

WENSUM

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WELCOME

David Sexton | Editor

This issue marks the first edition of WENSUM where each piece inside was first featured on our website before making it to the pages you're about to read. We're experimenting with smaller, more frequent uploads online before collecting the season's selections into this digital magazine.

Inside, there are some wonderful pieces by talented authors exploring the themes of loneliness, isolation, loss, and the feeling of being out of place.

I hope you enjoy them.

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On the Street That's Still Called Lenin

Elizabeth Olguin

The cow lows in the field behind my house as the sun sets, purple and orange and pink against the wheat fields on the street that's still called Lenin. When the night sky goes from blue to black and the stars shine above me in a panorama unbelievable, the crickets chirp, and the moths and bugs and sand flies that bite my ankles beat their wings against the window's screen.

Morning announces itself as a bright, blinding dawn that shines through the house's lace curtains. Maria shuffles into the kitchen in woollen slippers to set the fire under the oven's burner with a strike of a match and the whoosh of gas enveloped in flame. The kettle bubbles and whistles while her knife scrapes butter over bread and slices sausage and cheese for breakfast.

I emerge, and Maria chatters away to me in

Russian, a language that glides and rolls over its sounds, musical in a way most foreigners don't appreciate but I have loved since I first heard it sung. On the street that's still called Lenin, cars in a wedding procession drive by, honking their joy for the whole town to hear because joy in Moldova is something to be distributed amongst all your neighbours in the same way the elderly women around us share their chicken and eggs and milk warm and frothy from the cow. Maria calls for her son, the man I refer to as my brother but who's older than my father, with his litany of nicknames. Sasha, Sanya, San, Sashenka. I will always call him Sasha with my nasal 'a', the one vocal concession to my foreignness I can't seem to shake.

The tiny, brown birds that live in the bushes that border my yard are twittering and arguing amongst themselves, fighting over the choice spots along the fence. I call for the cat, and she comes trotting from her place, the stool by the garage that she and Sasha fight over when he goes to smoke and drink his coffee in the cool, morning breeze. She purrs and chatters by my

feet, begging for the scraps of fish from last night's dinner.

Out on the street that's still called Lenin, a horse-drawn cart goes by, driven by a man in a flat cap with a cigarette dangling from his lips. The horse's hooves clop against the ragged, pitted concrete and scatter gravel that skitters out into the middle of the road. The neighbourhood store welcomes me with a ringing bell and a murmured hello from the cashier. I've lived here for over a year now, and my Russian is confident and fluid as I fetch the small, dark loaves Maria requested, the specific type of milk, the homemade tvorog, double bagged in thin plastic that rustles against the cotton of my t-shirt as I walk home.

The children who live on the corner have ventured out to play amongst the mud and rocks that form our street, screeching and yelping, their wet, plastic flip-flops squelching against the broken stone. They stop their play to run to me, wrapping me in their tiny arms as they scream my Russian name: Liza, Liza, Liza. Then they let me go, because only for a moment am

I more interesting than the game of tag from before.

At home, Maria prepares dough, stirring and slapping and kneading as the table creaks and rocks against the cracked kitchen tiles. I sit at the same table with a cup of strong, black coffee and observe, fascinated by this act of creation, the passing of knowledge. When I think about Moldova years later, this is what I will remember. But at that moment I hear, in the rhythmic formation of the dough, that I belong here, in this family, in this house, in this place with the lowing cow and the chirping birds and the sunsets that defy description, on the street that's still called Lenin, where all my neighbours wave as I walk by.



A Bit of the Night

Shome Dasgupta

A rocking in the wind – rattled windows and a tremor. From night came a turbulence so maddening that he closed his eyes and covered his ears. Maybe, if he shouted, the deafening sounds – its frightening clash would subside. So. He shouted, sitting on the kitchen floor with his legs crossed. The wood of the house bent, tilting his body, and so came the memories of lunar tides – a gravity which pulled him in closer to the moment in his life when he held his Ma's hand. Time travelling.

In the kitchen, there was a bulb hanging from the ceiling, and it swung in the rhythm of the shaking stars, causing a flickering and just like that wavering light, the memories of his Ma's palm flashed with such lightning, he couldn't help but to lie down on the tiles in an effort to release the flooded pain of the past. He opened his eyes – he opened them for just a bit, his

hands now by his side as the moon wavered through the cracking windows – a refraction to match his murky mind.

Down the aisle, they walked – hand in hand – through the colourful corridor of toys and games to the back end of the store to find celery and cheese. A mother's tears were never meant to be seen by a son, but he felt them drop onto his arm. He looked up only to see his Ma turn her face away – the only way she could hide such sadness.

He spoke – a question, perhaps, all in mumble, and she replied, perhaps, an endearment of words, and that was all he needed as they continued to walk.

The plastic plates edged toward their end as the night invaded his house – he continued to lie on the kitchen floor. The more and more the night entered, the more and more he entered his own memory – a quick yelp. He never liked the dark; its overwhelming presence made him yearn for sunlight.

