WENSUM

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WELCOME

David Sexton | Editor

At the risk of repeating myself, I can't quite believe we've made it to Issue 8 of WENSUM and am continually blown away by the quality of the submissions we receive.

I've written about the difficulties we've had regarding X in the past and, in light of recent events, are weighing up our use of the platform. In an ideal world, we would move entirely over to our newly created Bluesky account (@wensumlit.bsky.social), but most of our submissions and engagement come from X, which still remains the most popular platform.

We are a small team of volunteers, so may not move at the quickest pace, but rest assured, we're looking at alternatives to our reliance on X.

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Lessons

Kathryn Kulpa

Once, before she was my mother, my mother played violin in a local orchestra. She kept her instrument, took it out at holiday parties, her hands gliding the bow over the strings with magical quickness, chin proud, elbow bent just so. In fourth grade, our school offered free music lessons to anyone who wanted them, and of course, I volunteered, eager to be discovered, to be a "child prodigy," like a girl in a mystery story I'd read. That girl was nine years old and filled symphony halls all through the world. She was also a miserable brat and got herself kidnapped, but still. The power she held in those violin-playing hands!

At first, when my mother gave me her old violin, I was thrilled to imagine that power thrumming in my hands and everything about the instrument – the oil-polished wood, the crushed red velvet of the violin case with its

cutout bed for the violin and all the mysterious compartments, tabs you pulled to open a hidden box with rosin the colour of earwax – promised passage to a mysterious new world.

The actual lessons were a study in disappointment. I hadn't expected the first lesson to be no playing at all, only memorizing the parts of the violin, with a quiz afterwards (C+ "Lack of Attention!"). I hadn't expected a teacher who'd poke my fingers and rap my elbow with a ruler, ask if I'd left my brains on a bus. I hadn't expected a music book where the only song I recognized, "Turkey in the Straw," was one I didn't like. Most of all, I hadn't expected the dismal, squeaking sounds that came from my humbled, ruler-rapped fingers.

Wednesdays, the day of lessons, became a weekly agony I'd do anything to avoid: playing sick, claiming I had to stay for extra help in math, passing obvious notes in class so I'd get detention. In detention, we had to "write the dictionary," copying down definitions from the old, brown-bound Webster's until an hour was up. Even that was better than violin lessons.

Back then, all my favourite literary heroines wore puffed sleeves and hoop skirts. Like Anne of Green Gables, I longed to experience an actual swoon; I sobbed at Beth's tragic demise in Little Women, and sometimes, when feeling wronged by the world, imagined them all feeling sorry when I died young of some unnamed ailment. Or at least, appeared likely to. One fateful Wednesday, I worked baby powder into my face with my mother's compact sponge, making myself look pale and wan, surely too sick to go to school, surely too frail to stay after for music lessons – too weak to do anything but lie abed while a devoted Marmee brought me Mallomars on my favourite yellow plate, and nibble them delicately while watching reruns of I Love Lucy and Bewitched.

Only I'd failed to notice the sift of powder down my red flannel nightgown, and when I tried to croak out "I feel faint" my mother pointed to the tell-tale trail and asked what did I think I was doing with her powder, had I seen the rug, I was going to vacuum up every bit of that mess – and then I cried, not fake tears but

real ones that left ugly snail trails in my powder-paste face, and I told her how I hated my violin teacher, Mrs. Valente, how she called me a tail-dragger and a lollygagger and stood over me with her ruler ready, so I was afraid to move my hands at all.

My mother sat me down on the bed. She sat beside me and wiped the damp powder from my face. She said Mrs. Valente had spoken to her about me.

"Did she say I'm a poky little puppy?" I asked. "A lazy bones?"

My mother shook her head, lips tight, like she was playing the clarinet. "She said you were not musically inclined."

I thought of all the times my mother and I sang together, in the car, or in the garden or working around the house, and I wondered if it hurt having to listen to my unmusical voice. I asked if that meant we couldn't sing anymore, and she said we could sing whenever we wanted, and that Mrs. Valente was a mean old –

"What?" I asked, hoping to learn a new swear word.

"A big bassoon."

"She went to Juilliard," I said, a fact Mrs. Valente shared with her students often.

"She doesn't know anything about teaching."

My mother made a terse, blistering call to Mrs. Valente. My violin days were over. My dreams of being a prodigy faded with them, becoming a faint musical murmur from another room, shuffling feet, woodwind vibrations, jangle of strings being tuned. Everyone was waiting, like me, for the show to start. Or perhaps only waiting for the program to change. Waiting for the next thing to happen.

The Coat

Joel Glover

My father killed himself, drowned in the lake at the bottom of the quarry, the week after my mother died. His pockets were full of rocks, and one lonely shell. He left me a note, in his bag on the shore, and a request for his ashes to be scattered on the sea.

Every memory I hold dear takes place in the town where I grew up. Forgotten, almost, by the world. An hour's walk across the heath the bypass carries tourists up to famous hills and valleys. We had no coal, no tin, no steel, so never had a mine. A church, quite old, but otherwise unremarkable, a village store that closed when I was little, a pub, and farms.

