, unfortunately, is not one of these days. I can hear them shouting even before their running strides send forceful vibrations through me. They overpower my senses. They consume my entire existence. I am almost paralysed in the noise of shouts and steps. It seems that they are, too. Caught in a ritual, oblivious to the outside world. They ignore a voice trying to shout over their clamour. Finally, almost all the way across the river, they halt. For the briefest moment I hope this will be the end. And then they start jumping.

I feel anxious for a long time after they are gone. I try to focus on the steps. It becomes easier as dusk approaches. John-from-accounting passes again. He has a spring in his step, and I wonder what is expecting him this evening. He greets the owner of the high heels, whose steps drag after a long day. I much prefer the tired shuffle of the evening crowd.

This means it is almost time for my favourite part of the day. It is not the exact same moment each time, but I can trust its occurrence like clockwork. I can almost sense the pitter-patter of soft, unshod soles approaching.

*Earth has not any thing to show more fair:  
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
A sight so touching in its majesty:*

It is once again time for their evening stroll. I do not even mind the various excretions they leave behind. Their pure happiness and unconditional loyalty leave a much more meaningful mark on me. I focus on their steps, some tiny, some more forceful, and ignore their companions' tired trot. I cherish this feeling as long as I can, and after they are gone – some earlier, some later, some having passed twice – I know that soon the briefest moment of solitude will come. Loners travel silently across the river, afraid to disturb the quiet of the night. I can feel their soft vibrations and let them lure me into drowsiness. Now that the sun has set, and the people have returned with their various noises to their homes, the city becomes a part of me. We are cloaked in silence. I can see lights reflected in the water, becoming one with the river, ships, towers, domes. Making their way through the night.

Dear Architect, the very houses seem alive;  
but all that mighty heart is lying still!

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picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

## shaping another world

by luciana di bernardo

### 1.

It was the first day of spring, the land still covered in thick snow that made it difficult to move through the dense forest. There was no other sound except for the rustling leaves, dancing in the freezing wind travelling through the mortal realm, called Aradian. Aylin was sitting on a tree branch, her bow aimed at the trap she had set before she climbed up. She was aiming for several minutes now, sweat already running down her brows. She was about to lower her bow and look for a better place to hunt, when suddenly a red fox appeared behind a tree. It was moving towards the trap, surrounding it with careful steps. For a moment, Aylin thought that she saw intelligence in the fox's eyes as it carefully looked around for any sign of danger. She slowly aimed at the fox and readied her arrow, before it could get away; after all, she had a family to provide for and could not let that chance pass. The moment she let go of the arrow, a black wolf appeared out of nowhere and tried to attack the fox when Aylin's arrow struck right through its upper body. The creature let out a crying howl and slumped on the snow-covered ground. It took her a few seconds to realize what had just happened and the severity of it hit her so hard, she almost fell from the tree; she had killed a wolf. A black wolf. One from the land that no one even dared speak of. A creature from Erilea. And everybody knew that killing a creature from Erilea came with horrible and unspeakable consequences. She hastily climbed down the tree, not caring about the sharp branches cutting her hands, and ran to the dying wolf, its blood already mixing with the fresh snow. She couldn't breathe. Seeing the big black wolf in front of her dying, she also saw what would happen to her family. All of them would be slaughtered and made an example of to show what happens when anyone kills a creature from that land. She had to cover her tracks as quickly as possible. Hastily, she used her dagger to cut down the wolf into smaller pieces and put the bloody meat and black fur into her brown leather bag. Both would come in handy on their inevitable escape.

After covering the leftovers of the dead wolf with snow and leaves, she ran back home to her family, her mother and sisters ignorant of the crime she had just committed. "We need to get

out of here,” she said the moment she slammed the door behind her. Her family was around the table, eating what was left of last week’s hunt. The fire behind them was crackling and illuminating the small room, covering it in an orange light. Their hut was small, but practical; the wooden floor was covered in fur from Aylin’s successful hunts, the windows and doors were sturdy enough to give proper cover during the hard winter months. Her two sisters and mother looked at her in shock, their spoons still in the air.

“What are you talking about? What happened, Aylin?” her mother asked. Aylin looked at her mother, a mirror of herself. Her copper hair was braided into a crown, her green eyes shaped liked almonds. Those usually calm eyes were now in shock, the golden ring around the pupils even brighter. The gold seemed to flicker, as if her mother already knew what had happened.

“We don’t have time, we need to go *now*. Only pack things you need, nothing heavy or unnecessary. I’ve got food for the next couple of days.”

Her mother and sisters hastily obeyed and stormed into the bedroom, when the heavy wooden door abruptly burst open. Startled, Aylin turned around only to see what she had only known from nightmare stories; a male Fae. Coming to get her and her family. She instantly drew her dagger, well-aware that this was a fight she would easily lose. The man stomped into the room, his face becoming even more vicious when he saw her. Pure hate was glittering in his sapphire eyes, making Aylin’s heart stop beating.

“I knew I’d find you here, human. I could smell you and my brother from miles away,” he said while picking up the leather bag containing the flesh of the black wolf. “Please, it was an accident. My family had nothing to do with it. You can kill me, but please spare my family,” she pleaded.

“And why would I do that, after you killed one of mine?”

Aylin took a step back, but there was nowhere to go and her back eventually hit the hard wooden wall. She looked over to her family, huddled in the corner sobbing, their faces as white as snow.

“I beg you, please don’t hurt my family,” she whispered. With his heightened hearing, she knew that he could hear every sound, every heartbeat, and every breath she took. He was incredibly tall, his deep brown hair covered by a woollen grey hood. He was still holding her bag, as he stepped right in front of her, so close that she could even feel his breath on her face when he said,

“Oh, I do not intend to kill you. That would be too easy. No, you will come with me to Erilea, where you will have to answer before the king, not me. And believe me, when I say, that he is far more vicious than I am.”

And with that, her world came crashing down.



The following moments were a blur. Her mother and sisters were shouting, begging him to spare Aylin, but it was a fruitless effort on something that was bound to happen. She had killed the black wolf, and these were the consequences – accident or not. Hell, she was lucky she and her family were still alive. The man grabbed her arm, knocked away her dagger with frightening ease and dragged her outside. She looked back to her family, unable to say



anything while the hut became smaller and smaller with each step. The shouts of her family were nothing more than a ringing in her ears. It all happened so fast, it seemed like a horrible dream. The Fae dragged her to the woods, close to the spot where she had killed the wolf. They were walking towards the border, towards Erilea. *This can't be happening.*

“It wasn't my fault! I was aiming at the fox when the wolf suddenly jumped right in front of my arrow! It was an accident!” she pleaded. The man turned around, gripping her hair, speaking through his gritted teeth.

“Accident, or not, he is still dead. It was your arrow that killed him. So, what difference does it make, human?”.

It had to make a difference. Because all she wanted, was to provide for her family. She gathered all the bravery that was inside her and tried to punch him with her right fist, but only hit air. With inhuman speed he was already behind her gripping her hair even harder, which made her groan with pain.

“You know, there is a reason why you are not in shackles. Humans are weak. You will always be a useless and worthless race,” he hissed into her ear. He pushed her forward so she would keep moving. The frustration of the situation hit her so hard, she could not help but cry. Cry for what she has lost in not more than a single day and for the unknown future lying ahead. It took a day's walk to the border, her shoes soaking and her feet already blistering. At the invisible border, the Fae stretched out his left hand, and for the first time Aylin recognized the runes running along his arm. She could not help but to stare at the ink entwining his pale skin. Mesmerized she dared to step closer and marvelled at the detailed and delicate artwork. And suddenly the air was knocked out of her. Right under his wrist she saw a small tattoo in the shape of a moon covered in flowers - the exact same tattoo she had right behind her left ear. Every inch of the tattoo mirrored hers. Every line, every dot, every curve. *This can't be real.* Recognizing the tattoo hit her so hard, she tumbled over a root, hidden beneath layers of snow. The man stopped whatever he was doing and yanked her up again.

“Watch where you are going, girl,” he said as if she did that on purpose.

“Your tattoo”, she said, her voice shaking. “It can't be.”

“What are you saying?”, he said with so much hate in his eyes, it made her flinch.

“It's the same. The same as mine”, she whispered while slowly revealing hers, her hand visibly shivering as she brushed back her brown hair.

Within seconds, he let go of her and staggered back. Bewilderment was written all over his face, his voice trembling, when he said, “Aylin, it's you. You are back.”

## 2.

Who Aylin was, Sara did not know yet. She stopped writing for a moment and put down her pen. She picked the cup in front of her up, took a sip of her black coffee and looked outside the window. It was another quiet day in London. The café she sat in was one of her favourite ones; it was clean, cosy, and bright. When she looked outside she could see the Millennium Bridge – one of her favourite spots in the city. Only half a year ago she sat in the exact same corner watching people hurrying to their work or whatever they were planning on doing. The furniture of the café was relatively modern and the smell of coffee and pastries was in the air. Looking outside she realized that everything seemed so different now; the bridge was almost empty, the

café less lively. It reminded her of a painting that lacked completely of colour; one that is only black and white.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment, savouring the warmth of the cup between her hands. Her decision to start writing a story of her own emerged when the world suddenly changed. She was longing for something that would distract her, something that would occupy her mind and block out the insufferable wave of daily news. Sara opened her eyes and looked at the story in front of her; she did not yet know who Aylin was – or is going to be. She could be anything; a human battling the vicious Fae king, a long-lost mate of the mysterious Fae who shared her tattoo, a heroine. But no matter who Aylin was going to be, Sara enjoyed each moment of shaping her story. In it she could lose herself and ignore what was happening around her. She looked next to her and noticed the plexiglass separating her table from the other. An elderly man was sitting there, wearing a mask, and reading the newspapers. At the front page it said “246.083 deaths from Coronavirus in the US”. When he coughed, people around him adjusted their masks to make sure they were still tight. Sara caught herself checking on hers with her left hand, too, to make sure it was still there. It saddened her to see how the world had changed so rapidly - just like Aylin’s life did. But she did not feel sadness when it came to her; she could make sure that Aylin’s life was without worrying about social distance, horrifying newspaper deadlines, and an invisible threat.

She could shape it. All it took was imagination and the café she was sitting in slowly transformed into the snow-covered forest. The cold wind chilled her bones. Sara’s heart was beating so fast – out of fear or relief, she did not know. “Who is Aylin?”, she whispered, almost out of breath. For a couple of minutes the stranger did not answer and Aylin did not know what to do. Should she use those minutes of shock to escape? But she knew, that with his non-human speed and hearing, it would only take a couple of seconds to catch up with her. Fleeing from those creatures was useless. Crying for help was useless. After what felt like a lifetime the stranger came closer to her, so close, that she took a step back, feeling intimidated by his sheer presence and height.

“Do you not remember at all? Have you forgotten about your people? We have been waiting for your return since you left. The people laid all their hope into you, or at least, what was left of it. We thought you were dead”, he breathed. “How can this be? How are you still alive?”, he whispered with a trembling voice. He was clenching his fists, knuckles turning white.

“I... - What are you talking about?”, Aylin asked. The words that came out of him did not make any sense to her. Who exactly was waiting for her? Whose hope? Her whole life she has spent in Aradian, caring for her family, painting the walls of her room with her sisters, going to the market with her friends, and chopping wood for the many harsh winters. Never in her life had she set foot outside the small village she was living in.

“You don’t remember, do you?”, he asked. “Whatever your name is now, you, Leya, are the rightful heir to the kingdom of Erilea. You are the people’s last hope”, he said kneeling down. “You are my last hope. You are my queen”.

And with those words, a new world was slowly shaped. A world where Sara could be the hero saving a long-lost kingdom from a ferocious and unlawful king. A world where she was in control. A world that she would save.

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## the devil's child

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by **simona fischnaller**

**August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2019 – diary entry #246 – written from home**

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*It has been a gruesome week. I have been feeling worse again lately. Much to my chagrin, my mother made me visit my daughter at her foster home today. This has been a terrible afternoon. Perhaps it is the reason why I am feeling so devastated right now. Frankly speaking, my daughter is, at least to some extent, the reason why my life has become such a torture.*

*I know that any mother would consider this little 3-year-old girl the most amazing gift from God and I must admit that she is extremely gorgeous, and, to my surprise, she resembles me a lot. She has got my curly blond hair, my mischievous grin, and my chubby, rosy cheeks. As I already stated, any mama would be very proud of having such a sweet toddler, but I am not. Truly, I hate her. I hate her as much as the person who forced me not to get rid of her right at the beginning of the pregnancy. I hate her, for she has got HIS black-brown and dangerously wide eyes. This is the first time that I actually wrote down my emotions about her and it feels...liberating. Well, since I don't want to talk to a psychologist about where my anxieties stem from, I guess I've got to write my story down. Maybe this helps me to eventually move on with my life.*

*Alright, so as soon as I gave birth to this child, I knew that I had to give her up for adoption because I could not have dealt with a baby on top of everything that happened in the year prior to her birth. Additionally, I was only 15 and how for God's sake should a depressive teenager take care of a new born baby?*

*My mother was angry at me for getting pregnant, but she never wanted to listen to me when I was ready to tell her the whole story. She wasn't there for me when I needed her the most, but*

*she wanted to adopt my daughter. If you asked me now, I would say that my mother's behavior was purely hypocritical, since she had never cared in the least about her own child – ME –, yet she wanted to be a better grandmother. Fortunately, she didn't get that chance, since child protection services realized that it would do more harm than good for everyone involved if the child was under my very nose day after day. This sounds caring, but CPS did not want to protect me, they only worried about this innocent little girl who was discarded by her own selfish teenage mom.*

*At that time, nobody realized how much I suffered and how desperately I needed help – literally nobody. But in retrospect, I must admit that they might have been right about protecting the baby because I was traumatized and being around her day in, day out would have made me go even more wicked. And maybe I could have hurt her, and she certainly wouldn't have deserved that, although I didn't have any maternal feelings toward her. To be honest, I don't think that I would ever be able to take care of that child, let alone LOVE her. It is for the best that she is living with foster parents, for it makes me less anxious and gives me the opportunity to simply face the future with a glimpse of hope.*

*So far, my safe haven has been books. I love to read, for it makes me forget everything that is going on in my life. In fact, the universes of the books I'm reading serve as my personal refuge. However, sometimes I even find the courage to listen to audio books authored by women who survived similar situations that I repeatedly found myself in ... and the positive attitudes toward life that they have developed over time give me strength. These reports have even persuaded me to eventually press charges against HIM and to go public with everything he did to me – but not at this point, for I am still too fragile. In addition to that, all of those powerful women make me believe that I can still achieve everything I wanted before my personal nightmare started. And I know that I can do that. I am currently planning to attend university next year (far away from home). This will be my starting point to a better life – a life without flashbacks, nightmares, panic attacks and self-harm.*