Now they were standing in line at the store – ahead of mother and son were a family of

four. He remembered how happy they were all acting, one by one, placing an infinite amount of items on the belt. Toys and candy and clothes and food. He saw a brief smile coming from Ma, who always appeared like a tower to him back then, as she looked at one of the parents. There was an exchange and a polite nod of the head. They left, but it didn't take too long for the two of them to check out – there were only two items. The cashier wished them a good night.

More night – night and night and night. He squirmed on the kitchen floor as the blizzard of sounds shook his earth. This cracked and that cracked, and there was crackling and crashing. Just beyond the house was a large field which was a pure green under the sun, but at that moment, a toothless ocean – abysmal.

Parking lot: under dim street lights – the sky came crashing into his head, bringing the moon with it as they stood just outside their car – a strong wind and a whistling chasm of air. Ma, in tears – apologising over and over again to her child. She thanked him for being a good son. In the car, on the way home – they were quiet.

He wanted to kiss Ma on the cheek. He wanted to play I See or 21 Questions, but he knew that night that he should just be quiet and listen to the sounds of the few cars alongside them, going in whichever direction.

A silence – finally, he whispered as his body relaxed. He sat up and crossed his legs again and looked around, seeing bits of this and that on the floor. The hanging bulb stopped its sway, almost smiling at him. Through the window, there was a night, but this time, it was calming and peaceful. He almost liked it, but he knew there would be another night the next day. In and out, his breath went as he finished off his memory before getting ready for breakfast.

At the kitchen table, they sat. Ma, wrapping cheese around stalks of celery in front of him – his favourite dish. She sipped her water, but his son wouldn't eat his dinner until she took a bit herself, so she broke off a piece and put it in her mouth. He ate his dish full of glee as the night moved over them. He remembered her words that night before he found her gone the next morning.

“Happy Birthday.”

A slight tremor as he stood up, moving the cups on the floor with his feet.

He whispered back as if he was there – or maybe she was here.

“Thank you, Ma.”

Another night gone – this one was different for him, and there was a bit there, a bit of hope that maybe the dark of the sky would embrace him forever, just like Ma.



The Ziggurat

Sam Christie

Baravin Erdelan looked across at the American, sitting stiffly in the air-conditioned, luxury Hummer. They were speeding through the streets of Erbil in the searing heat of the midday sun. Most of the cars on the streets were white, but this one was matt black. Baravin saw his face reflected in the lenses of the American's shades. These sunglasses were utilitarian, mean-spirited and looked like they had been crafted from the cockpit windscreen of a U2 spy plane. The American gave little away, dressed as he was in the usual western, quasi-civilian uniform: adventure fatigues, crisp blue shirt, beige jacket and a pair of sand-coloured boots.

“So, what did you think of the architect’s drawings?”

“Big. Very big,” said the American, sounding drained. Baravin felt a face-flushing pang; this man had so little interest in his project – he was

a mere investor – a big-hitting money man who cared nothing for the concept or for Kurdistan, in fact. But in Baravin's mind, building the biggest, most magnificent shopping mall in the Middle East was a project that had taken on a meaning far bigger than profit.

What unites almost everyone? Where did everyone want to go, regardless of their language or beliefs? Well, to the restaurants, the designer outlets, the cinemas, of course; they wanted to smell the perfumed air, the wafts of fresh coffee and listen to the burble of all those languages, indulging their pure desire for pleasure. Kurdistan would lead the way and would invite people from all over the world to share their mutual hedonistic desire for things and events – perhaps even each other.

Since the conversation seemed to have reached its limit, Baravin turned his attention to the city that unfolded behind the smoked glass. It was hot extremely hot, probably about fifty-five degrees, yet people still went about their business surrounded by dust, sweat and haze. Baravin always felt that the temperature,

heat that seemed to edge up every summer, was a very unfair burden for Erbil to bear. After all, the place was haunted by nearby war, terrorism, the resulting refugees and the constant presence of some foreign expeditionary interest that seemed only intent on stripping Kurdistan's assets. Climate change appeared like a cruel joke smeared as icing on the unfortunate cake of recent times.

“Mr Erdelan, can you remind me where we are going and why?” Baravin bristled again at the American’s indifference.

“As I explained, we are going to a ceremony for my workers. They bring something of importance from their community and culture and place these objects in the foundations of the steps into the building. It is a ceremony to thank and honour them, their families and their heritage.”

“You honour them by burying their things? Weird.” The American managed a cynical chuckle, which lasted only a second before his face hardened again.

“Then they feel invested in the building, part

of it. They bring drawings, poems or small artefacts. All of it becomes the building itself. It is good to make workers feel involved.”

Baravin made money, lots of it, but he also felt responsible for the people who worked for him. He wanted them to like him, to like being employed by him. His staff came from many different cultures and countries and this ceremony was a chance for them to feel as one and to be united in the purpose of this towering structure. The building would be enormous without doubt and would make a lot of people very rich, but workers should never be forgotten; this was the rule.