Mum worked. Dad stayed home with me. In the summer, we played in the park or walked in the woods.

We never went to the beach.

Mum got ill when I turned fourteen.

The doctors ruled out heavy metal poisoning first.

They never said why.

In the face of the unknown, they changed her diet, a little at a time.

No shellfish.

No fish at all.

No nuts.

Then, no grains, no dairy.

By the time they gave up all she was eating was lamb and pears, from the farm shop down the road.

Her organs failed slowly, her skin cracked, her hair fell out.

Blood transfusions were next, which slowed her decline from a sprint to a steady jog.

She clung to my father, beneath a tartan blanket on the sofa, and sobbed quietly when she thought I was asleep.

I failed all my GCSEs except PE. I got a C in PE, my grade buoyed up above the passing grade by my times at national swimming competitions. Like a fish, my mother laughed, you should have seen her Don. He kissed me on the

crown of my head, but he had never come and watched me swim, and never would.

It was the last time I heard Mum laugh.

When the end came, it came quickly.

Auntie Lin came to nurse her through those last few months. Dad would go outside and stare out at the fields, whipped by autumn winds, soaked by the rain.

Calling to him to come in did no good.

When the sun had long set he would come in and sit in front of the electric bar fire, drinking whisky and hot water.

One night, I heard him talking to her, his voice hoarse, tell me where it is, he begged, you must tell me.

She did not reply.

Two days later, she stopped talking at all, unable to form the words with cracked lips. Her lungs slowly filled with fluid, coughing coming in weaker and weaker waves which echoed around our small house.

I held her hand as she choked and gurgled, hoping that the doctor's promise that she could not feel it was true. I watched as the light went

out in her eyes.

Dad wasn't in the room when it happened.

I remember stumbling out of the room and finding him in the armchair, tears pouring down his face and into his beard, matting his lashes. I clung to him, wracked by sobs, she's gone Dad, she's gone, I told him. Auntie Lin made us cups of tea, dark as rum, Dad's sticky with sugar. He drank in silence.

At Mum's funeral, we watched the coffin lowered into the ground. Some of us threw flowers down onto the lid. Not Dad though.

Then, a day later, he was gone too.

Peter didn't come to his cremation. He'd had too many days off work, he said.

I met him at school, when he was still Petey, when girls and boys meant kiss chase, and different uniforms and not a lot else. He lived across the hill, in a little cottage, his father had a flock of sheep and kept a timberyard. He was the only boy who ever showed an interest in me, I suppose, Mum called us childhood sweethearts.

He dreamed of leaving, of singing in a band.

He never did. After too many pints in The Red Lion he sings, his voice cracked and harsh.

He said I fit right in here. That I would never leave, that I never should.

He hadn't been to the house much when Mum was ill.

I think he was scared of Dad, who never liked Peter much, but never said it. He said he didn't like to be around sick people, said it weirded him out. I was glad to have somewhere to go, a refuge.

I asked if he'd come with me, to scatter the ashes, but he said his dad needed him at the timberyard. It's daft, he's gone, it isn't like he cares. It is important to me, I said, it was his last wish, it would be selfish not to. You know what's selfish, he said, before he stopped talking and I started crying. He could always make me cry.

I stayed with Auntie Lin. The beach Dad had chosen was near her house, in Northumbria. It is where they met, my parents. I didn't know. When I had asked how they met Dad would clam up, and Mum would laugh.

She told me stories over tea. Beans and toast.

Stories about my Mum, growing up. Of boys she had kissed, and teachers they had hated. And Dad, I asked.

Your mother, she laughed. She waltzed right in off the beach, claiming she'd met the man of her dreams. Dragged him in with her.

The day after, she upped sticks and moved south, and they never came back.

She carried him away, or he carried her away, I never knew, she said.

They never came back.

I slept on the sofa, under a heavy blanket just like the one Mum had when she was sick.

Maybe it was the same one.

In the morning, I walked along a narrow path to the beach. Time and tides had shaped the land, a shallow groove of a footpath cut into the Northumbria rock, the cliff face jagged as shattered teeth.

Auntie Lin had pressed a coat on me before I went out, an old thing, she said it was my mums, or my dad's, she wasn't clear. It had been in a bag in Nan's loft for years, apparently. The leather was soft, supple, dappled grey, the coat

lined with fur.

I stood on the beach watching the water rush in and out, soap sud foam gathering on the sand. In the distance, I saw a face in the waves, appearing and disappearing between the furrows. Then, another face, too far away to have been the first.

I heard their barks, quiet in the distance.

Come join us, they seemed to say.

I took the Tupperware with my dad's ashes in it out of the bright orange carrier bag and waded into the shallows.

I shook the box, shook it until all that remained of my father were my memories and the coat.

A wave slapped across my thighs, unexpectedly high, soaking me through.

I felt alive for the first time, alive.

I dived into the sea and changed.

I was home.

The House as a Picture of the Past

Bright Aboagye

I grew up in a house that sang.