*What makes my life a little bit more bearable is the fact that the baby is not part of my life any longer, but HE still is. And this is what makes me feel uneasy. Still, I cannot do anything about it. I cannot confide this to any other person until I am absolutely ready to report everything that happened to the police, since nobody of my family and friends would believe me anyway... This story is far too crazy to be credible. I realized that when I confided in a good friend named Lucy right after I found out about the pregnancy. Honestly, her reaction was like a punch in the face. She laughed at me... She bloody roared with laughter. I felt so humiliated. This was the moment I decided that I must find a way to continue my life without sharing these dreadful memories with absolutely no human soul – at least for a couple of years. Surprisingly, I have been doing quite well so far. I mean the child, my daughter, has just turned three and nobody knows who fathered her, so I think my plan is going great.*

*Now one may wonder who the baby's daddy is. Well, her father is the devil himself and I swear, I have never met a person who is more possessive, hot-tempered, and evil than him. He used to be my best friend, my soulmate, and my idol. We grew up in the same neighborhood, attended the same school and always hung out together. He is three years older than me, but I loved him as a brother and I used to be very grateful as a young teenager that one of the "older, cool boys" regularly hangs out with me – a loner. Honestly, the two of us were having so much fun together. We were baking chocolate-chip cookies regularly, eating strawberry ice cream every day after school, and he often helped me with my homework. We even went hiking, swimming,*

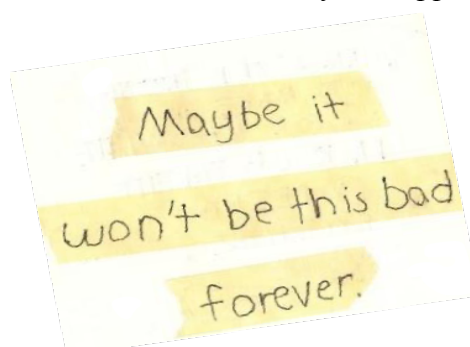
*and cycling quite frequently, since physical exercise made us both feel happy and content. Frankly, I wish I could go back in time because my life was more than wonderful back then.*

*Yet, the older we got, the more his behavior changed from being sweet and understanding to moody and aggressive. The more I turned into a woman, the worse his ill temper got. He started beating me up almost weekly – for no reason. He pushed me down onto the floor and kicked me with his legs – for no reason. I started crying and shouting for help, but he forced me to be quiet or else he would hurt me more. However, the physical pain was already immense. I've never felt so much anguish in my entire life. His main "targets" were my belly and my genitals, but sometimes he would also hurt my legs or arms. The bruises were clearly visible, but I didn't need to find any excuses that I had stupidly hurt myself on a hike because nobody ever asked me where I got the contusions from. No teacher, no schoolmate, yes, not even my own mother noticed all of the injuries I used to have for months at a time.*

*Obviously, HE was incredibly angry at me, but I had no idea why; I was just a 14-year-old-kid. He used to tell me it was all my fault and that something I did was wrong and thus I deserved that punishment. Now, roughly four years later, I know that it was by no means my fault getting beaten up on a weekly basis. My only fault was not having reported this to the police and not having broken with him for good. The answer to why I did that is simple: I didn't want to lose him. That choice was tremendously foolish, I know. But eventually our friendship – or whatever that was – came to an end, namely right after he sexually assaulted me. Oh, what an innocent term to describe what he did. In fact, he raped me. He raped me brutally, consciously and without thinking about potential consequences – getting pregnant, for instance.*

*Well, since that day my life has changed forever. I have become the mother of the devil's child and I am hurting myself regularly because I am at odds with myself and believe me, so much more is wrong with me. Yet, the only good thing about the whole matter is that HE hasn't talked to me since the rape occurred. He even tries meticulously to avoid eye-contact with me whenever we run into each other in the neighborhood. Still – sooner or later – our eyes meet every time because I genuinely shoot daggers at him ... I want him to know how much he made me suffer and I want him to know that I hate him more than anyone in this world.*

*He is fully aware that we share a daughter and he made it very clear that if I told anyone about the child or the physical and sexual abuse, something bad would happen, since he has a successful career as a lawyer ahead of him. Well, who cares about his stupid job? I surely don't, but for the time being, I'm fine with how things are. As soon as I have recovered, I will tell the truth. I will let everyone know what was done to me by my alleged best friend and why I abandoned my own baby girl. Mistakenly, he already thinks himself safe; he thinks that I am too weak and broken to go after him, but one day I will ruin his life just like he destroyed mine. I am not a victim, I am a survivor, but I still need some time to heal before stepping into the lion's den.*



Maybe it  
won't be this bad  
forever.

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## in between

picture: violet stathopoulou-vaiss

by karin ehrenbrandner

Between Earth and sky  
Between adult and young guy  
Between now and back then  
The question of where and when.  
**What am I, if I am in between?**

DARKNESS. SILENCE. NOTHING. Black.

I turn around to check if I can see something on the other side.

NOTHING.

My fingers tickle and I feel the urge to touch my eyes to see if they are really open, but I can't. These last couple of days were exhausting. Not only exhausting, but entirely uncertain. I am so tired. These four walls have been my companions for so long now. Who knows, maybe even longer? I don't know where I am or what day it is. I lost track of time. Is it night or day? Is it hot or cold? I can't feel anything. I'm too anxious. Am I sitting, or am I standing? Time is running and yet not passing. Hours go by, but I am stuck here.

One. Two. Three. What is that noise? Each stroke vibrates in my whole being. Four. Five. Six.

BOOM.

SUN. WARMTH. LAUGHTER. White.

I try to look, but it's too bright. The light is burning in my eyes. I try to touch the four walls of my container and sense that one of them is missing. Slowly and still a bit dangly, I try to exit the place I called home for so many days, my eyelids pressed together tightly. The whole body is still numb, but there is this rumbling in my stomach that reminds me that I haven't eaten in all these days.

Water! I need water. It feels like breathing through sandpaper. I open my left eye slowly, just so that I can see the light shining through my fingers, my hands still covering my face. I feel a warm breeze swirling through my hair. Turning my head to the left, I hear the waves breaking on the shore. I lick my lips, and a salty taste tickles my tongue.

HOME.

The salty scent reminds me of home. Am I home now? Where am I? Having adjusted to the brightness, I am finally able to remove my hands from my face and can fully open my eyes. I am confronted with a scenery I have never seen before. Beautiful. I try to move. As I dig my feet further into the hot white sand to enjoy the warmth, I feel the rough grains scratching and filling up the spaces between my toes. It almost feels like drowning them. I close my eyes again. Is this real? I am actually here. I made it.

As I open my eyes again I see people walking by. Their faces change the moment they look at me. They seem angry. As I try to approach them, they turn away and leave. That is weird; where I am from we greet everyone with warmth.

I walk a bit further in the sand, and every time my feet glide over it, it is easier to move. With every step the laughter is getting louder, until I see a few kids playing in the sand. I wonder if this is their home. Where is my home? I am not there anymore, I am here now. But I have not arrived yet, have I? It certainly does not feel like it. Is this also my home now?

I feel my body aching. My legs give in and I sink down into the sand. Sitting here and watching the children play, I find that they are not so different from me. They are in between child and adult; they are not there anymore and have not arrived in real life yet.

WHAT IS REAL LIFE?

Do I live the real life? I am home and yet not home. I am here, but have not arrived. I am not a child and yet not an adult. What am I?

LOST IN BETWEEN.

Lost between child and man. Lost between here and there. Lost between Earth and sky. I find myself lost in the sand, lost in a place that I do not know. A place that I would like to call my home. I am transitioning. I am transitioning from child to man, from origin to new home, from life to death. I am in between.

Maybe being in between is life.

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## everything we did not say ...

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by **anna kofler**

When they walked past, his look passed right over me lingering only for half a second and then moving right along. Was it possible... Had he just really not recognized me? I shook my head in disbelief and was about to reflexively shout something half-hurt, half-mocking after them when in the next second, his walk seemed to freeze mid-step. I could almost see his brain starting to process what he had seen with brows furrowed like “wait... was that...?”. He doubled back with wide eyes. When he found me standing there, hands on hips, accusatory look in my eyes, a roguish grin spread from one ear to the other and lit up his face and my stupid heart stumbled over the next beat. I just had to grin back at him, his smile was too infectious. With wide outstretched arms he came towards me.

“What the hell, Sandy! I almost didn’t recognize you there for a second. How have you been?”

And he squeezed the air out of my lungs in a tight bear hug.

My actual name is not Sandy. My actual name is Ali, or Aliya. It had somehow started when I was a little kid and loved playing in the sand and loved being buried in holes the older guys made in the sand until only my head stuck out. When I freed myself from the holes, the wet sand stuck to my whole body. Sand everywhere, in my hair, in my ears, also a bit in my mouth. And I would sprint over the hot sand, as fast as my short legs would carry me, down to the sea and wash everything off in the cool salty water and then go straight back to playing in the sand. “We should have called you Sandy”, my mom would say with a small headshake and a grin. The sand always washed off, but the name stuck.

Before I could catch my breath to answer, my brother Nicky came out of the tent he had just put up. He jumped at Leo with an almost hysterical cry and they hugged, laughing.

“Leo! Damn man, I haven’t seen your face in too long. How was New Zealand?”



“It was amazing, really. I’m going down to the beach with the others right now, but I got to tell you about it later when you’re all set up here.”

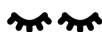
And as soon as he had arrived, he was gone again with a small wave and a quick grin in my direction after the other guys down to the beach.

Well, maybe this year would not be so different after all, I thought a little annoyed that I had not made myself at least a tiny bit more noticeable. Not a single word did I utter in front of him and that after almost three years. Perfect start. Leo was my forever-and-longer-childhood-vacation-crush. I had always admired him even when I was a little kid (he was actually a little kid too, back then). There are so many photos of the two of us and my brother as kids playing in the sand or in the sea, balancing on old surfboards or splashing about with huge inflatable animals, or photos of the three of us with popsicles smeared all over our faces and dripping down our fingers. Some with Leo’s older sister, who was – at seventeen – already a grown up to me, putting up a treasure hunt through the whole campsite for all the younger kids. And there is one photo, I especially admire, me about four years old, sitting on Leo’s lap, eyes glowing proudly, down at the beach on one of the campfire nights and him, only nine or something, with his arms protectively around me.

As we got older, the five years that separated us became more and more noticeable. I had always been the annoying younger sister my brother was sometimes made to take along, but when I was about ten years old, I started to realize how big the age difference between my teenage brother and his group and me actually was. I got too proud to be taken along as the little sister nobody really wanted to hang out with voluntarily and since there were no other kids my age at the campsite I felt like playing with, I usually stayed with my parents and read and read books all day long while the older kids played volleyball or made trips to the towns nearby or sometimes even were allowed to go out with the motor boat to find little secret bays along the coast. Especially in the evenings, when the Mediterranean air cooled off and the slight breeze carried along the music from the campsite restaurant and bar promising exciting nights at the beach or at the clubs, it was hard sometimes to stay at the tent with my parents while my brother and Leo took off with the other teenagers. They never asked me to go along anymore and I didn’t ask them to take me. I knew, I wouldn’t fit in with that crowd and I wouldn’t understand what they were talking about late at night down at the beach. There had been this one time, when I did go with them to the beach at night, and I was so excited but then it turned out to be a huge disappointment. Nobody talked to me and my brother sat a little way off together with one of the Italian girls, their heads close together, his arm around her shoulder. Leo was with some of the other guys I didn’t know well enough to join. After an hour or so I got cold and tired and I shivered so hard, I almost felt like crying. At some point, Leo came over and told me I should go up to the tent and go to sleep, there wasn’t anything interesting going on tonight anyway. But I was only ten and I was afraid to go through the dark pinewoods all by myself and so my brother had to leave his Italian girl and go with me. It was the last time I ever asked him to take me along to the beach at night.

Now all of that was a long time ago. When I last saw Leo, I was still thirteen and he had just turned nineteen. It was the first year, he did not arrive together with his parents but came in a separate car. And he brought along his girlfriend. I didn’t see much of him that year. Together with my brother and some of the others they did a lot of trips around the island while I had finally found some kids my own age to hang out with. After that year, we didn’t see each other again because the next summer my best friends’ family took me along on their holiday and the summer after that, Leo did not come down. He spent a year at a university in New Zealand. I

never heard from him at all in between. That was just the way it was, we did not see each other in real life. And the only contact we had when school started again in fall was through my brother when he texted Leo once in a while, and I sent along my regards.



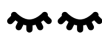
This summer was going to be different after all. When Nicky went to the bar in the evening after we had set everything up and had had our welcome dinner with our parents, it was the most natural thing for me to go along with him. After we got our aperitif at the bar, we found the others outside on the terrace sitting around one of the tables in a big circle. As we came closer, Andrea, a guy from Rome who also came down here every summer and had been part of the gang for as long as I can remember, spotted us first.

“Ahh, Nick, hey, hey, hey, come sit. And, ahh no, it is not possible, is that little Sandy over there? Leo has not been exaggerating then, you really did grow up. And you really are so beautiful,” he blurted out in a thick Italian accent. I grinned, blushing a little, and looked over to Leo who didn’t raise his eyes from a huge ice cream bowl in front of him but just shrugged and said: “Well yeah, it’s true. I almost didn’t recognize her this morning.”

After kissing and hugging everyone around the table, I sat down next to Andrea who immediately started talking at an impossible pace, gesturing excitedly, filling us in on everything that had happened in the past couple of days since they had all arrived here. Listening only with half an ear, my eyes were inevitably drawn to Leo who had just finished his ice cream bowl with relish. I still hadn’t had the chance to talk to him. As if he had felt my gaze like a tap on the shoulder, he looked up at me and smiled. Without hesitation he got up and dragged his silver aluminum chair around the group sitting down next to me.

“Ali. Feels like I haven’t seen you in forever. How long has it been? Like three years or something?”

I had to concentrate hard to understand his words while he stared so directly into my eyes. I cursed myself for still being so absolutely spellbound whenever he was around. I had been sure that my fascination for him had been a childhood crush and had expected that crush to stay where it belonged – in my childhood. Instead I sat there transfixed by his bright glinting eyes and already knew, but was not yet ready to admit to myself, that I was falling for him once again. And once you’re falling, there is no way to turn back. Distractedly, I blinked away those irritating thoughts.



“Yes. Yes, right, it’s crazy. How does it feel to be back?”

He started telling me about his year in New Zealand and about his life back at home and just like that we were as we had always been. Even though we hadn’t seen each other for such a long time, there was a sense of familiarity I could not quite explain. It was so easy talking to him, floating from one story to the next. After some time, I eased up, realizing with a tiny little inexplicable feeling of disappointment that there was no need for me to be nervous. Leo and I had known each other forever, we were like brother and sister. We kept talking and I only noticed how fast the time had passed, when the first ones started announcing they would be leaving soon. We ordered one last round and, at two in the morning, we made our way back to the tents. Leo and I walked a little behind the group still absorbed in our conversation. He had started telling me about a girl he had met at university in New Zealand.



“I wanted to stop seeing her because I knew that in a couple of months I was going back home, and it would only get harder to say goodbye the better we got to know each other. But she always told me just to relax, live in the moment. Enjoy it while we still can.”

“But it must have been hard on her too, right? Knowing you will be gone again so soon.”

“Well, yeah, I thought so too...” with a little painful laugh he added, “actually, I’m not so sure anymore. I guess she probably didn’t like me that much after all.”