Both men were shocked by the structure as it slowly reared into sight. Baravin had only dealt with the drawings up to this point, and this was the first time he had seen progress since visiting the vast mound-like wasteland in the very early stages. Huge concrete columns rose from the dirt with steel reinforcing rods poking out of the tops like bristles. The lower floor had been jointed together in pre-cast sections which stretched as far as the eye could see. Baravin

looked again at the plan on his phone in an attempt to match the half-finished shell to the colourful spiral that would reach into the sky. He felt the weight of responsibility fall on his shoulders; this is really happening.

The crowd of workers were gathered around the entrance steps as the Hummer pulled up to a space kept free by two dishevelled security guards. As the men stepped out of the car, Baravin was surprised that there was no cheering, and the atmosphere seemed tense. In the back of the crowd, two men jostled with each other and were shouting. A woman was wailing. When the crowd noticed the men, they fell silent but for the occasional push or shove.

“Hey, is this okay?” The American looked around nervously, picking up on the undercurrents that seemed to rise from the assembled labourers like a wave of malevolence.

Baravin ignored him; he had a speech to give. He walked towards a lone microphone set up near the parking space. As he approached it, it gave a brief screech of feedback. His heart was beating fast, and he felt beads of sweat forming

on his forehead, and not just from the heat. The crowd looked at him; they were a sea of sullen stares.

“My friends, we are united in one purpose. We are as family with one loving goal.” A voice shouted from the crowd, igniting several others. Baravin steadied himself and began to carry on.

“I am delighted that you would come here to be together in...” The fight broke out again at the back, and the crowd started to jeer and shout. A little girl screamed with a volume that cut through the noise of the throng. Like an unfolding explosion, more and more people began to lash out and club each other with fists and then began to pick up stones. The American slowly moved towards the bulletproof Hummer, tapping his left side as he picked his way backwards through the rubble and dust.

Baravin leaned towards one of the security guards whose face had begun to whiten as the violence intensified.

“What is wrong?” Baravin had to shout. The security man looked at him with a mixture of fear and pity.

“They do not agree. These people are not the same. They do not want to place their objects in that hole next to each other. Do you not see the hatred? The hatred is for you, for this, but they have turned on each other. Who else can they turn on? The only thing together about this crowd is the fact that they have to work for you, are paid so badly by you and can never visit this place when it is finished!” The security man threw his hands up at Baravin as the crowd roared in pulses with the sound of thwacking fists and the thud of falling bodies. Baravin was transfixed, staring at the scene and unable to move. The two security men retreated slowly, then turned and ran. The microphone squealed again.

The American stood by the Hummer, his eyes wild with panic behind the military shades. He fiddled inside his coat.

“Mr Erdelan, get control. NOW!” His voice wavered as he raised a pistol and pointed it towards the crowd.

The fighting mass had by now almost encircled Baravin and gradually, like a stiffening dog

about to attack, began to turn their attention to the two men. Baravin had only one way to escape – up a steel ladder attached to a nearby column. He leapt up and started climbing, suddenly awake to the horror that had unfolded so quickly, without warning.

He heard the shot while grappling with the hot rungs, inexpertly clamping his hands to the metal and swaying as he got higher up the column. The bang had no reverberating tail; it was a dull crack that seemed to be compressed as if in a box. He looked down and saw a young boy fall, his chest covered in blood. Baravin hung there as the crowd advanced towards the American, who frantically fiddled with his gun, repeatedly raising and lowering it with no luck. Now halfway up the column, Baravin turned his face away as the crowd tore and ripped, pulling the American apart in a concentrated frenzy of unbridled energy. His blood made a paste of the dust, and his glasses were crushed by the feet of the huddled, busy workers.

When Baravin reached the top of the column, high above the ground, he grabbed one of the

reinforcing rods to steady himself and looked down. The workers were silent and looked up towards him. He could make out the American's body strewn across the dirt. gingerly, he knelt down and looked up to the sky. He gave a prayer which became a muttering plea. The hand that held tightly to the jutting steel shook uncontrollably. Around the city, the competing sound of all the mosques in unison rang out for the call to prayer.

“This is for them. Would you ever unite us? Would you ever end the wars? We can heal our differences, stand in unity, be one. This place is for them, for the people of the world. People can have fellowship here. This is for them!”

There was only the sound of the many Imams singing different verses. The notes of their calls wove in and out of each other across the city, uniting musically and then jarring in a discordant battle. Suddenly the call to prayer ended with a croak, and there was only silence. Baravin saw a shimmer on the horizon as the sun continued to bake the ground hard. He could feel its power like a weight pressing down on his

head, and he imagined it singeing his hair. He looked down at the crowd.

Four men were scaling the ladder towards him, carefully picking their way up the column, their bloodied hands sticking to the metal rungs as they hauled themselves slowly skyward. They had determined faces yet gave no definite clue as to their intention. Baravin rose to his feet and threw his free hand in the air.

“You were divided. I wanted to unite us all. To bring us together in this wonderful project.” He paused and looked down. The four men carried on relentlessly upwards.

“You cannot do this to me. I am your employer. The American was your employer! Where is your loyalty!?”

The men continued to climb as the workers and their families watched in silence from the ground. Baravin started to scream.