Its walls, wrinkled and grey, blended into the overcast sky like an old photograph left too long in the sun. To the neighbours, it was just another tired building, its shutters hanging loosely, its roof patched in places where the wind had been cruel. To me, the house was a living thing – breathing, watching, and holding onto secrets that no one spoke of, a place where silence lived as surely as he did.

In its early days, the house had been filled with life. My mother had once danced down the staircase in her wedding dress, her laughter ringing through the halls. The rooms had been alive with joy, with voices that bounced off the walls and settled into the corners. But as years passed, those voices grew quieter until they faded into the ugliness of the house, leaving behind only the sounds of what had been.

I wandered the halls alone, my small feet padding softly on the frayed floorboards. I had memorized every squeak, every growl of the house, each serving as a memory of its age, its sorrow. The living room, previously the heart of the home, currently felt like a room that had forgotten how to live. The sofa sagged under the weight of old arguments. The kitchen was a place of shared meals and easy conversation – it seemed to hold its breath, thick with unspoken words.

The room at the end of the hallway haunted me the most. The door was always closed, a barrier between me and whatever lay inside. It was here that my mother had retreated after the last argument, the one that had taken something vital from her. The door, locked from the inside, stood like a sentry, guarding the pain that had settled into the room. I would stand before it, my hand on the cold doorknob, but I never turned it. I wasn't ready to face what lay in the room.

The house had a way of keeping things – the past, the pain, the silence and the sobs. It

seemed to breathe with me, its walls expanding and contracting in time with the beat of my heart. At night, when the world outside was quiet, I would lie in bed and listen to the house. The wind would howl through the cracks in the windows, and the house would groan in response – as if it were trying to speak to me, to tell me its story, our story.

My father had tried to demolish the house, to rid our lives of its suffocating presence and to finally find peace. But the house had resisted, standing firm against the attempts to bring it down. It remained firm within the ground. Its foundation was too strong to uproot from the ground. In the end, my father had given up, leaving the house – and me – behind. It was as if the house had won, had outlasted them all, clinging to its existence with a stubbornness that was almost human.

Sometimes, I played a game with myself. I imagined that the house was alive, that it could feel my presence, and that it understood my detachment. I would trace the cracks in the plaster with my fingers, feeling the cold roughness

beneath my touch. I would listen to the sounds, imagining they were the house's way of speaking to me, of trying to tell me the things no one else would. The walls seemed to lean in closer, as if they too wanted to listen and share in the secrets they held.

One day, I found myself standing in front of the locked door again. My hand, small and pale, rested on the doorknob, and something inside me – a voice, perhaps, or an imagination – urged me to open it. This time, I did. The door opened, its hinges protesting my demands.

The room was dark, the curtains drawn tight against the light. I stepped inside, my feet sinking into the soft, dusty carpet. The furniture was draped in shadows, the bed unmade, and the dresser's mirror reflected only the darkness. The house seemed to shiver, its old roots grunting as I moved through the room. I could feel the presence of the years, the silence that had gathered in this place, and I knew that the house had been waiting for me to open this door, to step into the past that it had held so tightly.

Against the Current

E. C. Traganas

You talk and talk, lips flapping like padded oven mitts, grating voice a chopping board of raw celeriac root and leeks. Plunge it all into the stew pot and let it simmer in the back burner, please. Let me hear the plashing of ancient streams, winnows threading their way to eternity, fiddlehead ferns drawing their bows across the forest path in muted counterpoint. Watch where you step. I will follow the tops of poplars.

tripping on pebbles
a trail of mindless chatter

Ismaila of Angwa-Dodo

Fatima Okhuosami

Ismaila slipped on a puddle of dog piss, landing face-down on his neighbour's bingo. His rectum, hosting a potpourri of cassava, bitter leaf soup and sukudai, pushed hard against his anus. It was still dark out and the muezzin of Angwa-Dodo central mosque was singing the call to prayers in a loud, one-note wail. "Who dat?" the constable living three doors down, croaked. Ismaila released simultaneous gaseous bombs which corrupted the fine morning air. He stood, tiptoed across the veranda of their face-me-I-face-you apartment, and filled his kettle with water from a plastic drum outside the officer's door. It belonged to his ex-wife, Salamatu – one of the things she brought with her from her father's house.

Two full months had passed since he sent her packing. It was not an easy decision, but there was the matter of her confession blurted out in

the middle of a bitter quarrel. She spat on his manhood like he was a worthless insect. Still, he would have forgiven everything had she got down on her knees and begged to stay, like a normal human being. Instead, Salamatu did the unthinkable. She tightened the wrapper around her chest, grabbed her akpoti, and moved in with her lover that same day, advertising their sin to the world.

Every day, for hours at a stretch, Ismaila thought of her and his insides sizzled like boiling tomato sauce, an auspicious circumstance for the local chemist who dosed him liberally with nameless concoctions. Wherever he went, he heard stories, elaborate accounts of the affair.

They said he was foolish not to have at least suspected.

They warned that the child in her belly was most likely not his.