“So, you still think about her a lot?”

“I still think about her but not a lot. It’s been almost a year now and it never got to the point, you know... It never really got serious.”

I nodded and halted when we got to his camper van. The loud talk and laughter of the others had faded away, they had already dispersed into several directions, everybody looking forward to getting some sleep now. We stood there for a moment without saying anything.

“Your parents trusted you with the van this year, huh?” I asked randomly, tapping on its side.

“Luckily they did. Believe me, the bed in there is so much more comfortable than any inflatable mattress,” he chuckled. “So, how about you? Do you have a boyfriend back at home?”, he asked quietly after a moment. Seeing the look in his eyes, my heart started beating hard. Could it be, that maybe there was a reason to be nervous?

“No. No, I did have a boyfriend for almost a year. But we broke up. Two months ago.” “You broke up with him?”

“He broke up with me.” I shrugged trying to show him how little I cared.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. In the end it wasn’t much fun anymore for neither of us, we were always fighting and I was always annoyed and then I was sad at first, of course, but I guess I would have never gotten around to ending things because I always thought maybe things will get better again, but if I’m honest I knew they wouldn’t, so now I’d actually say it was a relief that he had the guts to do it.” A grin spread over his face as I nervously babbled away and when I had finally finished, I had to take a deep breath. He nodded. “I know exactly what you mean,” he murmured, gazing into my eyes with a look that I felt could touch my soul.

Neither of us said anything after that. The moment extended with us looking silently into each other’s eyes. A tension started to grow inside me, making each second seem to stretch out like chewing gum.

A thousand unfinished thoughts raised through my head. Should I ask something else? Make a joke? Say good night? Or should I maybe...

“Good night,” I blurted out, my voice sounding too loud in the dark. Only after the words were out did I realize with surprise that I had uttered them. It had been an impulsive decision I had not consciously made. The moment had passed, we hugged, and I left. On the way to my tent I felt like tearing my hair out regretting my cowardly quick retreat. For a moment I considered going back but I wasn’t sure... Maybe I had just imagined the whole thing. Maybe there hadn’t been any tension. Or had he felt it too? But with every step, I moved further away from the possibility of finding out.

“Tonight there’s a full moon,” Andrea said a couple of days later on the beach. He shook his wet hair in my direction sending water drops flying in my face and all over my book. I shrieked a little and kicked some sand in his direction and he laughed. “Idiot”, I mumbled mock-sulkily. He dropped down on my towel next to me. “We’re going down to the beach to watch it rise and maybe make a campfire. You’re coming?”

“Sure, I’ll be there”, I answered coolly. Inside I felt like laughing out loud and balling my fist in triumph. It was the first time I had officially been invited to something like this and then it wasn’t even by Nicky or Leo who might have felt obliged to invite me.

That night after dinner Nicky and I went to the tiny store that was open 24 hours a day on the other side of the campsite to pick up some snacks and wine. The sun had just set, and dusk was falling. From some of the tents and camper vans set up along both sides of the path one could hear music and muffled conversations. Swarms of little insects whirred around the light posts that lined the path. The smell of summer lay in the air and I breathed in as much of the familiar exciting scent as I could. This summer wouldn’t last forever.

Nicky was walking next to me and seemed deeply concentrated on a pinecone he had picked up along the side of the path. Picking out the kernels is a tricky thing, especially while walking, so I was surprised, when he started to speak.

“So you finally going to hook up with Leo this year?”, he asked casually, not lifting his eyes from the pine cone. Not saying anything, I stared at him from the side, dumbfounded.

“What?”, he exclaimed defensively, “I thought you probably already did. I mean, that first night at the bar, he was definitely hitting on you, wasn’t he?”

“No, we... I don’t think... It’s not like that between us,” I said but my thoughts already drifted off in a different direction. If Nicky thought there had been something going on between Leo and me, then maybe my interpretation of that moment that night at the camper van hadn’t been so wrong.

“Okay, if you say so,” he said shrugging his shoulders doubtfully, but he didn’t press the matter further.

We took the direct way from the shop down to the beach and found the others scattered at the edge of the pinewood gathering sticks for the campfire. When the sun had set, one of the guys, Lucas, lit up the campfire and everyone gathered around it on their towels to watch the moon rise. It was a wonderful spectacle. A huge glowing ball, it rose out of the sea making the dark water sparkle magically.

By the time the moon was high in the sky, everyone had started talking in little groups. Andrea had brought a ukulele and was sitting with Nicky and me playing songs everybody could sing along with. After a while, Nicky nudged me in the side and gestured with his head over to Leo who sat a little way off, talking animatedly to Lucas and Sara. My eyes had followed his gesture and when I looked back at my brother he nodded encouragingly. I hesitated for a moment but then, finishing my third cup of wine, I gathered enough confidence to walk over to Leo. When I sat down next to him, he put his arm around my shoulder like it was the most natural thing to do and a comfortable little shiver ran down my spine. My tense muscles were just about to relax when Lucas spoke.

“So, Sandy you’re still in love with Leo then? I mean it was kind of cute, you always clinging to him when you were a little kid but aren’t you too old for that now?”, he remarked, grinning

stupidly. My throat tightened and I looked down at my hands twisted together in my lap trying to force a smile. I kept quiet because I sensed if I said anything now, my voice would probably quiver, and I cursed myself for it. I tended to break down easily when I was a little tipsy. It felt like a reflex, something my body did without me giving it permission to do so. My brain knew there was no reason to be so upset right now and I was startled at how easily this stupid little remark had thrown me off balance.

“Come on, Sandy, don’t start crying now. It was a joke!”, Lucas exclaimed incredulously when he saw my expression. Some of the others, who had been occupied with their own conversations, turned their heads in our direction. “Just shut up now,” Sara hissed punching him in the arm. I wanted to tell them not to worry about me, I didn’t want to be upset, it was just my body doing stupid things, but there was this strangely pleasant awkward silence, I didn’t feel like breaking. After a moment, Leo got up. I watched him, wondering what he was doing, and he smiled and stretched out his arm. “Come on.” Without thinking about it for a second, I grabbed his hand and let him pull me off the ground. Still, nobody said anything, but I felt several eyes staring at us now. As we walked away from the group, down towards the sea, I heard Lucas muttering “It’s not my fault she’s so damn sensitive”, some giggling and not-so-discreetly whispered comments. I could very well imagine the meaningfully raised eyebrows and had to smile to myself a little. This was the way it should be, the same in every group of friends. Everybody teasing each other, not taking things too seriously. After we were out of earshot of the others Leo broke the silence.

“He’s an idiot, you know. I always liked having you around. Still do.”

“I know... I know. I have no idea why I get so upset,” but after a pause I added, “well actually, I guess I do know why. It was always the thing I was most afraid of. That you guys just hung out with me because you felt bad for me. I’ve always felt like the annoying little sister, like I was an intruder in your grown-up group.”

He nodded understandingly and sighed. “Yeah, you’re right. You are really very annoying. I have no idea why I spend time with you at all,” he said dead serious nudging me in the side playfully. “You’re an idiot too,” I grumbled nudging him back, laughing a little. With a start I realized, OK, now we’re definitely flirting with each other and right on cue, my heart started pumping hard. We walked on side by side. After struggling with myself for some time, I finally said: “I have really been looking forward to seeing you again. You know it’s true I always had a big crush on you, right?”

Turning his head, he smiled at me teasingly. “Had? I got to say that past tense is a little disappointing.”

“Well, I guess we’re too old for crushes now...”

We must have walked for quite some time. When we returned to the campfire, it had burned down, and the others had already left. We gathered our things and made our way back to the campsite in silence. In front of my tent I turned to face him and gasped when I found him standing much closer than I had expected. I could almost feel the heat radiating off his body. My pulse quickened instantly, heart throbbing in my chest making it feel like there wasn’t enough space for it in there. Our eyes met and lingered, and I was caught. My mind went blank. It was not the first time I was about to be kissed. It was the first time, though, my body reacted this way. It felt like I was giving in to a magnetic attraction when I started to lean closer. Then, in a second, he turned his head to the side breaking our eye contact to pull me

into a tight hug. I stiffened up before remembering to hug him back and when he released me after a moment, I pulled away with an involuntary jerk. Again, the moment had ended too fast for me to react.

“Well, hum, thanks for the walk. I... I’ll see you tomorrow then.” He scratched the back of his head looking to the side. I pressed my lips together and nodded slightly.

“Yeah... Well, yeah. Sure, anytime. Goodnight then,” I mumbled awkwardly after a moment. And he turned away without meeting my eyes again leaving me standing there.



After that night Leo and I went back to being friends, just friends. Probably it is wrong to say we went back; we never really were anything else but that. When we hung out together, things were never strange, never complicated, just the way they had always been. I sometimes caught Leo glancing over at me, or maybe he caught me glancing at him and when our eyes met, we would smile at each other. There had been something between us that summer and we both knew the other had felt it too. Maybe things could have been different if I had just known what to say. Or maybe not. We will never find out what it could have been.

Because of everything we did not say...

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## biggie or no biggie

picture: violet stathopoulou-vaiss

by alex nussbaumer

Time to go. It has to be six already. Hey, I'm six.

I wonder what's for dinner. Probably fried rice, it's a Wednesday after all – I think. Today was a great day. Mommy brought me to the beach to meet her friend Janet's kids. I think my mom knows Janet from way back when they went to school together. The only thing that annoyed me today, was Oliver's tower in the middle of the city that we all built out of sand. But it's okay, Oliver is only four, so what does he know?

It's Friday now. We are on the way back to the beach. We built the city right by some sort of pond, or river, close to the ocean. Oh, and it was fried rice on Wednesday. I loved it. I love going to the beach after school. I'm so happy to finally be one of the big kids that go to school. Kindergarten was so boring! Kyle was always picking on me, too. I hate him! He is at a different school now; I don't know where. Oliver's tower is still there and I still don't like it. Miriam, Oliver's sister, also doesn't like it. Mommy said not to be sad, but Oliver couldn't come today, because he is at the doctor. Today it's just Miriam and I. After Wednesday, I am already friends with Miriam. Miriam is also six and I wish she went to my school!

Today I want to build more roads in our city - and a river! But the tower is still there. Right in the middle of our city. Maybe a police tower? The people living in the city need to be safe after all. Yes! I start digging out a path from the city to the ocean. I have even made a little tunnel! It's a long way from the city to the ocean. Why does mommy not help me? What have mommy and Janet been talking about all this time?! She can't help me right now; she has stuff to talk about. Now I have to dig a path for the river all by myself. Miriam is drawing roads into the sand with her hands and she gets sand stuck under her fingernails. She is calling my name and waving me over. I wonder what's going on. She's crying, but doesn't want our moms to see. I ask her what's wrong. I can barely understand what she's saying because she's sobbing, but it has to be sand that's stuck under her fingernails. I hate it when that happens, that's why I'm

using sticks. I was so lucky to find sticks! Janet sees that Miriam is crying and rushes over. It's not the sand stuck under Miriam's fingernails. It's the tower. Miriam doesn't mind the sand at all. I don't even think she noticed.

Miriam tells her mommy all about the tower. She tells her that Oliver built it without asking, and that it's now right in the middle of our city, the city that WE are building, without Oliver. Why should Oliver be allowed to built his tower in the middle of our city? Miriam says that our city is not about the tower! The city is just a regular city, no tower. I really don't mind the tower now. I think it looks good as the center of our city. Janet explains that Oliver just wanted to build the city with us. But he didn't ask, and that is what makes Miriam angry. Now Miriam wants to destroy the tower, but Janet says that she is not allowed to. I don't know who makes the rules for everything! I think it would be rude to destroy Oliver's tower. Maybe we should ask him if we can remove it, or move it somewhere else. Not because I don't like the tower. Actually, I like the tower now. But I would do it because I don't like seeing Miriam angry. Janet says the tower stays right where Oliver built it.


Now my mum is also coming to take a look at what's going on. I explain to mommy that Oliver built a tower in the middle of our city. I tell her that Miriam doesn't like the tower and that I am getting hungry. I also say that I didn't like the tower in the beginning, but now I don't mind it. I would also not care if it wasn't there. She looks at Miriam and sees that she's crying. My mum asks Miriam what she really thinks about moving the tower somewhere else.

That way, Oliver still has his tower, but it's not in the center of the city anymore. Janet says that the tower will have to stay exactly where it is. My mum is surprised. She doesn't want to go against Janet, but she also wants to help Miriam and make her feel better. I think today is Pizza day! I am not sure though. I am getting so hungry!! Miriam's mum and my mum are now arguing whether the tower should remain where it is, or whether we should move it or even take it down altogether. Now, this is weird. Oliver is not even here. Good thing it's six. We need to go. Pizza time.

The next day, we come back to the beach after school. Today, Janet brought Oliver and Miriam. All the channels in the city are filled with water! It looks like the city was flooded, but I built the river, so nothing got damaged! The tower is gone! No one moved it. It's just gone. It also does not look like it collapsed, because there is no pile of sand where it was standing. It's simply not there. As if it had never been there. The pizza yesterday was so good!

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## the tip of the iceberg

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by hannah götsch

*“Do you want to take the Risk?”*

His gentle eyes look right into mine as he eagerly waits for an answer. In the background, the cheerful melody of Ricky Nelson’s *‘It’s late’* merges with the laughter and clinking of glasses, and the sweet smell of cigar smoke fills the air of the entire pub. Faces appear and disappear in an instant, turning the multitude of individuals into one faceless mass. My hands wrapped around a glass of Glenfiddich, I take a deep breath. I close my eyes and try to adapt to the incredibly powerful wave of sensory input ruthlessly rushing over me.

Do I want to take the risk? I don’t know. What if it is the wrong decision and I’ll regret it? What if I lose everything? What if I get hurt? What if I end up regretting not taking the risk? What should I do? I don’t know. So many questions and no answers to give. Glassy beads of cold sweat appear on my forehead, and with every breath I draw, I shrink a little more and feel a little less. Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock. The usually soothing pulse of the clock has turned into an unbearably deafening noise drowning out my very being. I’m floating in a state of paralysis that has numbed my body and stolen my voice.

I stare at this tiny yet powerful device of torture that keeps pushing me towards the edge. With every strike, I feel the growing pressure gradually taking control of my mind and body. It feels as if someone has put a heavyweight onto my chest and keeps adding more and more pounds. My heart is pounding, cold sweat is running down my spine, and each one of my muscle fibers contracts a little more until I turn into a tiny motionless ball of fear.

I look up and into his deep green eyes. His intense gaze penetrates my entire body, and I start trembling. I can clearly see that he is trying to be patient, but he wants a decision. He needs a decision. And I understand. But I just need more time. What if it all ends up being a huge irreparable mistake? What should I do? I don’t know. The paralyzing fear of making the wrong

decision grows to dominate my entire body and I am incapable of uttering a single word. I am held captive in my palace of perfection, incapable of tearing down the walls that I have built. And with every second I withdraw a little more into the interior of the palace, locking one door after another until I don't know how to escape. What should I do?