“You bastards! Leave me alone. You are nothing but traitors! You will pay for this, in Hell and on earth!”

Baravin could now see the whiskers on their chins and the wrinkles on their knuckles as

they climbed the last few metres of the ladder in convoy, joined in one singular purpose.

Adopt

Zary Fekete

Lately, I've been scrolling through their pictures more and more.

Pics of occasional trips to the beach. Instagram-ready shots of food or wine glasses.

Then suddenly, there was no need for a status clarification; the pictures showed it all. Now there was selfie upon selfie with only the background changing behind two radiant smiles.

Then, just over a year ago, a new change. I first noticed it because it was so different. There was a sandbox with some plastic toys and a shovel, then shot after shot of a tousle-headed little guy. I guessed he was 8.

The word 'adopt' has more than one meaning. One is *to legally take on (another's child) and bring it up as one's own*. The other is to *embrace*.

They've done both.



The Women in My Life

Tim Love

I've been on this park bench since the gates opened, trying to work out if the woman opposite is an old mother or a glamorous gran. Then the baby she's holding cries, and she unbuttons her blouse to suckle it. I bow my head so she doesn't think I'm staring. Her drinks can falls, which makes things easy for me. I pick it up for her, saying don't open it now, it'll squirt all over you.

She introduces herself as Liz, a painter. I've always wanted to mix with arty people rather than nurses. When I ask her what she's currently working on, she says: "47 Lancaster Terrace." She switches the baby to her other side, tells me how she'd got a grant to do a street mural. The house is due for demolition. She's going to video the mural's destruction and enter it in competitions. Seems pointless to me. I look at the can because I'm not supposed to gaze at

women. I've learned to sneak little glances and join them up later.

I pop a pill. Tersipan's horrible stuff. Gives you hallucinations. I have to sleep with my head pointing North to straighten my brain cells. I've found out that Magnetic North moves at 40 miles a year. It's heading straight for me now. I know it's my turn to say something. My bedroom needs decorating for a start.

She's calling her project 'Entitled' – like 'Untitled' but for the homeless. She's never thought of home as a safe place. Her mother used to put clothes out for her every morning except on holidays when she could decide for herself. They'd been about to go away for a week. She was seven and chose her sparkly fairy outfit. Her mother told her that the holiday hadn't yet begun. They drove off without her. She sat on the stairs for a while, then started filling carrier bags with her belongings, wondering where to go. Half an hour later her father opened the front door. "Ready Liz? She'll only wait a minute for you to change," he said. "Am I adopted?" she replied. "It's that sense of impermanence I want to

convey," she says. I nod. I could have sworn she had a baby with her. Maybe the crying I heard was me. I tell her that my sister phoned this morning. Her daughter had run away, saying she'd decided after talking to me. "Why, Mark?" my sister said, "Why did you make her go?" I wracked my brains to remember when we'd last spoken. It was Boxing Day at a boring family do. I was drunk, sitting in the garden, having a quiet smoke. I didn't hear her creep up behind me. When she said: "Cold?" I jumped. We had a laugh about how Jake's girlfriends all look like boys, about Susan's multi-colour hair, and how Milly talks about nothing except her diet, which was obviously failing again. She asked if I had a spare cigarette. I gave her my last one, reluctantly. She lit it from mine, took a long drag. We sat there looking at the stars. "Crap, ain't it," she said, waving her cigarette towards the house, "You know, everything." I looked back. Through the French windows, I saw a room crowded with people. "School ok?" I said to break the silence. I knew she was a bright kid. She shrugged, waving the cigarette like it was a

sparkler. Or was it a wand? “Thanks for listening, Uncle Mark,” she said, “I know it’s not been easy for you since your mother died.” I didn’t want her to hug me so I rushed in to get another drink. She didn’t follow.

Maybe I said all this to Liz or maybe I just thought it. She’s staring at me as if she knows it all anyway. I’ve heard about women like her, do-gooders who want to help the homeless. She fiddles with the buttons on her blouse. I’m not homeless. I bury my head in my hands and give it a shake. Why is everything my fault? Life’s tough enough as it is. I try so hard. I always take my pills. I brush my teeth twice a day. I don’t stare at things I’m not supposed to see.

I look up and she’s gone, like all the rest. They talk and talk, then walk the talk without a word. I’m not going to chase them. It’s too nice here. There’s a bandstand, whitewashed now, but I’ve seen pictures of it painted like a fair-ground roundabout. The trees have labels with long names like Harry Potter curses. There’s a path for the blind, with Braille signs telling them what they can smell. I can smell what they

smell. My father comes round to say that the park's about to close. It's his job now to take me home. He never lets me down.





Fine, Fine, Totally Fine

E. J. Nash

The screaming starts even though we're still five minutes away. My daughter recognises the landscape: the goldenrods that crowd the guardrails, the white pines gazing over the highway, and the exit leading to the lavender farm. I imagine myself leaning over and jerking the steering wheel out of Greg's grasp, heaving us out of traffic and into the lane that will take us to the lavender. The car won't stop as I jump out. I will run to the field, collapse into the flowers, and let the indigo stain my fingertips.