Those who pitied him advised he find a young girl from an impoverished family to marry, someone who'd look upon him as her saviour. He was, after all, a man of impressive physical

strength, towering height, and skin the colour of burnt sugar. Many families could be persuaded to overlook his chronically sour disposition, a recurring nervous twitch of one eye present in all males in his bloodline or the fact that he was nearing the dusk of his forties without getting on in the world, living in the same village he was born.

He abandoned his ticket officer job in the local government council and spent his days indoors, overwhelmed with lurid fantasies of revenge. Sometimes, it felt like the walls of the room and parlour he rented – because Salamatu's parents had demanded that he secure a decent accommodation for their only child before accepting her bride price – were closing in on him. Or the jamboree raging inside his head could no longer be contained. Whenever this happened, he knocked on the door of a moneylender living opposite his compound and borrowed two or three thousand naira. This loan was advanced on the strength of the upcoming elections when he hoped to reprise his role as a party thug.

With money in his pocket, Ismaila would go

off to Rugan Rabo. The boys who "run things" in Kwali's most infamous district, supplied him Colorado loaded into cigarettes and copious amounts of sukudai, a pernicious formalin solution fit for stomachs reinforced with concrete. The first time he tried this combo, he woke inside someone's farm, in a tight embrace with a scarecrow to whom he gifted his shirt, singlet, trousers and cap.

Ismaila took a route behind the popular Kazman Hotel, hop-skipping a series of puddles which were the defining characteristic of the rainy season all over Kwali. A town that provided the capital city's sole senator for twelve years. Although it was market day, there were as yet no delivery vans, levy collectors or sketchy vendors in pickup trucks advertising multi-purpose tonics with loudspeakers. Save for an okpa seller setting up her canopy on a stack of vehicle tyres, the entire area was empty.

This woman stared at him as though there was something important that she wanted to say, but he forestalled any chit chat by quickening his steps. He crossed the highway and followed

a tiny footpath that reared its head.

Ismaila traversed a melon farm, meandered through an uncompleted building, and arrived at a dumpsite before boluses of shit forced their way down his legs. He was bathed in sweat.

But somebody had cleared the bushes around his makeshift toilet.

From the corner of his eye, he caught a man staring him down. Likely chased there under similar circumstances. The stranger was dressed in a matching kaftan and drawstring trousers tailored from the reddest cheapest polyester. Ismaila raised a hand to show he did not mind sharing his space. The man drew back his lips, revealing two rows of teeth fit for a toothpaste commercial. Then his face morphed into something Ismaila could neither explain nor understand, but which forced him to look away.

All at once everywhere felt hot – the air he breathed, the soil on which he stood, his jalabiya – as if he was an offering tied to a burning stake. He heard his heart beat out of tune and wanted to run away, but his feet were in open mutiny against his brain.

The man hobbled closer and Ismaila noticed one leg was less steady than the other. As was an arm which hung from its socket like a stump.

He had a sack made from raffia on his good shoulder, similar to those used by farmers for keeping their implements.

"Ina kwana," he said, offering greetings.

Ismaila would have answered, and he tried to, but something moved inside the man's bag, distracting him. Within seconds, pain gripped him in the neck. Rough hands dragged him to the ground. Pushed a kerchief into his nostrils. He felt his strength evaporate. It was as if he split in two, one half floating, gawking at the inert form, begging him to fight. His limbs became water.

The stranger knelt beside him, on the left side, pressing against his kidney. He started to mumble gibberish as if under a spell. Then he took a knife out of his bag.

"Buy okpa. Sweet okpa." It was the vendor Ismaila crossed earlier, doing her rounds. She was headed in their direction, hoping to take the shortcut to Kuzman filling station, where

she had a delivery for the fuel attendants.

The stranger paused, listened carefully to the approaching footsteps, then retrieved his knife and kerchief. He was waiting for the intruder to come into clear view.

Ismaila swallowed mouthfuls of air. He wiggled his fingers and toes as strength returned to him. An anxious expectancy rose in his chest. He stared at his tormentor, eyes wide, sweat beading on his nose. Both his halves merged.

The okpa seller appeared, supporting a plastic bucket full of merchandise on her head. Ismaila had resolved to call for help, but at the crucial moment, a lump gagged his throat. He could not breathe. The man was squeezing his neck.

She hurried over, kept her goods next to a congregation of weeds, then said in a voice so low, only the three of them could hear: "Is he the one you caught? You suppose wait for the muezzin to pass na. This man has been drowning himself in so much liquor, his kidneys are definitely useless by now."

"So, what should we do? If we let go, he will

expose you."

The hairs on Ismaila's skin turned into spikes. He screamed wordlessly and passed out.

Through the haphazard ringing in his ears, he heard a wicked cry: "My penis o. This man don thief my penis."

He woke, white with shock.

All twelve members of Angwa-Dodo's vigilante team were at the scene. With heavy slaps, they demanded that he return what he stole. The hawker, who quickly found somewhere to hide her goods, informed the gathering that two penises were spirited away in Gwagwalada the previous week. They consoled and reassured the stranger who by this time, was heaving. "I only come Kwali to find work so I go fit feed my wife and my pikin," he sobbed. "Leg I no get. Hand I no get. Wetin I go say happen to my penis when I return house?"