-

*“Listen, Lady, there are other people who want to be served as well. So, do you want to try our new cocktail of the day or not?”*

*“What’s in the Risk?”*

*“It’s a mixture of tequila, rum, vodka, soda and some lemon juice.”*

*“I think that might be too strong for me. I’ll settle for something I know.”*

*“Yeah, there are very few people taking the Risk. Another whisky then, there you go.”*

*“Thanks.”*

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# Christmas without you

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by chiara eder

*To my dearest grandpa  
who is living in heaven,  
taking you away from earth  
was god's greatest flaw.*

*Seems like it was yesterday,  
you were there;  
telling me all your stories  
and now you are away.*

*I'm here, missing you so much,  
having the best guardian angel  
watching me from heaven;  
we will hopefully always be in touch.*

*Dear Grandpa,*

*First of all, I have really really missed you since you passed away on the 25th of February this year. I am often reminiscing about the night when the hospital called to tell us that you passed over to the other side - the worst night of my life so far. As it all started one month before your death with your stroke, your biggest fear was that you would leave grandma alone. Whenever I visited you in the hospital you were crying because you'd been afraid of what was about to come. The only thing you wanted to do was leave the hospital and go home to Grandma to*

*continue your perfect life, as the two of you did before. But I can tell you - or can you even see it? - Grandma is doing great. Even though she also misses you a lot – it could not be otherwise after more than 65 years of love – she is so strong and tough. So, you really don't have to worry about her, but please take care of her, I really need her.*

*Besides the fact that I miss you unconditionally, I have to admit that it was one of the best decisions ever that you decided to pass away on the 25th of February. Tell me Grandpa, did you know what was about to come and therefore you decided to leave? I know, this might sound as I am happy about the fact you are not here anymore, but that is not true. I would give everything to have you here by my side again.*

*Taking into consideration your state of health as well as everything else that happened in 2020, you really chose the perfect point of time. Do you want to know why? Well, there are a lot of things I need to tell you. I think in 2020 more things than ever before have changed.*

*Do you remember Corona? On the day of your death, the first cases in Austria were registered – the beginning of a long and terrible journey that is still going on – with no end in sight. Your funeral was the last one in our hometown which was 'normal', afterwards no funerals were possible and if so, then only up to ten people could attend. I am really thankful that I had the possibility to say goodbye to you, and so are all the others. Afterwards, everything happened stroke upon stroke.*

*The first lockdown in Austria. Nearly all shops had to close. Contractors had to stop working. We weren't allowed to go outside unless we intended to help someone. We weren't allowed to meet friends and family. We weren't allowed to do anything. But not only here in Austria, all around the world life seemed to have come to a standstill. Country after country proclaimed a lockdown.*

*And the worst of this was that Grandma had to cope with this situation on her own. After more than 65 years of living together with you, she was alone. ALONE. Nobody was allowed to visit her. Nobody was allowed to go for a walk with her. Knowing that she is at home alone, trying to deal with your death all on her own was such a horrible feeling. But you know Grandma. You know how tough she is. She really managed the whole situation great. After six weeks of lockdown I was finally allowed to visit her again, to talk to her, to go for a walk with her and to simply enjoy time with her. She really is an angel – so please keep an eye on her, Grandpa!*

*Lockdown was followed by a strange summer. Everything was different. No festivals, no concerts, no moonlight shopping, no sport events, nothing. Especially young people used the time gained to do a lot of sports – and so did I. Together with Tom I hiked up at least one mountain every week. I know you would be proud of me because hiking was your passion as well. And Grandpa, you know what's been the best experience this year? I have been up the highest mountain of Austria in September – and it was beyond description. I felt so close to you – closer than I've ever felt since you passed away.*

*Originally, October would have meant a completely new start for me. After finishing my bachelor in Vienna in July, I decided to move to Innsbruck for my masters. Anyways – Corona was and still is here. Means: online university. The only good thing is that I get to spend more time at home and thus also with grandma - and you know how much I love home and Grandma!*

*And now, shortly before Christmas – lockdown number two. Everything is the same as it was in lockdown number one - only worse. Awful. Sad. Horrible. Simply incredible. I am not sure*

*whether I am excited about what is to come – as we expect that it can only get better – or if I am afraid of it.*

*Besides all the terrible changes that happened in 2020, the worst of all is definitively that this year, we have to spend Christmas without you. The first Christmas without you. You loved Christmas so much – that's where I got my love for Christmas from.*

*All that I am, or hope to be, I owe to my angel grandpa.*

*But it won't be the same this year. You will not be there to eat cookies. You will not be there to decorate the tree together with me. You will not be there to unwrap my presents. You will not be there to spend Christmas eve with me. YOU WILL NOT BE THERE.*

*Your Christmas spirit is missing. Something is missing. You are missing. I miss you.*

*Lots of love,*

*Chiara*

*P.S: Merry Christmas to you Grandpa!*

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## disordered order - ordered disorder

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by viktorija ebner

*Structure seems to be the most important aspect in life. Sentences, paragraphs, papers, folders, bookshelves, offices, rooms, houses, buildings, communities, streets, nature, ... EVERY ASPECT of the world is structured. Even the human DNA is structured and needs to be transcribed and replicated in a specific way.*

*But what if changes cause this structure to decay? Then it leads to chaos, unrest, imbalance. Because we want to structure the world to make it more tangible, more real, more understandable. Does nature require everything to be in order or is it just one of these stupid inventions of humans to render an uncontrollable world more controllable?*

Oscar's life has been characterised by a strong sense of order because his parents could not stand chaos. "Tidy your room! Put away the socks from the floor! Don't let your shoes lie around!" is what he constantly heard from his mother. These assertions sound like ordinary instructions that every mother gives, but Oscar perceived them differently. His parents had an extreme urge for order or at least he thought so. When he opened the drawer of his parents' wardrobe the socks had to be neatly piled on the bottom left side, the underpants on the bottom right side, bras in the middle. All in order. All structured.

*This order gave Oscar a sense of stability, safety and security, but, at the same time, it somehow ...*

At school – the same. "Structure your sentences! Structure your paragraphs, your thoughts, your ideas!" – Structure. Structure. Structure. The words infiltrated his mind. When Oscar turned 14, he recognized that his body was changing. That his feet seemed to be too big for the rest of his body, his arms too long and his muscles too weak. That is the time when he started

to categorize every piece of information that reached his mind and every entity that reached his hands.

Numbers go into this category.

Language and words into that.

The blue pen belongs into the first loop of the pencil case.

The green one into the second.

The red one ...

But isn't that what everybody does automatically? Categorizing things. Isn't it natural to long for order?

Well, no, not when it turns into an obsession. Oscar couldn't put a pen in the wrong place. He couldn't wear multicoloured clothing, because that made him angry. He had to separate the colours – red to red, green to green, yellow to yellow.

He wanted his emotions to belong to a certain category, but it was tough to categorize his feelings, because there were so many of them and he couldn't identify whether it was anger, hatred, sadness or a mixture of all of them at any particular moment. It was impossible to define them, so he decided to ignore them completely, because they didn't fit in anywhere.

The boy did not know why he felt that way. It had just seemed as if the structure that dominated his life so far had suddenly vanished. When he thought about his future there would be no school to structure his day, no parents to organize his life.

That is what happens when you transition into adulthood. Order and meaning seem to be lost, non-existent, impossible to achieve. Everything seems to fall apart. That is indeed what happens.

By overemphasising order and structure, Oscar tried to get a grip on his life, to find meaning in a meaningless world, to find orientation in a disoriented state. He craved for the time when everything was normal - when his mind was at ease and his body not controlled by these hormones. He was holding on to his old identity, his old life, because he didn't feel prepared for the changes that were about to come. He was holding on too tight because he was afraid of losing ... well, he didn't know what he was frightened of - Uncertainty? Growing up? Changes? Loneliness? Responsibility? Disorientation?

First, Oscar's parents endorsed or even relished his new sense of order and cleanliness, but after some time they recognized that there was something odd about his behaviour. His mother didn't see that he was undergoing changes, but just that he even wanted the vegetables on the plate to be separated. That caused her to raise red flags and to wish to bring her son back to his old self.

Honestly, that was what confused Oscar the most. For more than 10 years, everything that his family cared about was making and maintaining order and now that he is doing the very thing accordingly, they are not satisfied either. How could he make sense of that?

As usual, his parents' solution was not to handle the issue together and talk to their son, but they decided that Oscar should visit his uncle in Cork. Thinking a change of scenery would 'cure' him and cause his phase to vanish.

His uncle's house was a complete mess. Building material, old tyres, broken chairs,

bathtubs, ... everything was lying around the house. How should a man who lives in such a chaos teach him how to structure his life?

Uncle Gerry did not regard his house to be a mess. He knew where to find what, and he didn't care what other people would say about his way of storing things. He was completely unaware of the state he was in. Oscar observed that his uncle was unable to throw away any items because they were valuable to him. In some sense, his uncle displayed the opposite of his obsession. While Oscar wanted everything to be neat and ordered, his uncle would not; and he could not part with any of his possessions. But somehow, they also shared the same problem in not recognizing that they both needed help.

While the boy stayed with his uncle, he realized that his way of living might be a different way of structuring his life. He was not sure if he should categorize it as something positive or negative, because usually chaos is perceived as being something negative. For Oscar, however, it had a curative effect to see that structure is a personal matter. Some might regard it as disorder others as order, but the essence is that you feel at ease with it.

Structure is the most important aspect in life. ... but what if it turns into an obsession?

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# IT's creating absence presence

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by viktorija gruber

I am walking lonely  
Me, myself, and IT only  
Looking, outside, on ITs surface  
Ignoring my surroundings and thinking  
IT was a good purchase  
IT gives me all I want and need  
IT is so addictive indeed  
No *real* memories in my mind  
But in IT forever and ever

Today is a good day. The day feels like my birthday, somehow strange, but I feel certain that today is a good day. My alarm on IT went off at 6:00 a.m. We are starting early today, and I have already packed everything I need since yesterday evening. We planned a hiking tour because going outside into nature is of utmost importance for one's health, right? IT anyways told me to do so.

IT, the essential device, is charged and I let IT slip into my hiking trousers' pocket. I take on my new trail running shoes that I ordered with IT and swing my backpack onto my back, put my sunglasses on and outside the door I rush.

I know that IT controls me but for now, I tell myself, I let IT stay put where IT is. In the bus I meet my friends that are involved in a heated discussion about which way up the mountain would be the best, swiping and touching hastily with their fingers on IT. Should I take IT out as well?

There is this urge. This obtrusive, compelling urge to take IT out. I feel IT vibrating, clinging to my thigh. Is IT really vibrating? Or is my brain tricking me again? I don't know, actually I

don't care. *I have to take IT out.* God, what a stress this puts on me. But I let IT stay where it is, with my hands sweating, my thoughts clinging to what could possibly have caused this vibration, if there was any.

I betray my inner self which constantly keeps repeating *I am not addicted, I am not addicted, I don't need IT...not now, I can be totally fine without IT* and have a glance at my friends' essential instruments and join the conversation – absent present with my thoughts on the device. My eyes, surprisingly, also get a glimpse of the picturesque sunrise that can be seen

outside the windows of the bus on the mountain peaks. For a short time, everything is peaceful, and I feel present in the moment, just how it has always been back then. *Just how it has always been* keeps echoing in my head now, as if my mind wanted me to nudge into a different direction, away from IT.

In the meantime we have figured out which trail would present us with the greatest challenge and after 20 minutes in the bus we finally reach our destination. A tremendous mountain ridge opens up before us and now the nervous tingling in my thigh and my fingers is back. Unable to resist the urge to take IT out, I take IT out and instead of using my own eyes, I use the eyes of IT. Snap! Another photo is taken and slides into my gallery. *I will post it later on Instagram and maybe along with some other pictures I take today. Now IT starts to take control over me again,* I think. Angrily, I put IT back into my pocket but tell myself that it's no shame to use IT since my friends are also constantly using IT and they don't seem to have any problem with IT. *How do you know?*, asks my mind, but I turn the voice off.

Up the mountain we go. Without myself consciously knowing, I find IT back in my hands making little videos of my friends and taking pictures of the surrounding beauty. Lush green grass patches, mountain peaks and happy smiles appear on ITs screen, my eyes fixed on IT and my feet moving as if they were programmed. *We are all programmed, and we are all absent present,* my mind tells me again.

After two and a half hours we reach the top. The ascent was good, and IT informs me that I have reached my maximum percentage for the daily activities. I am happy and proud. We take another picture. I go to the summit cross and take out the summit register to write a few thoughts and our names in it, when I suddenly read...

I was walking lonely  
Me, Myself, and I only  
Looking, outside, on the landscape  
That would my mind and soul shape  
Nature would give me all I want and need  
It was miraculous indeed  
These memories forever in my mind  
But yours no more...no more

Some indescribable feeling of epiphany is rushing through my body, taking control.

My phone, IT, drops. ITs display - shattered. My mind – present. IT – absent. Gone down the rocks.

One of my friends, shocked, immediately asks if I am OK and whether I wanted his device in the meantime.

*Yes, yes, I am and no I don't, no I don't.*

I am re-born; today is indeed a good day.

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## virtual affection

by stefan lusser

picture: violet stathopoulou-vaiss

Finally, the day has come. Bestowed by my granddaughters with the most valuable gift – time.

“Grandpa,” they wrote on Monday, “let’s go into the mountains!”

This truly filled my heart with joy. Being an alpine guide for over 40 years, it is always a pleasure when young people show interest in one of nature’s most precious gifts. Yet, why didn’t they call me when they know that I have problems with typing on this piece of plastic? My hands and fingers are too big and rigid for these buttons that you can’t even feel.

“Yes,” I eventually managed to answer.

As someone who spent his life in the mountains, the most remote and yet peaceful places out there, I let this new age of technology pass by just like the clouds that pass by on a humid summer evening.

...

Packing for our jaunt to the mountains was not a difficult task. Some bread, bacon, water, a pocketknife and my good old binoculars should meet all our needs when we will be looking down into the valley. The weather will be fine anyways.

“Sara,” I asked the younger of the two gently, “what is this backpack for?”

Looking at her immense backpack that was filled to the brim, Sara responded in a calm but somewhat irritated way,

“These are just the essentials, grandpa. Power bank, remote control, USB cables, headphones, smartphone and some stuff.”

Not really being familiar with any of these gimmicks, I didn't ask any further questions as Marie approached me seemingly agitated,

“But there will be 4G connection where we go, right Grandpa?”

“4G connection?” I mumbled thoughtfully. – “Yes, I've already checked,”

Sara intervened without giving me an opportunity to question what in God's name this could be.

• • •

“Are we almost there?! I'm so exhausted, my legs don't work anymore...,” my two granddaughters echoed alternately while walking up a narrow path in the woods. Impatience is not something unusual nowadays when you go hiking. I feel like this resembles today's fast-paced society in an accurate manner: People want the most output for the least amount of time and effort, which makes them impatient and restive. Still caught in my thoughts, I told them that it is not far anymore, pointing a finger to our destination that could be seen in the distance. Also, I had to smile a little. My granddaughters, 16 and 19 of age, acting like two children in the car on the way to a holiday destination. And still, although I caught them out of breath a couple of times, they checked their phone – every ten minutes, every five minutes, nearly every second that passed as we were hiking through the mellow, light-colored larch forest on our way up.