Instead, I tell Erica that we'll visit the apple another day.

“You say that every time,” she moans.

The apple. A massive forty-foot tourist attraction, wedged on the side of the 401, complete with an observation deck up top near the giant metallic stem. The electronic roadside sign announces over six million apple pies sold, not

that we've ever purchased one. Each time we drive by, I can taste this phantom cinnamon on my tongue, something sweet and maybe cloying with an aftertaste that's faintly burnt.

Erica wants to visit the apple as much as I want to see the lavender.

Travelling with a four-year-old takes time; somehow, my husband still wants us to be as efficient as we were before Erica's birth. Greg doesn't factor in packing the stuffed animals, making sure she has the only water bottle she'll use, or pulling over at the rest stops so she can run and jump and expel the energy that prickles under her skin. We survive the drive to his parents' place a few times a year, yet we've never managed to arrive on time. Not that it matters. His parents want to see Erica's silky pigtails and her unicorn t-shirt. Only Greg cares if we're late. He craves for life to be carefully contained in an on-time, perfect little box wrapped up with a bright red bow. Spontaneity is a foreign language.

I look over at him. Lavender? Apples?

He shakes his head and pointedly looks at the

dashboard clock.

I wonder where my old husband is, the one who loved detours and adventures. Then I think about where I can find the old version of myself, the woman who would argue. Our conversations are transactional nowadays: dinner plans, swimming schedules, school drop-offs, dentist visits, and dance classes. The other day, my colleague asked me about my weekend. I didn't tell her about Erica's meltdown or the fact that I hadn't showered in three days. I said I was fine.

I am always fine, always fine, because I'm not supposed to be anything else. Between playdates and school and bedtime routines and appointments, so many appointments, I don't have room for much. Perhaps just enough space for a small lavender flower.

Now we're hurtling down the highway, past those indigo fields, past the apple and the pies, and there's not a sound from Erica, not a moan or scream or anything. The silence is the worst part. The acceptance. Greg tightly grips the steering wheel. Another twenty minutes pass before he mutters a comment about needing

gas. A petty part of me wants us to be stranded on the side of the road, wasting precious time, listening to the cicadas and the hum of the highway, but Greg pulls into a rest station with plenty of time to spare. He pumps gas and I buy overly-expensive pretzels. The clerk asks me how I'm doing and I tell him I'm fine.

Outside, in the blinding heat, Greg leans against the car and taps his wrist with an over-exaggerated gesture. The window is down, and I can see Erica staring listlessly at the cars hurtling past us. I never feel reckless on the road when everyone else matches the same speed. Only now can I see how fast we were going. How hard it would be to change direction.

I don't know why I say it.

"I lost my phone." The lie is smooth and soft. It tastes delicious. "I think I forgot it at the last rest stop."

Greg is aghast. He says we should forge ahead as we're already late, but I argue that we can't lose the photos in my camera roll.

"I'll drive," I say to him. "That way, you can take a break."

I will worry about Greg later. For now, after I double back and miraculously find my phone, I will travel down the same highway. This time, I will take the exit toward the orchard. I hope Greg will come with Erica and me as we walk between the trees. We will climb the giant apple, the iron walkway echoing under our steps. Once we're on the observation deck, I'm sure Greg will stare down at the roaring river of the highway. Erica will point towards the petting zoo. And I will be looking west, towards the lavender fields, towards the tiny violet flowers.



The Sun Kisses Them All

Joanna Garbutt

As I crawl out of my hiding place after the storm has passed, I realise I am alone. I shout, though my lips are chapped and stinging, and struggle to form the words as the harsh, cold air floods my throat. The winds have been intolerable the last few days, with drifts up to a foot high, maybe more. And last night, there was a blizzard. I fashioned a hiding place for myself under a rock, fear forcing me to work despite my exhaustion. I had assumed that the others had done the same, but when I re-emerge, I see no one. I call and call, but there's no reply. My head throbs with panic and the piercing rays of the midday sun.

I look around. I don't know what direction to take. I try to remember where we were heading, but I have completely lost my bearings. I hear their voices echoing around, bouncing off the mountains, but I see nothing. Perhaps all I hear

is the wind.

How I long to hear their voices. How much I had hated them, and now I can't bear to be without them. It had been an unhappy voyage for me. I was insular, only responding in short, quick sentences. Their company was difficult – I always wanted to be alone and avoided them when possible, volunteering for extra shifts on watch for the solitude. When I wasn't working, I would watch them play their games after dinner, something childish like 'The Priest of the Parish has lost his cap', the tears rolling down their faces as they struggled to breathe with the laughter. They weren't unpleasant towards me, but I know I made them uneasy. I had despised their happiness when I was at my most miserable.

When we arrived and started the expedition, they became less happy – too cold for laughter. We walked and walked. They would obsess about food or the lack of it. It was at the front of everyone's mind, and some days, it would be all anyone would talk about. We would all dream about an abundance: onions with curry powder,

sweetened hoosh with pemmican, arrowroot and biscuits, caramels and ginger, meat pies with thick gravy that we could sink our teeth into. I felt like an engine where paltry pieces of coal were thrown into the furnace infrequently.