Worshippers coming back from the mosque, motorcyclists hustling for passengers, and kids by their mothers' sides waiting for the school bus, assembled. The crowd roared like a poorly synchronised opera, eager to conquer the thing

before it – for Ismaila had ceased to be a person and was now lesser than an object. They tore off his clothes.

Murder was the goal, and by instinct, each participant knew his part. Some picked stones. Others grabbed wood logs. A few managed to find heavy bits of scrap metal. They laughed at his tears, the unabashed cackling of the mentally ill. The sky wept in solidarity, hard and relentless.

A man with a face like a bicycle seat stood at the head of the horde. It was Ismaila's neighbour who had stopped by on his way to the police station. He held a vehicle tyre in one hand, kept a jerrycan of petrol next to his feet, and was gawking at his love rival with the venomous loathing of a cobra about to strike. It was he who took the plaintiff to the side, emerging some twenty minutes later to inform everyone that he had verified that the penis and testicles were gone.

Ismaila's eyes darted from person to person, desperate for a saviour. Friends, acquaintances, comrades with whom he used to down bottles

every evening. That was when he sighted Salamatu. She pushed through towards him with her swollen tummy, tried to say a sentence or two in his favour. But the crowd, led by her lover, silenced her.

Ismaila covered his privates with his palms. One of his eyes was swollen shut. Blood dripped from a wound under what remained of his nose. There was a nonstop whoosh sound inside his ears.

"I swear, I no thief bros penis," Ismaila wailed in a voice that could have thawed the most frozen of hearts.

Then the constable hit him with a plank, and everything went black.

Pretend but Feels Like Real

Karen Baumgart

Today was my six-years-old party day! Mum and Aunt May had got *Frozen* party hats and paper plates and made cupcakes with Elsa and Anna flags. I love Anna the best, even though Jeremy thinks *Frozen* is a stupid girls' movie and teases me for liking it. But Mum said I could have any kind of birthday party, and Aunt May said she'd spit in Jeremy's pink lemonade if he was a meanie. Aunt May isn't my real aunt, just a pretend one, but we have a secret handshake so that means she'd really truly spit in someone's drink for me.

I didn't want Jeremy to come. When he's around, it gets noisy and scratchy in my head, like a petting zoo with every animal sound all at once. But Mum said we'd invite the whole class, so nobody was left out. She said maybe Jeremy just needs a good friend and couldn't that be me? But I said no way, Jeremy is mean

– he never does the games I want to play, like the olden-days game I play with Lucy, where we make pretend jam to get through the pretend long winter. Jeremy says that's stupid girls' stuff, but I don't care, and anyway, Aunt May says there's no such thing as girls' games and boys' games, kids can play whatever they like. I love Aunt May almost as much as I love Anna.

It was my absolutely best party ever and I got to wear a rainbow Anna cape, and my tummy was fizzy with pink lemonade and fairy bread triangles!

And then Dad turned up and his clothes were different from the last time, so I didn't remember him right away. And then he gave me a present with a big ribbon bow. The paper wasn't blue like my other presents but maybe he didn't know it was a *Frozen* party? And then I pulled off the wrapping and it was a *Transformers* quilt cover, so I looked down and wished so hard it was an Anna quilt cover, but it wasn't. And then my eyes did that stinging thing from trying not to cry in front of people, which is much worser than having a *Transformers* quilt cover.

And then Aunt May came up behind me and squished me with a vanilla marshmallow hug, and when I turned around her blouse got soggy, but she didn't mind, whispering that I was so brave and to just wait until I opened her present. And then Dad said he had to go and to keep growing up into a big, strong boy, and he pretend-punched my arm, but it hurt like real. And then there was a big heavy on my chest, maybe an elephant or a *Transformer*. And it was noisy like a petting zoo.

Inconclusive

Neil James

When Dr Rajan gave me the scan results, that wasn't the word I was waiting for. It is, of course, better than the other word. The other word slowly killed my dad. It turned his skin grey, erased his body cell by cell, until one day last winter, pumped full of morphine, he faded away in a bed that wasn't his own. I'm booked in at Radiology for a re-test, which means two more weeks of waiting and telling myself that nothing's certain yet; it's just tests. But every waking moment I'm fixated on whether Poppy, my daughter, can afford my funeral costs. I'm in limbo – not officially dying, but not really living either.

Normally, one of life's few pleasures is leaving the office at six and walking into town for food. The Raven's Head has the best beer garden around, the food's great, and there's a decent selection of ales. Today, the lasagne doesn't taste of

lasagne. It tastes of shadows on the lungs. Thirty years of smoking. The warnings I ignored on cigarette packets. Last time I was here, I wolfed that lasagne down and wanted more. Today, every mouthful is like swallowing leather.