• • •

“Let's do another Boomerang for my Instagram followers!” Sara shouted with joy.

“No, I have to send Snapchats to all my friends. They have to see this!” Marie replied.

“But don't forget to save pictures to your library so that we can upload them later. These will get a thousand likes for sure!” Sara countered again.

What I experienced at the top of the mountain left me speechless. As soon as we reached our destination, all the nagging and grumbling was blown away. Instead, it developed into prattling about all these technological things they call social media or whatnot.

The world has changed.

“Likes” they mentioned. It's all about likes. How can you even like something through a piece of plastic? This whole thing seems very superficial to me. Liking something or someone to me is something personal – affections you express. Just like my feelings for the mountains and how it used to be back in the days. Having worked as an alpine guide for my entire life, I cannot even express what the mountains mean to me still. The smell of the eventually frosty thawing grass in the morning; the first sun rays that tickle the tips of the trees, covering everything in soft reds and oranges; the clear, cool air that freshens the lungs with every breath – I could go on and on... Seeing the sparkles in my eyes when she caught me reminiscing about the past, Sara approached me in awe,

“These were the days, right?”

She seemed to have realized what is really important when being surrounded by marvelous peaks, hearing the birds chirping, breathing in the fresh air, being exposed to absolute tranquility. Technology can draw us from these essential gifts that nature provides us with. No smartphone, no internet connection, no social media platform, no kind of virtual affection can come close to what the real world has got left for us. It is not my duty to make young people aware of that. Seeing that Sara got vigilant of that filled my old soul with deep pleasure.

...

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## all we have is now

picture: violet stathopoulou-vaiss

by **anna mall**

*Heavy breath,  
dripping sweat,  
hurting feet  
I wanna keep  
this moment,  
FOREVER.*

I take a deep breath and let the keen, real air enter my lungs. Our path was rocky and the climb exhausting, but we made it anyways. Our past lies behind us and our future ahead. I relish this precious moment of presentness and blissfully look around. “All we have is now”, I tell them, and they nod.

The view is amazing. We are standing here, on the top of the mountain, and I feel like resting on a majestic throne. “I wanna keep this moment forever”, I tell them, and they nod.

I reach into my pocket and grab my smartphone to capture the picturesque scenery: the azure cloudless sky; the golden sunbeams covering the green-brownish grass, and the massive, greyish rockmass right in front of us. The others do likewise, and we spread out over the large but steep terrain. The vivid dyes of nature are rapidly transferred to the small screen on which they appear even more rich and lively. I love the shot and want to put the phone away, but my selfish device suggests making some adjustments, which is why I devote some minutes on editing the picture. A filter here, a modification there, and the beauty of natural colours is intensified. My smartphone seems to be fond of the result, as no other suggestions are made, and I hence decide to upload the picture on my social media. It doesn't take long until the first

reactions are popping up my display. I respond to all of them and another couple of minutes pass by quietly.

Clouds appear on the hitherto flawless sky. It feels as if I have forgotten that I am standing on the top of a mountain, and my trance-like appearance indicates that I have lost all senses of location and time. I no longer relish this precious moment of presentness. I no longer cherish the amazing view and the beautiful scenery. It appears I have more important things to do now. Whereas some minutes ago I literally reached the climax of my real surroundings, I am now close to reaching the climax of virtuality: active passiveness. I take another breath. This time, breathing feels different, unspectacular, mundane. The air is still keen, but no longer feels, smells or tastes real. Reality is gone.

I realise that I am immersed in a virtual world. Deep inside me, I am still aware of where I am, and I subconsciously notice the upcoming change of weather. I feel a pressing urge to break out of this wide and simultaneously narrow space, but I don't know how. My virtual environment won't let me: There are too many notifications, reactions, suggestions, news, ... and I cannot help but check them, scan them, read them.

A gentle breeze is tangling my hair, almost pushing my cap off my head. I finally look up, adjusting my cap. A cold shiver runs down my sweaty back, and it feels as if temperature has decreased. My heart is pounding faster. It is the first time I actively realise that I am still here, standing on the top of a mountain, next to my friends, but the beautiful picture of a cloudless warm environment has changed into a hazy and chilly atmosphere. My hitherto blurred thoughts clear up. "We are far away from 'now'", I tell them. They nod, again, not losing sight of their digital devices, which is why I am not sure if they have been listening to my words. Have they ever been listening? I doubt.

We are what people call 'modern', but, I am afraid, we lost our focus. And our faces. We are standing here, on the top of the mountain, but I feel no longer special, no longer real, no longer 'me'. Who am I? We have climbed this mountain together, as a unity, but this unity is no longer united. I suppose we are alone and together at the same time. We are together alone in this moment of presentness.

I cough. The air tastes different. It has become toxic. I have no choice but letting it enter my lungs. I need to be cautious, as I otherwise might suffocate. My gaze wanders away from my smartphone, and I realise that more clouds, dark clouds, have appeared in the sky. I tell my friends that a storm might be coming upon us. They look up, too, but they don't react. I wonder if it is us being selfish and not the digital devices as presumed earlier.

"We used to do things differently." I mumble these words, but I could also scream them, as they wouldn't listen anyways. We used to leave our houses without feeling dependent on digital devices pretending to know us better than anyone else. We used to keep precious moments in our minds or in an album full of costly, wisely chosen printed photographs, not amongst thousands of other forgotten pictures on our digital cloud. We used to live without feeling pressed of sharing every moment on our social media profiles. We used to care less about what others, often strangers, think about us. We used to converse face-to-face instead of texting each other. We used to express feelings through real emotions instead emojis. We used to think ourselves, not to google. We used to be 'real', following our hearts and thoughts, not a piece of hardware. We used to be human.

What does that say about us? I don't know.  
If we used to be 'human', what are we now? I don't know.  
If we used to be 'real', does that mean we are now 'fake'? I don't know.

It is true that the air has become toxic and inhaling too much of it might end up being deadly. I observe my friends from afar. They put their smartphones away. They seem to have listened to my words, as they suggest departing soon to avoid being confronted with the upcoming storm. They exchange words, they giggle, and they look happy; they seem to be 'here', right in front of me, on the top of the mountain. They seem to have turned the switch towards reality again. A smile appears on my lips and I join them. This 'other world' has undoubtedly become part of our lives and changed us, but I realise that there is no need to be afraid that we will all end up suffocating in the toxic air of virtuality. It changes us, but, in the end, we decide whether we want it to take over our lives, turning us into an artificial version of ourselves. We decide how much time we want to spend in this other world. We decide whether we like this or not. It is all about choices, it is all about privilege.

"Let me enjoy this moment", I tell them, staring at the beauty of nature stretching around me. "I will follow soon", I add. I am standing here, on the top of the mountain, remembering the words I proudly said at the beginning: All we have is now. I close my eyes, and a sunbeam fights its way through the sky, tickling my nose.

*Heavy breath,  
dripping sweat,  
a gentle breeze  
and hurting feet,  
I wanna keep  
this moment deep,  
forever in my heart.  
I breathe.*

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# choices?

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by natalie mühlmann

## Choice 1

---

Hey grandma, please tell me, what was it like?  
Back then around the twenties when you had to fight?

It all started with a plea that nobody took seriously.  
It was yet another sea of unrelatable viscosity.

You were asked to question your behavior critically,  
but, at some point, it all got judged politically.

We were robbed of individual thoughts and our freedom.  
Instead, we were supplied with speechless masks, insisting that we'd need `em.

So we fled to the mountains, to escape from the lunacy.  
But even up there, we were distracted by disturbing imagery.

You know, there were people who'd been tragically affected,  
even though they were not amongst the typically expected.

I know. Bye grandpa. I'd have loved to get to know you.  
I'm sorry you didn't make it, just because nurses could no longer pursue.

All this thanks to those who believed it the least,

being the ones why the case numbers constantly increased.

So underdogs were overwhelmed and the system broke down.  
People lost their jobs. A heavy weight that made them drown.

Teachers and doctors could do nothing but shed tears.  
Being exposed to the unknown. Being plagued by existential fears.

Social contacts were forbidden.  
Any meetup had hence to be hidden.  
Loneliness and lethargy thus composed the everyday rhythm.

And to be honest not much has changed up until now.  
If young ones come in a crowd, people still raise their brow.

But didn't they tell you that they were going to save the people?  
And all that they'd need for this was supposed to be a tiny little needle?

That's true, so we had some hope, and were so naïve to believe,  
that this virus called Corona would soon take one's leave.

Well yeah, that would've been nice, but that's not the way it is.  
I wish I could come closer to your eyes, to once hug and give you a kiss.

Me too, my child, yet the virus is about to turn seventy,  
causing us to keep up further with this eternal uncertainty.

## Choice 2

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Hey grandma! Hey grandpa! What was it like?  
Back then around the twenties when you had to fight?

It all started with a plea that first nobody took seriously,  
as it was yet another sea of unrelatable viscosity.

You were asked to question your behavior critically,  
and that's what we did, to avoid the situation from raging any more wickedly.

We were supplied with speechless masks, insisting that we'd need 'em.  
But soon you realized: They weren't speechless; they restored freedom!

That's what they did, yet we still left for the mountains,  
to charge up our endurance, which lengthened the lives of thousands.  
Thousands of those who had been amongst the typically expected,  
but thanks to us were saved from being tragically affected.

Thanks grandma. Thanks grandpa. For all the civil courage.

Of course, but never forget the ones who fell victim to this entire savage.

However, we feel blessed that we together managed at least,  
to bring the case numbers down to a permanent decrease.

Besides, underdogs had always been backed up,

by a system that consistently refused to give up.

Offering hope and perspective amidst the turmoil of a shutdown,  
sparing many from what it feels to suffocate and then drown.

And all along, teachers and doctors eventually made it happen,  
the return to a better world, which again had people vividly laughin'.

Social contacts were once forbidden,  
and meetups had to be hidden.

But loneliness and lethargy only shortly portrayed our rhythm.

It's absolutely crazy. A lot seems to have changed.

I cannot imagine the world, in which friends became estranged.

That's exactly why we strengthened our belief,  
that this virus called Corona had to leave.

And now, dear child, come here and make a wish!

Pick up our hug and a tiny little kiss!

### Choice 3

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My grandparent(s), they told me, what it was like,

back in twenty-twenty when the world was forced to strike.

Now tell me, who are you? What does your future look like?

Choose wisely – words and actions – to please surpass this fight.

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## united with nature

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by nellie veulliet

...  
*united with nature*  
...

I am sitting on a lichen-covered, very rough but sun-warmed stone between some *rhododendron ferrugineum*, also commonly known as rusty-leaved alpenroses. With my fingertips I touch the rather raw surface of the *rhizocarpon geographicum*, the map-lichen. In this season of the year, the alpine roses bloom in their most beautiful pinkish-red splendour. I take a deep breath and enjoy the smells of nature with which the mountain blesses me. I close my eyes and concentrate on the sounds I can hear. There is the call of the mountain jackdaw, *ryrrhocorax graculus*, the wind that is blowing over the landscape and the distant chatter of my family.

I bend down and pick up some earth from the dry ground. I put it in my mouth. Ugh, that does not taste good. Grandpa always told me to perceive nature with all senses. I guess he meant all of them except the sense of taste. He was also the one who taught me everything about the ecosystem of the mountains. He used to take me along on his hikes and led me in on the most fantastic secrets of nature. We would look up the Latin names of plants and animals in the encyclopaedia together. “You are a very special boy”, he used to say. Those were the best days in my whole life. He taught me to enjoy nature to the fullest. He encouraged me to look really closely at the little things in order to see even clearer how amazing nature is. I miss him so much.

I look up from the ground and see an anthill not far from me. I remember what grandpa told me about the *campanula alpine*, one kind of the blue bellflower high up on the mountains. If one picks the flower and presses it gently and very carefully because the forest ant is a protected species, into an anthill, the blue flower turns reddish. The reason for this is that the ants feel threatened and instantly spray their formic acid on the intruder. This, then, leads to a chemical

reaction that changes the colour. That is something I have never tried before. I get up and look for a bellflower. I am lucky to find one not far from the anthill. Slowly I approach the hill and can spot all the little ants working and moving very fast. Carefully I put the flower on top. I wait patiently but extremely excitedly if its colour changes. The blue of the blossom slowly becomes lighter and turns into a light red. It works!

“It works!!! Mooom, mooom! It works!”

I quickly run over to my mom to tell her about my successful nature experiment.

“Mom, I really need to show you something very special”, I shout while pulling on her jacket sleeve impatiently. She does not even look up from her smartphone but just says: “Tom, I can’t right now.”

Rather disappointed I go over to my sister and my dad and again say: “Daddy, Susan! I really, really need to show you something very special.” Daddy is in the middle of taking pictures of my sister for her Instagram account.

“Tom, not now! We first need to take the perfect picture of me”, Susan said angrily. Disappointed and with the feeling of being left alone, I trudge back to the anthill.

• • •

*I can see faces and eyes but yet they seem blind.  
I can see shadows of people with empty minds.*

• • •

I try the experiment again on my own. While doing so, a mountain jackdaw sits down next to me. It expectantly gazes at me. A story which grandpa told me comes to my mind. He mentioned that there is a legend that deceased climbers become jackdaws and spend their afterlife on the mountains. I suddenly understand.

“Grandpa! Is it you?”

The bird only caws, but I can feel that it is him subconsciously.

“Grandpa, I have missed you so much!”, I shout happily and full of energy. The jackdaw spreads its wings and lifts off the ground. Grandpa wants to show me something, he wants to take me along on his adventures one more time.

I get up quickly and follow him. He flies very fast. I have to hurry to keep up with him.

“Not so fast Grandpa! I can’t follow you!”

I run across the alpine pastures over sticks and stones, higher and higher up to the top of the mountain.

“Not so fast Grandpa! Wait for me!”

The view from up here is fantastic. I cannot remember being so high up a cliff ever before. It is getting narrower and I find it more and more difficult to follow him. I now have to climb and crawl on all fours.

“Not so fast Grandpa! I want to come with you!”

I try not to lose sight of the jackdaw. I do not really concentrate on the track, which is actually no longer a track at all.

“Grandpa! Wait! I am coming with you!” I run further and suddenly I jump off the edge.

• • •

I was born as a child,  
a caring family by my side –  
but yet alone.

• • •

Finally.

Finally, I can fly like my grandpa can.

Finally, I become fully united with nature.

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## moving on

picture: violet stathopoulou-vaiss

by kathrin mall

*It'll be okay, they say.  
It gets better, they say.  
It won't hurt as much, they say.*  
But what they all mean is:  
You mourn, you cry, and then you forget.  
**I DON'T WANT TO FORGET!**

Everybody tries to help me and wants to speak to me; don't they understand that I want to be left alone. Just leave me alone. I am fine. At least I tell everybody that I am fine. I am the strong one. I must be strong. Strong for everybody around me. We cannot all fall apart at the same time. Life must go on; we can't simply stop living, because you are no longer here. Stop breathing, because you are no longer able to. Even if that would be perfectly okay for us. You would not have wanted that. You would have wanted us to keep going. Keep living.