I decide to go west and start walking. I pray I am not heading away from the rest of the expedition.

As I trudge on, I think of Mother and my sister, Elspeth, and wonder what they are doing back home. It would be cold and snowing there as well. I can't quite remember what the date is, but I know it is not yet Christmas. Still, I imagine Mother bringing out the shiny red ornaments and the candles for the tree. The wreath for the front door will be layered and put together by Elspeth. I see her profile, the light of the fire casting her in shadow, the pink nib of her tongue sticking out in concentration as she works.

It is Father's death that has brought me to this place. His debts, which we had not known about while he was still with us, but which have made the world appear darker. Father's friend,

Edward Stanhope, pulled strings to arrange my place on this expedition, saying it would set me up for life, and would provide us all with a solid wage and promises of further riches on my return.

“It’s what your father would want me to do in these circumstances, William,” he’d said as we sat in his drawing room, sipping thick, treacly sherry. “Now that you are the man of the house. And it will put your training to good use.”

Stanhope would look after my mother and sister until my return. He told me this to comfort me, but it doesn’t, as I worry about what he feels this duty will entail. I remember the way he would look at Elspeth.

It is hard to be grateful now that I am out here and looking around these mountains, feeling like a lamb brought to the slaughter. Early in the expedition, a man cut himself attempting to catch a seal for food, using the wrong kind of knife. The sight of his crimson blood on the white ice, its starkness, haunts me; this is what scares me, me a living, breathing thing of warmth in this place of complete indifference.

How could anything exist here, I wonder How could I exist here? But we would stumble on the remains of past expeditions, which would provide evidence that it was possible to survive, but only if you kept moving.

I must carry on, I tell myself.

Then I see something in the distance. A dark figure. A man coming towards me. In a rush of joy, something warm fills my veins. I shout at the top of my voice and start waving. The man does not wave back, but he continues to walk towards me, and I see it is Harry Brown, a member of our team. He comes so close I can hear his voice.

“Turner!” he shouts.

“Brown!” I shout back. And we draw closer still so that we no longer need to shout.

“I was sent back for you,” he explains.

“On your own?”

“Yes,” he says. “They couldn’t spare anyone more.”

He is carrying a bag like mine but hopefully, it contains some other supplies. I assume they gave him no cooking equipment, as there

wouldn't have been much to spare.

"They've made a change in direction," Brown says. "We need to head off towards the mountains to the east. The blizzard has thrown us off course. That is the direction we need to take if we've a hope of getting to the summit." He looks at me. "Do you have food?"

"Some horsemeat. Not much." The remains of Lazy Lenny, who was unfairly named after an initial resistance to using snow shoes. He grew so thin and worn that the dogs finally set about him. After they'd had their fill, I collected the meagre remains of poor Lenny for my own provisions.

Brown nods. "It will only take a couple of days for us to catch up with them. If we keep a good pace."

"We must find some shelter," I say after what must have been hours of walking. "Some rocks. Something to keep the wind off. I don't suppose you have a tent, do you?"

"No."

We eat before attempting to get some rest. I take some of the horsemeat from my pouch and

set it to warm slightly in the sun so that I will at least be able to chew it to get it down my throat. I know it might make me sick but the hunger pangs are worse, pain that can only be silenced through food. I see Brown's profile as he stands in the sunlight. Brown was popular on the boat. Knew the words to lots of songs. He especially annoyed me. But he is quiet now, staring out into the horizon. His good humour is the first casualty in our battle against our environment.

I sleep badly. There is a lot of noise, a constant reminder of where we are. The ice cracking, the wind wheezing through the mountains. I think of how far we have come and how far we still have to go. The cold is absolute, the numbness in my bones which has turned from an ache to a pain and then to a weight heavier than any load I carry.

I examine the shapes in the darkness. My eyes find things in the black. Will we meet the others? Brown seems confident and shows no fear. I must get back. For Elspeth and Mother.

In the morning, we rise and eat again before walking.

“I am surprised they sent you, if I’m honest,” I say to Brown. “That they could spare you.”

He shrugs. “Stanhope would have raised hell if no one had tried to find you.” He states it as a fact, but I would have been surprised if there was no bitterness. Everyone knows about Stanhope and my relation to him. He is a major donor to the expedition, so no one feels they can say anything against him in front of me.

We go further. We travel along a ridge and look at the endless inclines and declines. They must surely not be too far away.

I remember when we took photos, setting up the camera to catch evidence we were in such a harsh landscape. All still and squinting in the sunlight. I remember this and feel a rush of happiness and think of a time when Mother and Elspeth would see those photos and ask me questions and what I would be able to tell them. The details seem banal and commonplace on our journey when lived with day in and day out, but details which, so far removed from anything she has experienced, will make Elspeth’s green eyes widen in amazement.

I keep them in my head as I move forward – the times when we would sit in front of the fire, simply enjoying each other's company. It was only ever marred by my father, coming in drunk and criticising us. Sometimes, he would cuff me, irritate me, just to make me angry. He would knock me about the head and jeer. He would call me an idiot, a waste. Not enough of a man to truly be his son.