Two girls, dressed for a night out, sit at the next table, studying menus and drinking white wine. Apparently, the one wearing a stylish white blouse is called Salma. I'm drawn to her gold pendant, an ever-decreasing swirl like the age rings of a tree. It hangs at her chest from a rope chain necklace. Also catching my attention is the tattoo in Arabic scripture just below the bangle on her wrist. I ponder the translation, but I know I'm only seeking reasons to look at her.

I like the way Salma smokes. How she purses her dark red lips around the white cigarette, the slow drags she takes, and the allure of her kohl-rimmed Cleopatra eyes as she inhales. Sultry and hypnotic. She reminds me of Princess Jasmine from Aladdin, which I watched years ago with Poppy. I recall the guilt I felt in finding a children's cartoon character sexy. Even the

way Salma holds the cigarette is enticing. It sits loosely between two fingers of her right hand, smouldering in the late summer air, adding glamour to the forbidden fruit; making me fall in love.

When I was sixteen, a first cigarette between my lips, I pretended to be Liam Gallagher. I'd practise in the mirror, mimicking the nonchalance, perfecting it. These days, I don't look so good smoking. I'm the man they'd use on the anti-smoking ad campaign: the after. The bad shit that fags do to your face and body. Yellow eyes and stained teeth, suckling on a brown inhaler morning and night. Live Forever? Not in this state.

The pub doesn't permit smoking in the beer garden, but Salma's ignoring the sign. She never asked the friend opposite her or the couple on the next table whether they minded. She never asked me either. She just lit up. As she draws on the cigarette, her smoke drifts my way on the evening breeze, into my nostrils, into my shadowy lungs. Salma doesn't care about that.

And why would she? I'm just a bald bloke,

twice her age, eating alone, eavesdropping on her conversation to avoid my own thoughts. My carefree summers have long since disappeared. I only ever dress in sensible styles, always grey or black. Girls like Salma don't see me anymore. I've become invisible.

It turns out that Salma returned from Vegas last week, and her mousy-haired friend in the summer dress, whatever her name is, wants the lowdown.

"What do you want to know? We did everything. The casinos, the shows…the strip joints. The night never ends in Vegas." Salma's voice is whispery and purrs like a midnight secret. She takes another drag. The smoke curls around her, matching the flash of grey dyed into her jet-black hair. She can't be older than twenty-five, and she's dying grey streaks into her hair. Salma doesn't give a fuck.

"You went to a strip joint?" Friend's eyes are on stalks.

A slow nod.

"To watch the girls?"

"Sure."

"That is so wild."

"Antony hired a private booth. The two of us, a bottle of champagne, and a girl. She was cool." Salma's charcoal eyes brighten at the memory. "Her name was Misty. Great stripper name, right?"

What would it be like, a never-ending night in Vegas with Salma? She'd be through the sunroof of the limo, face to the night sky, skin glowing under neon, hair blowing in the desert breeze. She'd discard her high heels outside The Bellagio to paddle in the fountains, make you get in there too, then laugh as you're both chased off by security, unfazed about losing shoes. She'd gamble everything on red or black, impassive as the white ball spins because she, you, the croupier, everyone in there knows she's going to win. That's just the kind of girl she is. I long for a night out with a girl like Salma.

"Does anyone else know you went with Antony?" Friend says.

Salma takes another long, slow drag, making Friend wait for the answer. Making me wait for the answer. She gives the tiniest shake of

her head, and a coy smile teases the corners of those gorgeous cherry lips. She draws them into a perfect 'O'…and exhales. "Just you," she whispers.

"Salma!" Friend says. "What are you like!?"

"Antony has accounts everywhere. He doesn't pay for hotels in Vegas."

"Yeah, but he's, you know…how old is he exactly?"

"Forty-eight. He's experienced." She gives another subtle smile.

Friend laughs. They both go back to their menus.

Perhaps Salma's into older guys? I've arrived here straight from work, and I'm wearing my Gucci jacket. She doesn't know I found it in a charity shop and that I only work in the complaints department of a bank. She knows nothing about CT scans or my recent divorce. I could invent a past and a present for myself, and she'd be none the wiser. All I need is the right opening line.

If I get it right, then maybe we'll get talking. I could share my own Vegas stories, be funny

like I used to be, and when she and Friend move on to the next bar, she'll invite me along. We'll hang out. It could be one of those evenings with strangers where you start at A and end in a different alphabet, somewhere crazy and unexpected. Singing songs around a fire in someone's garden, smashed in a basement club or fucking while drunk on a stranger's floor.

And wherever we go, maybe we'll reach that point when we can't drink any more, unsure which pub, club or whose house we're in. We'll head outside to feel the night air and talk about life like we've somehow found answers in the stars or the cracks on the pavement. She'll catch a look on my face that says something's going on and makes her ask if I'm okay. That's when I can tell her that no, I'm not. I can tell her about the scans and what Dr Rajan said. That I'm not young anymore. That I'm scared of dying. And she'll say the kind of thing that cool, clever people say, bathing a problem in a new light and making everything seem alright again. We'll be soulmates, even if it's just for a night. Sometimes, that's the best kind of soulmate.