But most of the times I put on a happy face. There is no room for anything else. Life goes on as normal around me, but I do no longer feel normal.

I feel nothing. I feel numb. I feel blind.

I used to see in colour, but one morning everything turned bleak, gloomy and grey. It felt as if a filter of darkness had been placed upon my eyes. And in this moment, I realise, I was robbed of the ability to see in colour the same morning you were robbed of your life.

I remember that Monday morning like it was yesterday – You were here. No, you are here. I mean your still body is lying on your bed. It looks like you are asleep. I wish that was the truth – that you were just sleeping. Or at least that I would be sleeping, and would wake up any minute, get up, walk over to your apartment and see you there sitting on your usual spot, on your white-and-blue striped couch, looking out the window and already waiting for us to show up, since you have already seen us coming.

That will never happen again. You will never sit on that spot and wait for us to come visit. Even if I know that is true. I am not ready. Ready to let you go. Ready to move on with my life. Ready to accept to never seeing you again.

In the beginning grief is like a fog of thick, dense and unrelented darkness, no ray of sunshine can break through it. With time, they say, things get easier. But how do they know? Everything I see is only grey.

Everything has changed in one small instance. You are no longer with us. We miss you so much. Life goes on even if our small world has been completely turned upside down. The earth keeps on turning, the sun keeps on rising and setting each day, the birds are still chirping loudly in the tree outside my window. And I can no longer feel any joy in these otherwise beautiful acts of nature. Inside I am completely numb.

And like that spring turns to summer. And as summer fades into autumn we go through everything. Every bin and box. Every case and chest. Every cabinet, cupboard, and closet. All your possessions get sorted into three piles: KEEP – DONATE – THROW AWAY. And as these piles get smaller and smaller and more furniture pieces get moved out, the apartment is no longer yours.

It feels empty. It feels cold. It feels bare.

One of the last pieces still in the apartment is your couch. Your seat remains empty – ALWAYS. No one of us will ever sit down in this spot. All the other seats are fine, no matter how crammed we sit, nearly on top of each other. But this one seat stays empty. It still is your seat even if you will never sit on it again.

And over the next weeks empty rooms get filled up once again with full boxes and new furniture pieces. And on the evening of move-in-day, once all the boxes are finally unpacked, I wander into the living room. The couch standing there is no longer striped. It isn't even blue or white. It is a warm tone of light brown. Not beige, a bit darker. The couch isn't even new. It is the couch we also had in our old apartment. We took it with us. Finally, after an intense day of moving, I sit down in my usual spot on the light brown couch. And whilst sitting there, relaxing for the first time that day, I realise one thing. My spot on this couch is exactly where your spot was. So, on top of everything else that I have already been sharing with you for my whole life, I am now also sharing my favourite spot on the couch with you.

And then there comes the moment when one looks around and realises one can see a little further in front of them. And one's next thought is – things will be okay. Not the same – never the same again, but a different kind of okay. And each day one will get better, slowly. Painfully slowly. Until the day comes where one remembers whilst crying and smiling at the same time.

*It'll be okay, they say.*

*It gets better, they say.*

*It won't hurt as much, they say.*

Now I understand what they really meant to tell me:

You mourn, you cry, but you will always remember with a sad smile,

But you will never forget.

*You just keep moving on!*

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A black and white photograph of a fossilized lobster resting on a large, light-colored rock. The lobster is positioned horizontally, with its large pincers (chela) facing towards the left. The background shows a rugged, mountainous landscape with sharp peaks and a valley, suggesting a high-altitude or desert environment. The lighting is bright, creating strong shadows and highlights on the rock and the fossil.

## not like us

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by **nadja mulser**

The place looks always the same. We always come here. Multiple times a year. Sometimes all of us, sometimes just a few. I have never been here on my own, I don't want to either. This place has always been mysterious. A slab of stone, almost like an altar, overlooking the surrounding mountains. The mountains which were green once, back then, generations ago, before the catastrophe. Now there is only the wasteland, rocks, dust and the blinding sun.

I have been here many times, as a child when we prayed for water, for rain, when the fossilized Goddess was brought out and we begged her for new life. The old women sometimes told stories, passed down by their own mothers and grandmothers, of a big plate of water, mixed with salt, which one couldn't drink, but some creatures lived in it. Our Goddess was one of those. She had come a long way to find us.

There are other rituals too though. Rituals that children are not allowed to participate in. Rituals for pregnant women, for ailments, for death. I have seen them depart for the place many times, having to stay behind for being too young. I was told I didn't want to know, to go and run along and play, to forget about it. They usually came back with death in their eyes and tear traces on their dusty cheeks.

There are many women in our tribe. Many children too, most of them girls. I never really thought much of it. It was normal for me. A child doesn't know where children come from. A child doesn't realize that women alone are not able to make babies.

There were two boys, close to me in age, we were friends as much as I was friends with every kid in the tribe. One of them vanished when we were about six rains old. He ran off into the desert and one of the wild mutants got him. That's what they told us anyway.

Getting older I got more curious about the place overlooking the mountains, about our Goddess, about the rituals I was not allowed to participate in. Not yet.

The one boy my age, we never noticed him to be different from us. His hair was long like ours; he was tall and slender like us, a child. The only difference was that extra bit of skin he carried. All that changed. We changed and suddenly he was different.

There was a man in the tribe around that time too, barely ten rains older than me, but he was the only one. He too was different from us. And the women flocked around him, once a month at least. Not all of them, but the younger ones, the ones who always prayed to the Goddess for children. And usually, after some time, their prayers were heard. They carried babies inside them, but our world is dangerous, and no baby is ever save of being called back to where it came from. Many women come back down from the place, their bellies empty, their hands empty. The man never goes to the rituals. I don't know if he is not allowed to or if he's simply not interested. Everyone always watches him, there is fear in their eyes, and still they go to him.

All this was not that important during my childhood, but once I grew older, into a woman myself I was curious, and once my rains were sufficient, they told me about babies; where they came from. Suddenly all the noises made sense. I was disgusted. And I looked at all the women with babies in their bellies differently. Then came the day when I could finally go with them, go to see a birthing ritual for myself.

No one else seemed particularly excited, their faces were guarded, our walk to the top quiet, except for moans and screams from the one about to give birth. More than once I noticed them looking at me; worry in their faces.

The slab was quickly drenched with fluids, with blood, sweat and tears. The screams echoed through the mountains; female and feral, till finally a high-pitched whine joined. The baby was bloody and pale. Its hair was glued to its head. It was a boy.

No one seemed relieved yet. They started drying him off and one of them gasped. I stood on my toes to look over shoulders and then I saw it. Black markings decorated the baby's skin, like a web enveloping him. I was confused. I had never seen anything like this, except maybe... but I didn't want to believe it.

They took him from his mother and ignored her screaming. One, two, three swift bashes and his skull was cracked open like a nut on the side of the altar. His eyes were open, unseeing, red as blood. Then they tossed him over the cliff.

Later they explained to me, about the sickness men carry, about the danger of mutation, of madness. About the creatures in the deserts who once were men. The ones I had already seen the markings on, luckily only from afar.

I wish they had told me earlier, so that I could've understood when it happened. But I still carry the horrible memory. Bloody eyes follow me in my dreams, and I stare in horror at the two men still living among us. I wait for black markings to betray who they really are; who they have always been. Monsters.

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## Cat, the lobster

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by jessy proulx

At 7 years, 11 months, and 3 weeks old, Katy was ready to take on some responsibility of her own. The day of her 8<sup>th</sup> birthday was imminent, and her parents would have to honor their promise. She would finally get her own kitty-cat! She had not felt this excited in a very long time! On that day, her dad was bringing her to the pet shop to have a look at the available choice of adorable furry balls. She tried not to think of what her new pet would look like; it did not matter. She would choose carefully. She wanted a best friend, not just a cute ornament to impress her friends with. It would be her kitty and she would love it with all her heart!

“C’mon Katy, we’re here!” said Peter, her dad.

“Yes! Yes! Yes! Woohooo!” Katy came out of the car; she could not contain her joy. She kept running and dancing around her dad. This was definitely: “the best day ever dad!”

“Calm down Katy, we’re only gonna have a look okay? We’re not actually bringing a cat home with us today. You understand?”

“I know, I know, I’m just so happy!” she took his hand and led him in the store all the way to the section where they kept the cats. Since the day she had decided that she wanted one, she had been visiting the place quite often. It had not been easy waiting for a whole year. A whole year of doing home chores, behaving at school, getting good grades, and never complaining. It was all part of the deal. She had proven she could be responsible, and now she would collect her reward!

Katy looked through the glass window at the cats on the other side. There were five of them, each one cuter than the next. This was going to be harder than she had imagined. Since they were looking to buy, Katy and her dad could cross on the other side to interact with the

ferociously playful animals. She had barely set foot inside the enclosure that she had them all on her. What enchantment! What delight! What joy!

“What is it Katy? Are you alright?” Katy’s dad took her out of the enclosure. Her right hand was swollen where one of the kittens had nipped her playfully. She had little red patches on her face and seemed to have a hard time breathing.

“Oh no, you’re allergic sweetie. Come, we’ve got some Benadryl at home, it’ll make you feel better.”

“But...”

Katy stopped, suddenly understanding that she would not be getting a fluffy friend after all.

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Two days passed, and Katy was completely inconsolable. It had taken the better part of a day for the symptoms of her allergic reaction to dissipate and since then, she had not wanted to leave her room.

At some point, Katy’s mom came to see her. “Darling, your dad and I had a talk. You know, there are so many different pets you could get. Why don’t we go back to the shop tomorrow and try to find you a different pet?”

Katy looked up at her. “I don’t care for other animals, mom! It’s a cat I want! I don’t want some dumb dog or some ridiculous rabbit, some boring bird or some stupid snake. I don’t care for those! I want a kitty-cat, mom. Nothing else!” And so, her parents let her sulk and figured that she would get over it in time.

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On the day before Katy’s big day, her dad decided to take her out to a nice restaurant. He still had to figure out what she would want as a birthday gift. He thought that getting her out of the house would do her some good and that she might give him some suggestions.

“C’mon Katy, we’re here.”

She came out of the car, walked to him, and held his hand. “What is this place, we’ve never been here.”

“Nop! They just opened. It’s the new favorite in town. I thought we might try it together. They’ve got tons of awesome stuff on the menu and today, you get to choose anything you want! We’ll pretend it’s your birthday already!”

“Anything? I can even get a meal for adults?”

“Yes, you’re nearly eight remember. And if it’s too much, we’ll take it home in a doggy bag.”

They entered the restaurant. It was huge! One of those gigantic buffet restaurants where people could eat as much as they wanted, and more. There was even a counter where you could get chefs to prepare anything for you. That is where they sat, at a table near that counter. From their seat, they could hear the multitude of sounds you would expect from a restaurant’s

kitchen. The sound of a knife being sharpened on steel, the crack of an egg being tapped on the counter, the sizzle of meat hitting a hot grill, and: “What’s that sound daddy?”

“What sound, sweetie?”

“Listen dad, it’s like tiny whistles.”

“Oh, I hear now. I think that one of the chefs is preparing lobster. It’s the sound they make when they’re being prepared.”

“Prepared for what? It’s a funny sound. They meow like cats haha!”

“Hmmm... I wouldn’t say that, sweetie. Look, there! That is a lobster tank, and there’s still one in it. Come, let’s check it out.” They stood and went up to the tank.

“Woah, it’s so funny! Can people pet it?”

“I guess so, but it doesn’t seem very soft. It doesn’t have fur or anything. But yeah, technically, you can take it out of the water for some time and manipulate it without problem.”

“No fur? I wouldn’t be allergic then? I want to have it prepared for me dad! I want to pet it!”

“Oh, but it’s not what you think Katy.”

“You said I could have anything I wanted, please.”

“Yes, but I think you don’t understand what I meant by preparing... It’s a restaurant Katy, people eat lobsters.”

“...” “Katy?”

“No, that’s not true. It’s alive dad. Just swimming around in its aquarium. Why would people eat it?”

“That’s just how it is darling. Now, why don’t we go sit? Let’s check out the menu.”

“No! I don’t want to eat anymore. I want the lobster. I don’t want it to die, dad. Let’s take it home. We can go to the pet shop and get it a nice aquarium. Please, dad. I will take care of it. We can’t leave it here. Please, please, please.”

“C’mon Katy, we can’t just buy a live lobster and bring it home.”

“Why is that? It’s no different than a fish or a turtle, and they have those at the pet shop. They’ll be able to sell us a home for it. Please dad, that’s all I want, please!”

“Oh gosh. I can’t believe it. Your mom will kill me.”

Around 15 minutes later, Katy and her dad were leaving the restaurant. Peter was carrying a doggy bag full of ice and his very much uncooked purchase. They were going to the pet store.

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Surprisingly, the clerk turned out to be quite knowledgeable on lobsters’ needs for a habitat and food. In no time, Peter and his daughter were back home and had everything set up for their new ‘house pet’. They had also learned that it was a male, and that they could carry it around in a cooler with ice. If ever they wanted to carry it around...

“This is amazing, dad, thank you so much! It’s the best gift ever! Look how happy he is! We need to give him a name. Let’s call him Cat!”

“Cat?”

“Yes. Cat, the lobster!”

“That’s...Very original, sweetie. Very nice.”

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And so, the days passed, and Katy took really good care of her new friend. She had learned how to manipulate him properly. She was able to remove the elastics on his claws when he was in his tank and to put them back on when she took him on walks. Because yes, she really took him on walks in the garden. It was strange, really, but her parents were content that she was happy, and it was not much work to have such an animal in the house. It also happened to be a great topic of discussion when they had visitors.

One afternoon, Peter went to check in on his daughter. She was in her room, painting Cat’s elastics with colourful flowers of all kind. She looked up to him, “beautiful eh, dad? It’s for Cat, I will put them on his claws next time we go for a walk. He’s gonna look so handsome!”

“Yes, Katy, great idea.”

“Dad.”

“Yes?”

“I was thinking. Do you think that we could get a friend for Cat? It’s just, he seems lonely sometimes and I thought that maybe he should have a friend.”

“But he has you, that should be enough, no?”

“I don’t know, I feel like he would need a lobster friend. And his aquarium, it might be too small for him. I heard that lobsters can travel miles and miles when they are in the sea. Don’t you think that he misses that too?”

“Maybe sweetie, but that is not something we can offer him.”

It was true, they could not. The more she thought about it, the more she realised that it was not fair for Cat. Not fair that he had to be stuck in a small aquarium with no friends, and not fair that he could not be free to walk miles and miles like the other lobsters she had seen in the documentary. Katy came to a realisation. As much as it pained her, she would have to free her clawed friend.

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Luckily, she knew just the place. She lived in a small village up a mountain and there happened to be a beautiful lake not 15 minutes away from her place. One of those beautiful mountain lakes with pure fresh water, full of fish and surrounded by just the right amount of green grass and trees. There was also the most incredible view on a myriad of rocky mountain peaks. This would be perfect for Cat. Not to mention, close enough for her to visit from time to time.