I almost fail to see the huge crack in front of me, narrowly avoiding falling into a large crevasse. I cry out and step backwards, edging slowly away. My heart thumps, and I try to catch my breath after the shock.

“That was close. How come you didn’t see it? A bloody big crack like that.” Brown says, appearing next to me.

“I was distracted.”

“We need to go. We can’t be too far away from them by now.”

And he goes, so I follow behind him even though I am still annoyed at his lack of concern. I wish that someone else had come to find me.

We camp for another night, going slightly out

of our way to find somewhere suitable. I struggle to sleep and think of Mother and Elspeth in front of the fire again. It is one thing being cold on the outside, but to constantly warm myself on the inside, to keep away all the dark thoughts, requires too much energy. I start to miss the other men. What I hated about their good humour and happiness on the boat, I crave now. I feel a burning need to be with them, their red faces smiling at me, though it feels too late.

The next day, we begin early, hoping to finally reach the others. I try asking Brown how long he thinks it will take, but he is vague. I set the remains of my rotten horsemeat, barely a table-spoon, to defrost in the sun and look over at him.

“How much food have you got?”

“Not much. Enough.”

“How much?” I ask again, but he won’t say.

How much did they give him for being the search party? They were running out of food before the blizzard, and there was talk of a further reduction in rations. I had been quiet about my horsemeat, hugging it to me when I

sheltered underneath the rock during the blizzard.

Dark thoughts refuse to be held back any longer. What if something has happened to the rest of the group? Maybe Brown is not leading me to them. Maybe he has lost his mind. It would be an easy thing out here. But I continue after him as I don't know what else to do.

My memory shows me once more the night of Father's death. The two of us standing on the bridge. Mother had been concerned and asked me to fetch him from the tavern. To get him before he shames himself and all of us. I'd found him outside in the streets, walking slowly, swaying in the lamplight.

"You're an embarrassment, William," he had said, trailing behind me as we walked over the bridge, calling insults at my back. "You're a bastard, I'm sure of it. Nothing so pathetic could have come from my loins. Your mother—"

I'd turned round to face him. "Is worth twenty of you," I'd said, finishing his sentence. I'd begun to turn away. To hell with him. He could make his own way home.

He laughed. "She's damaged goods, you know. She tricked me. She's nothing but—"

I didn't hear what he said next. I turned around to face him and hit him, a punch to the side of his face with as much force as I could muster. A greater force than I had known myself capable of inflicting. I didn't care how much I hurt him. I just wanted him to stop.

Only he was a lot more unsteady than I thought. Now at the top of the bridge, not a high bridge but high enough, he fell to one side, some of the cracks in the brickwork giving way, so he lost his footing and went over the side. As he fell, in the moonlight I saw his face, the realisation he would fall into the water, his look of panic and terror. I watched his face disappear into the running water, knowing he couldn't swim and I willed him to fall. I didn't move, didn't go to get help. I stood watching till I knew he had gone, and then I went home.

The next day, we heard his body had washed up lower down the river. Everyone assumed he had simply fallen in after the side of the bridge gave way. A terrible accident. I thought things

would be better after he'd gone. But the debts made it so none of us could sleep. His legacy was more disruptive to us than his company had been.

I realize we've been walking for hours.

“Where are they?” I call out to Brown, beyond exhausted.

He doesn't reply. He continues moving.

“Stop! Stop!” I cry, looking around us.

He stops and looks towards me and gives me a frost-bitten grin. A sickness rises in me despite the emptiness of my stomach. A realisation that has been creeping slowly finally consumes me.

I look at him and see what is there. Or at least become aware of what I am not seeing.

I think back. Brown has not been eating. He makes a show of it, but I never see him actually put anything into his mouth. I never see him sleep. I take it for granted that he sleeps because I have been sleeping, but I have not seen him lie on the ground or close his eyes. I finally understand that I am alone out here.

We have been going nowhere. I am in a hell, a purgatory, a punishment. The devil is in front of

me, with his jeering smile leading me along. My hell is not the fires, the pit of suffering with all the other lost souls. It is this cold, unrelenting loneliness.

“We are lost,” I shout, as much to myself as to him. I can’t see anything ahead, just an endless expanse of white.

“I think it’s beautiful,” he says, looking out over the horizon, smile gone. “Everyone always complains about it, the ice, everything. How unrelenting, how frightening it all is. But these mountains, the sun kisses them all.”

He isn’t Brown anymore. He is Elspeth in her pretty blue dress, and I feel a deep sharp pain inside me. Tears beginning to form in my eyes. I’d told myself over many months that what I had done, I had done for her. But I realise that is nonsense. I have left her to the mercy of Stanhope.

“Elspeth, I...” But I don’t know what to say. She turns to me, unsmiling, the desolation on her face. She doesn’t look me in the eye, just stares out at the nothingness behind me.