"Where'd you stay?" Friend asks.

"Place called The Flamingo. You heard of it?"

Friend hasn't, but I have. I lost $9000 there last year. Salma doesn't need to know about that though. Nobody does.

I wonder whether Salma's ever read Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas or seen the movie? Hunter S. Thompson stayed at The Flamingo in the sixties, off his head on acid. Would Salma be interested in that? Maybe, if she's heard of Hunter S. Thompson or his most famous book. Salma's cool, cultured, she knows about shit. It's a bold opening gambit, admittedly, but I know the book, and if she knows the book, it's an instant connection.

I clear my throat.

"Excuse me," I say. "Did you say that you've stayed at The Flamingo?"

Salma looks straight at me. Our eyes meet. It's the first time she's noticed me. I'm no longer invisible. For the briefest of moments, as I stare into those black hole pupils, I'm with her in the hotel, the casino lights twinkling like Christmas. She's running her fingers through the dark

hair I used to have. Maybe it's now, maybe it's then, or maybe, somehow, it's two eras meeting in a single, impossible moment before CT scans, divorces and jobs at the bank.

"Yeah," she says. Her gaze flicks back to Friend, then returns to me.

"It's a cool place. I stayed there last year."

"Right." She draws on her cigarette. It smells so good. The shadow is probably growing right now. A dark presence rolling across my alveoli. Fuck it. I would happily let Salma blowback a nebula of toxic tar and nicotine directly into my blackened lungs just to experience a second of her lips on mine.

"Have you heard of Hunter S. Thompson, the author?"

Salma shakes her head. She doesn't look irritated, merely bored. This kind of thing probably happens a lot.

"Oh. Have you seen the film Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas?"

"No."

My heart feels heavy. The lasagne's doing somersaults in my stomach. I look at Friend in des-

peration.

She returns a look of subtle pity. "No, sorry."

"It's alright," I say. "It was set there, that's all. It's a good movie."

"Cool," says Salma. "Thanks." She turns her body back towards Friend. "Yeah, so we saw the whole strip over the week. Downtown too. Fremont Street. Old Vegas."

What was I thinking? Salma wasn't even born when the movie was released, let alone when the book was published. I've blown it. The instant connection is now: "Remember when that weirdo in the pub started asking us about dead authors?" Great.

"What are you ordering?" Friend asks.

"I don't know." Salma pushes the menu away. "We'll wait for Will and Nadir. They should be here soon."

That'll explain the two empty seats at their table. I feel so fucking stupid. If it wasn't so awkward, I'd get up and leave right now.

There's a familiar buzz in my pocket. I'm thankful to take out my phone and read the WhatsApp message.

Hey Dad, how was ur day?

My daughter is a similar age to Salma. Right now, she's two hundred miles away at university studying medicine. Poppy's a sensible girl who doesn't drink and doesn't smoke. Pretty, but a pale English rose, not mysterious or a rule breaker. I send her money every month, and ask if she's eating well whenever I call her. She assures me she is and promises to come over and see me when she's next home for the holidays. She can't stay over though because I live in a one-bedroom flat, well, a bedsit if I'm being honest, and there's a spare room, her old room, at her mother's. I never realised how much I'd miss her.

For a second, I almost tell her where I've been this morning, but I don't want to burden her with the worry. She has enough to think about, and it won't change anything.

Fine. Usual office crap. Just in the Raven's. Lasagne top quality, as always. :)

There's a murmur of male voices behind me. Will and Nadir have turned up clutching bottled beers. The one who's probably Will is pudgy,

and his shirt's too tight. He's an XL-wearing-L, a spiky-haired dumpling on a night out. Nadir is olive-skinned and looks like the boys whose pictures Poppy used to pin to her bedroom wall. He's model handsome with short dark hair and a camera-ready beard. A tan blazer fits perfectly around his wide shoulders.

"Where've you been?" Friend asks.

"Uber was late," says Will. He sits next to Friend, placing his beer on the table.

"Yeah, sorry," adds Nadir. "You ordered yet?" He sits next to Salma, drawing his chair closer to hers with a scrape across the flagstones.

"Not yet." Salma stubs her cigarette out on the metal table and tosses it onto the floor between our tables. I stare at the lipstick mark on the stub.

Nadir checks something on his phone. From the way he moves his head, I'm guessing he's in selfie mode. Even from here, he smells fantastic.

The evening's drawing in, and someone inside the restaurant must have switched the music on. Deep House suddenly washes out of the speakers of the beer garden to tempt the evening

drinkers in. It creates a different atmosphere: pre-club rather than chips and a pint outside.

The music makes it harder to hear conversation. Will cracks a one-liner and they all laugh. Fat lads need to be funny in this kind of company. Nadir must have asked Salma for a cigarette. She takes the packet from her bag and flicks the top open so that he can take one. She's trying, or pretending, to listen to something Friend is saying. Nadir lights up and closes his eyes as he takes that first hit of nicotine. He also looks great smoking. Like a film star.