The next day, Katy told her parents that she was going to visit Jenny, her friend up the road, and that she was bringing Cat with her. She had him tucked in a cooler full of ice on top of a little wagon cart. It was not the first time she did such a thing, so her parents did not think much of it.

“Do not take too long, Katy. You know that being outside of the aquarium is not ideal for him,” said her dad.

“I know. I’ll be quick, I promise! Jenny just wants to show him to her parents.” Katy went on her way... to the mountain lake.

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It took her around 20 minutes to get there pulling the wagon cart. She carried it all the way to her favorite spot around the lake. A little rocky beach she visited often with her parents on hot summer days. She took Cat out of the cooler and removed his elastics.

“Here Cat, look at this! This is your new home! You see the fish there; they are your new friends. But I will also stay your friend; I will come and visit often. I just, I just think that you will like it better here. It is big, so you will be able to walk a lot. That is what lobsters do.”

She put him on the ground beside the water. He walked slowly towards it, and then jumped in. No looking back, no goodbyes. What did you expect from a shellfish pet? It was okay for Katy; she knew that she would be able to visit him.

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“I freed him. I let him go.”

“Let him go? Where Katy? Do you know how much we spent on this aquarium? On food?”

“That’s not important, dad; I brought him to the lake. He will be happier there, and it’s not so far. We will be able to visit him!”

“Oh no, Katy. What have you done? Why do you think we used sea salt in the aquarium?”

Lobster cannot survive in freshwater lakes.

## **Epilogue**

I would have liked to have a better end for Katy’s story. Unfortunately, she thinks that she has killed Cat, and her heart is broken. But just for a little while. She is 8. She does not completely understand the meaning of death. She will be able to heal and forget these sad events.

You, however, understand the finality of death. I would not want you to think of Katy as a monster. All she wanted was a better life for her friend. Besides, you should know that she did not kill Cat, the lobster. No. He came back out of the water shortly after Katy left. Then, he walked around on the mountain path for a little while. At some point, he slipped down the edge of a little escarpment and rolled down to land on a flat rock.



From there, he had a wonderful view of the mountain chain in front of him. Rarely do lobsters get to see such sights.

After a while, a woman walked past him. She noticed him on his altar-shaped rock and could not believe what she was witnessing. She immortalised the moment with a quick picture. Who knows, she could use such an unusual scene in one of her writing classes.

She picked up Cat. He was getting a little weak and did not offer much resistance. She brought him down to the village and was kind enough to buy him a friend lobster at the supermarket.

Not long after, she went home and cooked a fantastic meal for her family.

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act II  
scene 1

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by angelika stuppner

I did not choose to die alone.  
I used to be happy. Back then when it was all rosy and daffodilly.

*Lavender blue, dilly, dilly,  
lavender green.  
When I am king,  
dilly, dilly, you shall be queen.*

I had watched far too many Cinderella adaptations. A few worthy of the associations with the original story. The majority a mere infamy.

But all stories shine at the beginning. And I wanted to shine, too.

“Mum, I am hungry! Is lunch ready yet?”, I cried down the curved staircase, leaning over the wooden railing.

No reply. My mother had an aversion against stair-to-kitchen conversations.

“Mum? I’m starving!”

Still no reaction. Having considered a second verbal tackle and thrust it aside before even trying it because of the predicted defeat, I started trotting down the stairs. With every step, I was more and more falling for the story that was written on the brick-red-shaped tiles. Back in the days when we compensated the missing sleigh rallies with blanket-rides down the stairs, all our bottoms hurting from the harsh hits they took with every inch coming closer to the finish line. But that time was long gone. Now, it was time for the big shot.

Mother surpassed herself with lunch. Perhaps she knew that it would be my last lunch with all the family, and she wanted it to be special. Last meals are strange. Strange, but unavoidable.

*Who told you so, dilly, dilly,  
Who told you so?  
'Twas my own heart, dilly, dilly,  
That told me so.*

The next few months, I was shut away. Well, in fact, I shut myself away on the orders of the government. But I wouldn't have done it if the government had not dictated it. So, let's go back to the passive and say, the next few months, I was shut away. Imprisoned. Silenced.

I bummed around in my room and pondered whether this was a legal thing to do. I started to recap my whole life. How I messed up my lost youth. How I missed all the faded faces that were long gone but still managed to somehow take control over my thoughts. How I pitied myself for having those episodes of inexplicable mental pain. I wrote poems and lyrics striving for inner peace and release. But I failed. My real-life duties punched me in the face every time I tried to escape the misery I hadn't sought. I could proudly call myself the owner of a withered life. I was drowning in my world of thoughts and what-ifs. Stop pondering and go back on your feet, I heard them commanding.

*Call up your men, dilly, dilly  
Set them to work  
Some to the plough, dilly, dilly  
Some to the fork.*

But it was hard. An unattainable mission.

Newspapers distraughtly reported the number of daily deaths the intrusive virus had caused. Deaths were counted meticulously as if there was a discount on coffins ordered on behalf of Sir Covid XIX. Deaths were attributed to the virus no matter *from* or *with*. For too long, no distinction was made. But prepositions matter. Reports were all over the newspapers, printed as well as online, on social media and on toilet paper. Headache was on my daily agenda. Only the dead were spared from the news. What a pleasant thought. I have never enjoyed gossip about royalty. And now, royalty forced me to relinquish what all creatures pursued.

*I love to dance, dilly, dilly  
I love to sing  
When I am queen, dilly, dilly  
You'll be my king.*

“Happiness is a direction not a place”, Sydney J. Harris alleged. But I was spatially confined. “The secret of happiness is freedom, the secret of freedom is courage”, Carrie Jones claimed. But freedom was nothing but an empty word.

“Happiness. Its achievement is our own responsibility”, I conclude. Ask self-help books and calendars with sayings. They know. Should I ignore the warnings?

I was ready for my own Cinderella story. Ready for the waltz at the ball. For a ball gown which would make me feel beautiful for the first time in my life. I was ready for all of it. But I guess I failed at shining. Got myself an F. Nothing to brag about. Nothing to be a heroine for. Despite all the pronouncements that told me to stay home just to feel like a heroine after the near-apocalypse experience. Some bad joke only politicians could promote. I may have written this story with a beating heart and a wondering mind. But with dead eyes and an exhausted breath.

This was my big fall. These were my tears. The moments I was afraid of my own thoughts.

*Let the birds sing, dilly, dilly  
And the lambs play  
We shall be safe, dilly, dilly  
Out of harm's way.*

You wish.

Lyrics: *Lavender's Blue*, by Morey Larry / Daniel Eliot, Walt Disney Music Company

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## a taste of trembling

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by selina tiefenbach

### *Intro*

*She has never been afraid of anything that was obviously frightening. She has never been terrified of the dark. She has never been scared of ghosts. She has never feared loneliness. In the dark, she felt inspired. Seeing a ghost, she felt familiarity. Being alone, she felt at home. And still she was so far from being fearless. She was inspired by sadness. Pain was her companion. Sorrow was her beauty. Grief was her strength. Control was her savior. She was alright on the outside but inside she was chasing dreams to make them come true. Her longing was her deepest secret, and it was a burden to keep it buried.*

*She was good at smiling and making charming conversation. It seemed like pleasing was her pleasure and she could never let edges remain intact and softly she swirled around the room to quiet and to smooth. She carried light wherever she went, always prepared to shed more of it if necessary. She carried so much light that it started to weigh heavy. And whenever she lost it to those she felt in need, she gathered up even more to never run out of brightness. She made her way shiny and glistening, sparkling to the observer's eye but not because she was afraid of the dark. She carried the dark as much as the light, but the darkness in her chest was protected by the light and there were always too many reflections, her shape appeared too brightly for anyone to spot the black emptiness in the middle of her body with their eyes.*

*One day, the darkness grew out of her body, surrounded, and dizzied her and made her forget who and where she was for the very first time. Humans have an irritating talent to ignore warning signs and so, she thought it best to ignore that unpleasant little happening that had just cut in and out as if it could never become a permanent circumstance and was just occasionally, temporarily to be undergone. She thought about it and when she realized that her thoughts went deep, she only shook her head, slightly as if it was just a small hair tickling her nose and cheeks which had to be banned to the back of her head where it belonged. She put*

*back the light into her eyes and the warmth into her smile, gathered back the light around her and then she put on just a little too much and for a second, she was blinding.*

*The second time the darkness grew out of her body and mantled her head and made her forget, took her just as much by surprise as the very first time. When she gathered back the light it was like waking from a long sleep and whatever had happened, appeared to be blurry and distorted, left as another dark place in the back of her head. And just like when it happened for the first time, she moved on, she fulfilled her duties, she carried on just like before, and gave her best to forget about that again temporary incident that had just taken place. Bright light surrounded her. Whenever light was needed, she hastily hurried about the world to give it to those she saw in need. She went on long hikes far off from home to gather more of it, searching for sources to shine, filling the air with glistening tears just so that there were more things to reflect the brightness she tirelessly tried to spread.*

*She went far off to places that she could not be traced to and her endless rushing made her reach a state of permanent breathlessness as if she found herself in an everlasting condition of enchanted excitement while all she felt was exhaustion. The worse her condition became, the more she felt the need to shine. And when her endless search for light was too much for her to take, when she could not bear the load of what it takes to create bright kindness, sparkling hope and burning belief anymore, she started searching for all those things that double and triple light, that would throw back all the light she had like echoes in endless empty hallways, that would turn her light into a sea of colored reflections so that she would no longer have to reach and hunt and gather in the cold.*

*When she was breathless because of excitement for the first time in a while, she had found her sea of colored reflections. It was in a glance at the biggest mountain pasture covered in pearl white snow. The sharp little crystals broke the light into a million shining pieces. It was so bright that the unprotected eye could almost not endure to look at it. She was truly enchanted. Her eyes wandering over each frozen summit in the distance, spotting frozen creeks and streams, the ice breaking the light in even more light and all around her, the world appeared brighter than she could have ever imagined it to be. It was by far one of the brightest places she had ever seen and she was deeply fascinated and hastily tried to carve the picture into her mind in fear of forgetting about the bright beauty she had witnessed. And then she started gathering the cold. She froze herself to a point where her limbs were numb, her mind became stiff and thereby calm and a shell of thick ice covered her and prevented her from crushing through impacts from the outside and made her hollow from the inside.*

## The Real World

I was walking home from grocery shopping in the early afternoon when my eyes suddenly touched a decorated stone wall spectating what some might call street art. It was not that I had not walked home this way for at least a hundred times before but, seemingly, I must have been deeply in thought whenever I passed this wall. But this time I lifted my eyes, stopped, raised my hand to my forehead to protect my eyes from the bright sunlight and gazed at the picture of a beautiful woman in a revealing evening dress, voluptuously leaning over, her lips slightly parted, her figure lean and fragile while having all these curves that women's bodies should have. I was instantly reminded of a time when I saw these women in a different way. When I craved to look like these women posing in underwear, tight mini dresses and

skinny jeans, toned or to be a little more realistic: starved to the bone. Today, these pictures disgust me. But that was very different in the past.

I was a senior in high school and a quite ambitious runner when I first came across the idea of just losing a few pounds to run faster and to look leaner. I had never actually cared about my weight before but with an increase in mileage per week and training hours in general, I found that it was quite easy to just lose some weight. I stopped eating in the evening after training and just had half of what I usually had for breakfast and then cut out sweets (the only thing I never gave up was cake, because that is simply not possible) and when my coach took me aside to ask if I had lost weight I was not just flattered but truly enchanted. I had a harmless-looking little notebook in pastel colors in which I thoroughly wrote down everything I had eaten in a day, even a glass of juice would pop up occasionally but, of course, usually I would not have any because of the calories. This innocent-looking pastel-colored little book was a contrast to the violent control it had over my life at that time.

For half a year, hunger was a loyal companion and vegetables were my best friends while food was the enemy. I felt heroic when I had consumed less than 1000 calories a day and endured all the pain my sore muscles gave me because a body run on air and love is unable to recover from physical activity and my physical activity went “beyond sanity” as my friends used to phrase it.

I wanted to look like an angel. Not those plump little babies with wings that you spot in ancient religious paintings, more like the sort of angels that you could observe on Victoria’s Secret runways covered only in underwear which was again covered in jewels and everything was sparkling and the light broke in all these tiny jewels on their bodies, broke into a sea of colored reflections. And I was fascinated. And I adored them. And I kept eating very little to nothing.

Resentfully I turned my back on the painting on the wall and preceded my way home, again deeply in thought. What is it with the world that makes young girls be entrapped in distorted body images and eating disorders? Why is the beauty of a woman still defined by men designing and shooting and portraying women’s clothes and bodies? Why do I know of so many women who struggle with the essential key to life: food? If I would at least be the only one whose life was to become even more unendurable once my body decided to rebel against the famine, I confronted it with.

I reached my street and took a deep breath to calm down, but the pictures always keep coming once I thought about how it was before. The memories are the worst. They come and go in waves. I find them in songs and revisited places and long lost poems I once wrote and all they do is talk to me in feelings and colors and when I read them, the light of the future vanishes, slowly like the dusk that swallows the last brightness of the day when the sun sinks behind massive rocks in places captured by mountain ranges. Growing darker steadily until my eyes only can get hold of contours and shades of grey. Sometimes, I can hardly recall the times before I have felt like this. Before I was on an endless flight. Before I lost all trust in myself. Before I felt so messed up and out of control. Before I started to hastily search my direction and before I was unable to ever run far enough to find something truly real. When I think about it, I am recalling a life without addiction. A life where I do not have to fight the craving from the moment I open my eyes in the morning until the evening when I finally, after a lot of overthinking and pacing about the room doze off into sleep. A life where I would not anxiously pick up the phone to cancel my plans because I felt sick and bloated from eating too much. A

life where I would run for the fun of it and not because I felt like I constantly needed to get away. As if my bad habits would not get hold of me when I kept in motion – needless to say, they still do. Now I am an addict – addicted to food that I deprived my body of for so long.

I met my neighbor in the lawn and stopped to exchange a few words. I was good at smiling and making charming conversation. I have a hidden talent to conceal how I actually feel. Then I pulled out my keys and turned the lock. I remember the very first time it happened. It was a quiet morning; the house was empty, and I was all by myself having breakfast. This morning, breakfast comprised an apple and some yoghurt because I've had a slice of bread last night, so I really needed to make up for that. When I had finished a whole box of ice cream, it was like coming back to my senses. I felt sick and guilty and totally deranged. I could not explain what had just happened or how long it had taken me to eat that much. That day I ran three extra miles and did half an hour of spinning on top.

Mechanically I put away the groceries while my head names the number of calories each piece of food that slides through my hands has as if I would only know food by numbers not by name. It took a while until I realized I was bulimic. I ignored it for a long time afterwards. It was a thought that I decided did not have space in my life and I banned it to the back of my head like my hair when it tickles my cheeks and nose. It's just that being bulimic takes up so much space of your life. First, I started rescheduling appointments with friends because I would rather stay home and eat what I could find. Then I planned on being home when no one else was just so that I could eat without anyone noticing. Next, I had to cancel plans with my friends because it took so much time to train like a maniac in order to make up for all the food I had eaten. An endless vicious circle.