I am overcome by nausea and drop to the

ground, breathing quickly. It hurts to continue to breathe, to move. I look up and Elspeth has gone. I see no one for a minute, my vision blurred, until another figure comes into view. It is Father staring down at me. He takes a step closer and watches me for a moment. I know now that I am finished. I cannot continue. I sit down and wait.

In these final moments, I try to escape these dark thoughts. I try to think of Mother and Elspeth and the fire, and our easy company, and their smiles when they would see me there reading, asking what was holding my interest. I try to keep this memory alive. I force myself. But I finally know that I will never see them again.



By the Radio

Letitia Payne

She hesitates before she places the phone to her ear. Always one to text or email but rarely one to call. He knew this well but rings anyway. She squeezes her eyes shut, and flecks of colour erupt across the backs of her eyelids.

“Hello?”

On the other end of the line the News at Seven echoes through a room, a cat cries to be let out, and a man clears his throat, preparing to speak. Her breath catches at the back of her throat.

“Angel. I have to tell you—” Her father’s voice bellows through the receiver.

“Are you alright?” She places a hand on the kitchen table to steady herself.

“Yes, I’m fine darling, but look I really must tell you what came to me this morning.”

That morning, she’d sat at that same table, picking at the embroidery on the tablecloth. She’d let the phone ring. As it vibrated against

the cloth beside her, she glared at the cat bowl filled to the brim with water long turned stale. She thought of emptying it but had sat firm in the chair, unmoving.

“I really can’t talk for–”

“Do you remember Tracy Chapman?” There’s this animation in his voice, like every sentence is a different coloured thread for her to pluck at.

“Look, I was just about to have dinner” She feels the damp begin to creep onto her palms.

“On the way to school, remember? It was the only CD I had that you liked.”

The music underscored every school run. The soft melody of the guitar, his fingers tapping offbeat against the steering wheel, she remembered it well. At that moment, she was six again, her backpack too big for her frame, and her hand didn’t fit in his as they walked to the school gates. She clung to two of his fingers instead.

“Angel?”

She shivers against the cold draught. Her feet are naked against the kitchen linoleum. The windows are open. She wasn’t sure how long it had been since the house fell quiet – a couple

of days, a week, perhaps more. That morning, she'd needed to fill the emptiness, so she opened the windows and let the autumn decay creep in.

“I’m here.”

“It reminded me of the time I told you about the Queen sending a birthday letter to every person who turned a hundred.” On his end of the line, the chatter from the television grows louder and recedes again. He’s pacing.

“I don’t think I—”

“No, no. Remember, I was taking you to school, and you said: I hope she sends you a letter when you turn one hundred.” He breaks off into a thunderous chuckle that drowns the entire soundscape behind him. “And I thought, gosh, I’m not that old.”

As his voice trails off, she wonders if it might rain later on. There is a fly in the water, peddling frantically, trying to reach the sloping tin wall of the bowl.

“Dad, there’s something I have to tell you.”

In the kitchen, her feet grow roots, and her chest is a drawstring knotted twice over. She wants it out. She remembers the undented pillow on the right side of his bed, the bare shelf with the toothpaste stains in the bathroom cabinet, the plants wilting in the empty study. Outside, evening descends like a dark veil. The fly stops pedalling. The water stills.

“Funny, isn’t it? I always think of you when I find Chapman’s CD.” Her dad had heard her, she thought, but he had to get to the closing line of his monologue.

“I think the cat’s gone.”

The cat was the last thing to keep him there. In the corners of a room or an empty chair at the table, she could no longer feel him lingering in all that space he left behind.

It had been a few months, or maybe it was coming up to a year. He liked to listen to Radio 4 – the afternoon he passed, it hummed from beneath the study door. Fickle static bled into

every sentence as it tried to cling to a signal. She found him there and hadn't closed a door in the house since.

“I’ve been leaving the door to the garden open and—”

“Listen to me.”

“Dad.” It falters, her voice. Dips out like the static seeping from beneath the door. Her vision mottles as the tears come, hot on her skin. She stands alone in the empty house with the open windows, the open doors.

“I’m coming to get you.”

And with that, it is finally quiet. No more pacing, no sound from the TV to fill his front room. Only the buzz of a dead line.

She wanders through the empty house. Bare feet catching on the corners of rugs, hands slapping against the walls to steady herself, she thinks she can hear someone plucking at a guitar, and she follows the song through the hall. Her bare soles drag across the wood.

She sinks into his chair and presses her forehead to the frayed leather top of his writing desk. She wants to absorb it all, inhale the fragments that are left. The weight of everything she's left unsaid rots within her with each passing season.

When she returns to the cold linoleum and the open windows, she is not alone. The cat sits on the old embroidered tablecloth, licking itself clean from the wilderness. There is no knock at the door, no turn of his key in the lock.

The next morning, she goes to him, to his spot by the weathered oak tree at the end of the lane. She caresses the branches she'd clung to as a child and feels the sting of the memory suck the air from her lungs. The leaves that cover him have all withered to rust. Tracing her fingers across the stone, she memorises the way his name feels against her skin. There's a long silence before she speaks.

“The cat came home.” She says, and the wind shakes the last of the season from the old tree in response.

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