I sank down on the bench next to the kitchen table. They say bulimia is a disease similar to alcoholism. At least you can quit alcohol, but you will always have to deal with food. I do not trust myself around food. Some days, I think it is over but then it hits hard on the next day. Once I start craving food, there is nothing to end it but to give in. I wake in fear wondering what the day might be like. Wondering if I will be okay or again feel sick and unable to sleep because of a sugar high. If I am okay, I feel anxious what tomorrow might be like. If I am not, I tell myself that I will never let this happen again, well aware of the fact that this is a lie. Overall, I have reached a state of permanent breathlessness fostered by anxiety and the pressure to be perfect and an ambition that is more like a disease rather than a driving force. I have never been afraid of anything that is obviously frightening. I have never been terrified of the dark. I have never been scared of ghosts. I have never feared loneliness. But I do fear the future.

For years and years, I have lived my life somehow removed from the utter experience. I had to. The price I paid in order not to break was ice, a frozen heart, a dullness that made the shame and disgust I felt endurable. This alleged method of self-preservation has the unpleasant side effect of muting everything else. I wished well for the world and all the people in it, but I stopped believing in myself. Emotions reached me in a sort of hushed manner as if they lost their intensity on the way and I became a master in disguising. There was a point at which cold became a synonym for brave and now I am only that – existing but not alive. My longing was my deepest secret, and it was a burden to keep it buried.

## *Outro*

*She was hurting. But nobody saw and she would never show. She was a caretaker not one to lament. After all, she might blame the world but deep inside, she still felt like it was her own fault. If she had not denied herself life in the first place... and who was she to cry when others seemed to have so much more of a reason? Who was she to stop shedding her light when she saw others in need? Who was she to put herself first when she believed love was lost on her? She could neither give up nor give in.*

*She ran away only to find that everywhere you go, you take yourself. She was indecisive and insecure and wished nothing more but to cross over, transitioning from the lingering state of captivity to freedom. But the warm smile had frozen on her lips a long time ago. The clarity in her eyes was the dangerous awareness that the world was an empty place to live in. She could only try, and she did try. She never stopped trying to get rid of that stale, bitter-sweet, familiar taste in her mouth: the taste of trembling.*

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picture: violet stathopoulou-vaïs

## here and there

by celine ivanka krajnc

Staring out into the vastness of the ocean I feel a sense of calmness and willingness. My gaze is wandering and unfocused, but I am not. I do not need to arrange my thoughts or concentrate on the essential aspects of my plan. Everything is already planned and in order. There is not one single fiber of my body that is not ready for the weeks ahead. I am ready.

Suddenly my eyes are drawn to something floating in the water. A makeshift boat? Oh god, I know too well who could have built this little wooden boat, stuck together and holding onto its dear life by remnants of tape and nails. Violently and without my consent I am taken back to that beautiful time that now couldn't seem farther away. Ironically, given that I am standing on the dock where me and him used to let almost exact replicas of boats float out into the sea. I try to shake myself out of this trance-like induced state of memories flooding back to me... but I cannot. Emotions of happiness, belonging, and warmth flood my body recklessly, relentlessly, reigniting the spark of love in me, which I did not think possible. My thoughts start to turn warm and – no. This needs to stop right here and right now. I shake my head, naively willing the memories to vanish, store them away in the furthest corner of my brain.

This is no time for letting emotions cloud my better judgment. In fact, the only emotion that needs to be present from now on is hatred. Vengeance. I will not let them off scot-free, au contraire – they will pay, and they will do so dearly. Would Anthony be proud of the journey I am about to embark on? Would he? Would he be proud of the Juliet I became in order to pull this off? Suddenly, I do not know anymore.



“I swear Julia, I didn't do what they are accusing me of, you have to believe me, Julia, please, this is all part of a plan!”, Anthony's eyes looked at me pleadingly, willing me to believe him.

“This isn’t Mom accusing you of stealing bubble gum from Joe’s convenience store ‘round the corner Ant, this is a murder charge you’re facing – the governor’s brother to crown it all! For God’s sake what were you thinking?!”

“I didn’t do it, you have to believe me!” his eyes spoke volumes, however the string of words that came out of his mouth – I couldn’t believe them, the evidence the state of Louisiana had against him was just too

damning. Anthony, my brother, on video tape, killing the governor’s brother point-blank – check. Blood of the victim on Anthony’s jacket, found hidden in his closet – check. An eyewitness putting Anthony at the scene of the crime – check. Motive to kill the brother of the governor – ... none. I have always had too much faith in our judiciary system to believe stories of convicts that were apparently unfairly imprisoned. But this is little Anthony we are talking about here, my brother Anthony who couldn’t hurt a fly, who carried out every spider with care out of my room back into the garden. I started to doubt my faith in our system, simply because my faith in Anthony was of a more indestructible foundation. Was I being naïve? We are in our early thirties. We aren’t kids anymore. We both have changed, maybe he has for the worse?

“Julia, I need you to listen to me very carefully now. Are you listening?” he said with an urgency that I have never experienced ever, especially not from Anthony.

“I am”, I told him hopelessly hoping that whatever he was about to say would undoubtedly convince me of his innocence.

“Do you remember the place where we used to play with Buffer pretending to have discovered this treasure that our ancestors left us? Do you?” I did. I could remember it as if it were yesterday, simpler times.

“The hollow tree that we marked with an X”, he continued, “the X that told us where the treasure was hidden”, he almost yelled at me at this point, fists on the iron table balled with anger and urgency. “Behind the third branch on the left side of the X you will find a key, which opens a safe deposit box in the Liberty Bank of New Orleans on Canal Street.” Liberty Bank – isn’t that ironic?

He continued “in there you will find a USB key with audio files that will prove to you and to everyone that I am innocent. Please Julia, tell me you will find the key and listen to the audio files... please you are everything I have left, my only hope for a chance to get out of this alive”, he pleaded with me as if his life depended on it and it did.



I kneel down, looking into my own reflection in the water, disturbed by fierce waves. My face – or should I say façade? – still solid. Good. I cannot, under any circumstances, not even for one second, allow myself to drop my mask, my façade, my game face. As I rise again, knees strong, secure, and steady – exactly what I need right now – I can feel her presence behind me. I turn around prepared for anything, my fabricated and forged smile already on my lips.

“Hello Samantha, what a delight to see you here!”, I say, my insides turning like the proverbial body in the grave, because it is in fact not a delight to see her here unplanned.

“Juliet, I did not expect to see you by the sea this early in the morning, have you had a sleepless night?”, she asks spuriously, probably hoping that I did sleep horribly last night – which to my satisfaction, I did not.

“Why are you up at this hour though? Having to do some last-minute planning for your tremendous Thanksgiving dinner tonight?” I inquire, hoping that that will remind her of someone or something to tend to, anything to give me a few more moments of silence and solitude before tonight’s events.

“Now that you remind me, yes, I was wondering if it were possible for you to arrive an hour earlier, you know, for organizational purposes”; she did not have to add the air quotes around the word organizational, it was the tone of her voice that implied that and we both knew she only wanted me there early because she wants to keep an eye on me. Suspicious Samantha, always thinks I am planning something. In her defense, this time I am. From the second I listened to the audio proving that Anthony was innocent, I devoted every aspect of my life to this plan. I took out a loan, moved to another city, changed my name, my appearance, everything. Julia Fox from New Orleans, Louisiana made way for Juliet Dubois, the rich lawyer’s daughter who just happened to find an apartment next to Samantha. Samantha is right in her suspicions, because tonight marks the biggest part of my plan yet – vengeance for the innocent – the night that Samantha finally goes down for the incarceration and death of my brother Anthony.

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## on the doorstep *between dream and reality*

picture: violet stathopoulou-vais

by rubin vorpsi

It is about two o'clock after midnight during a deep and cold winter, total darkness and tranquility cover the whole city and with it our neighborhood, which is very near to its center. But in our home, hasty steps and noises of movement and packing up things disturb this peaceful night, with all the lights being switched on, except of those in our bedroom, as me and my sister are still sleeping there. Something is happening, something unusual to our home's everyday routine.

I am in my bed covered from tip to toe under a pile of blankets, consisting of three different kinds: an old but thick wool blanket with a grizzly brown kind of a color, covers me from inch to inch, while a red long-haired handmade blanket, offers me further isolation from the humid cold of the room, and a thin greyish cotton fabric throw, with some weird geometric patterns on it, meticulously embroidered by my grandmother's hands, gives the final touch to this huge fabric construction.

It is so warm and comforting down there, and so safe that I want to stay like that forever,

and continue unhindered my so beloved adventurous dreams. But in the same time that I enjoy this snug protection, the weight of it crushes me so hard, as if there is someone standing above my bed, pressing me down with his body and hands, pushing me deeper and deeper into my confinement of cloths, and thus, deeper and deeper into the dreamy world of my imagination.

But as I cover myself, leaving no inch of my body exposed to the room's dark intentions, the air gets thinner and thinner under my blankets, to such a point, that I have to surface my head just a little bit, from time to time, only to be able to replenish my oxygen levels, and then, dive back again into my dreamy world. You see, the cold and humidity outside this construction of fabrics, is so constant and penetrating, that in order for you to survive the night during its cold and wet persistent siege, you had to be fully cocooned as a chrysalis.

As I surface my head repeatedly, only to take small sips of cold air, and then dive back in, I find myself in a repetitive transition, a transition between the space of my room and that of some distorted and fragmented dreams. Dreams that look a lot like faded paintings, resembling distant and far stretched moments of memories and imagination, like frames with living pictures inside them, moving but colorless, as in those old films of black and white. I am inside those frames and films, being a crucial part of their plot, as I am the narrator, the protagonist, and the lyrical eye, all in the same time, able to move in and out of my body, and able to see everything, both from my eye's perspective and out of it, like a voyeur who is monitoring with awe and wonder whatever unfolds in front of him.

This particular night though, I clearly remember myself striving so hard to prolong as much as possible, my stay in the depths of my bed's warmth and safety, even though, all my

surroundings are restlessly trying to disturb this experience of mine. I persistently refuse to quit from this experience, because I know I prefer it a thousand times more compared to what is coming next, even though I don't know what exactly that is. But in spite of all this, and even if this repetitive transition of up and down, may sound and look to you too tedious and annoying, it is an experience that I cherish and carry with me, till this very moment that I am writing down these lines.

The memory is still so vivid and clear, as I can still remember wishing with all my heart's strength to stay in that illusion forever, to be trapped between two borders, those of dream and reality, as a migrant is, when stuck in the grey zone between the two neighboring countries he is trying to pass by, with no access in neither of them, being stuck while waiting for his fate to be decided by someone unknown, someone who possesses a god-like power over his future and life. I wanted to be like a traveler, who made a pause in his journey, in order to shelter himself from the heavy storms coming his way, but decided to stay a little longer than he originally planned. Like Odysseus, when he reached the golden shores of Circe's majestic and mesmerizing island, which made him lose his mind and sense of time and space, making him forget his prior and primary mission of going back, back to his home and kingdom of Ithaca, back to his queen Penelope who so patiently and devotedly was waiting for his return.

Even though I was only six years old, that night did never fade away, it is like my brain refuses to wash its remains out of the sand, and how could it? That was the night that I was forced to leave behind me everything I considered my world, my childhood, my life, my joy. All those were so rudely paused, without any warning, and without even being asked or even informed of what all this would mean for me. Maybe I was too little to understand, or maybe

my parents didn't know even for themselves as well, what exactly to say, or what the future would turn out to be. Maybe that is how life is after all; decisions that have their consequences known only after they come to you. But surely, I did not forget that night.

Some time ago, a friend of mine, during our student years and upon a passionate discussion about time and space, introduced me to an idea that has stuck with me ever since. As he told me "Time is as relative to somebody as is his particular time and space experience in a certain set point of his life," and continued, "imagine a child being only four years old, those four years, are his whole life, and they seem to him so huge and infinite, as it is all what he knows until that certain time".

So those years, my first years, were limitless and infinite, full of joy and love, freedom and brightness, safety and endless games. Those were my only concerns back then, and I had all the time in the world in front of me to enjoy them. But that night, forced a sudden break upon my carelessness and disregard for what the future will bring, that night, I had to go away from all that, and set course for a strange and unknown place to me.

Back at home, while they are preparing things, my parents make more and unnecessary noise deliberately, so that I would behave myself and wake up, I had to get off my bed you see, and get prepared like a good boy I was, as they kept telling me. But for their poor luck, and in contrast to what I had promised them just a few hours ago, no such plans were in my true intentions. I still resist and try to disregard all these interferences and annoyances that are trying to tear down my illusion, and so I continue to keep myself well wrapped, pretending I am still asleep. But despite my constant stalling, my father comes into my bedroom and with a sudden and unremorseful move, strips me off my cocoon

of blankets. I finally had to disembark my woolen submarine, ending my dreams and mysterious adventures in an eyes' flinch, and set foot on our screeching wooden floor, feeling its wet and cold penetrating my feet once making contact with it, waking me in an instant, as a freezing chill furiously reaches my spine, invading my whole body with its torrential force, even though I am wearing a pair of thick and warm handmade woolen socks to protect me.

Everyone is on their feet by now, and so are my sister and grandma, who unfortunately will not join us in our trip, everyone is in a total alert mode, everyone except me, who for some reason is acting as if nothing is happening. After having a quick breakfast already prepared the previous night, I am being dressed up and prepared as a boy doll by mother's tender but hasty hands, and then set on the couch to wait for further instructions. All of us are staring at the clock, waiting for it to strike at half-past two, so we would leave the house in time to catch the first bus towards our fixed destination. This trip would be at least fourteen to sixteen hours long, and being the first ones to arrive at borders, was of paramount importance, as it is said, that the first shift is always the most neighborly and welcoming one, as things tend to go faster when first. And there is always less possibility to get stuck in an endless line of steel boxes, if you happen to be the beginning of it.

After our half household had been meticulously squeezed into four brown leather suitcases, and now dragged outside in the freezing cold terrace of our house, gazing in despair at the foggy moon above, all of us are now gathered at our doorstep, where a dim yellow light paints the constructs and shadows of my sister and grandmother holding hands.

While we are staring at her immovable and muted, as you are in a funeral, crying as she is, my little sister demands repeatedly and in a



profound agony and despair that we take her with us. On our way down the stairs, the last goodbyes find my mother in tears; she is giving now my sister a tight and enduring hug, with a wet and passionate mother's kiss as a charm to protect her, and this makes the night suddenly so bright and warm.

But as the three of us keep fading away in the dark, and away from my sister's sight, she keeps on calling to us with a sobbing voice. I still can hear her cry, and see her little green eyes, wet and red from the steaming tears purring down her white little cheeks.

In that very moment I didn't know what to do or what to say, and muted and numb as I was, no words came out of my mouth. I didn't grasp why and what was happening, I only accepted things as they were, I didn't question them, I didn't resist them. I had surrendered all the control of my body and will to my parents, to what was happening, to anything that that was. I was just a vessel, I was just a boy doll, I just wanted to go back to sleep, I just wanted for all of this, to be another bad dream...

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