Is Nadir fucking Salma? Will isn't – even with Friend he'd be punching. Salma wouldn't look twice at him. Nadir has it all going for him, but maybe he's not rich like Antony. He has Salma's attention again though. He's drawn her closer to him, talking into her ear. It seems intimate. She's smiling and nodding, returning eye contact. Electricity fills the shrinking space between them.

And this is what it's come down to. Salma and Nadir are the stars of the movie, their youth and beauty captured on celluloid. I'm just watch-

ing them from a darkened theatre, so distant I might as well be on the other side of the world. They're the cover stars of the magazine I'm reading, hanging on every detail of a life I don't lead. And if we're talking Vegas, they're on the high rollers' table, celebrating a jackpot, their night forever young. I'm not even in the casino anymore. I'm the guy at five a.m. who blew all his chips, then his reserve, then his life savings; the guy slumped at the bar, head in hands and red-eyed because everything's fucked and his wife's left him.

What could I possibly say that Salma would want to hear? Nothing.

I finish my lasagne and stand up. Neither Salma nor Nadir notice as I walk around the back of them. Nadir's cigarette rests between two fingers of his right hand, wisps of smoke rising from the glowing ash.

I place my hand on his shoulder, not shouting but speaking loudly enough to be heard over the music. "Excuse me. Sorry to interrupt, but you do know it's no smoking out here?"

He looks at me directly, his eyes a deep, choc-

olate brown. Every strand of hair is immaculate, skin smooth and flawless. "Sorry, mate," he says. "I'll put it out."

No argument, he flicks it to the floor and extinguishes it under the sole of his shoe.

Salma looks at me for the second time this evening. Immediately, she averts her gaze and returns to her conversation with Nadir, their eyes only on each other.

I walk out of the beer garden, through the French doors at the back of the pub, through the main building, where every table is full of people eating, drinking, laughing.

"Goodnight," says the barman as I pass the bar.

"Goodnight."

Soon, I'm out of the pub. The street has the look and sound of evening. Lads in shirts walk to the next pub in fours and fives, shouting at each other, at other groups or nothing in particular. Girls wearing short dresses clip-clop their way along the pavement in uncomfortable-looking heels. It's still light, just about, but the streetlights are on. At this time in the evening, a good night is always possible.

I take the fags out of my jacket pocket. It's been weeks since I smoked one, but the urge is stronger than ever.

Fuck it. I take a cigarette from the packet and place the filter between my lips. Even that feels good. I think of Salma, exhaling smoke through those red lips, smouldering and seductive. Young and wild and carefree. The images flash through my mind. Liam Gallagher in the bedroom mirror, the summer evenings of my student days, pills and designer shirts and girls in low-cut tops, Born Slippy and The Beach and Gail Porter's naked behind.

But then there's Dad. The final late-night phone call telling me to go straight to the hospice, the tiny blue spots on his hospital gown under the harsh strip lights, his skeletal arms sticking out from under the starched sheets, the ventilator mask giving him the last oxygen he'd ever breathe. I hear Poppy saying how disappointed she is that I'm still poisoning myself, that my willpower isn't what I promised it would be. I see Dr Rajan's computer screen and the black and grey image of my sick lungs.

Reluctantly, I take the cigarette from my mouth, unlit. I place it back with the others, then toss the packet into a nearby rubbish bin.

The evening's mild. I'll walk home tonight. My bedsit isn't far. A mile or so across the bridge, by the river where the air smells fresh, past the trendy bars next to the theatre, turn right at the off-licence, then it's three or four streets from there. I'll message Poppy again when I'm home. Ask what she's up to this weekend. Take more of an interest in her life.

"Inconclusive," Dr Rajan said.

Nothing's certain yet; it's just tests.

Amniotic Fluid

Luanne Castle

I look down at my lap and find it gone, replaced by a big bump. Eight months and one more to go. Building a nursery, one small purchase at a time. Circus bears in blue, green, and yellow.

Where am I? Must be sitting on the concrete bench down the street from Monroe's. Maybe on break, although I don't remember coming to work this morning. I feel a drop of sweat slowly rolling down between my breasts. It veers off to roll down the side of my bump.

Somewhere, a siren seems just out of reach.

How did I get on this bench? What time is it? Cobwebs have draped my brain. I try to emerge from this fog but can only focus on my body. I stare down at the little golf balls of flesh protruding from my ankles. I should walk to get the circulation going.

When am I due back at work? I hoist myself off the bench with one hand, cupping my belly

with the other.

Foot traffic around me seems accelerated, manic. The voices of the people feel prickly, fingernails that jab. Pain swells behind my sinuses and forehead. A man jostles me as he tries to move around me in his haste.

Shut up, I say aloud to the siren. It drones on and on.

How I long to have already given birth, to be home, rocking my baby in Grandma's creaky oak chair. My baby's face is still blank. I'm carrying a living doll with no face. I pull my sticky dress from my back. It's so hot for May. Due date: June 12. Four and a half more weeks.

As I begin to walk, my feet… so heavy. Nerve pricks assault my arms with little warning jabs. Green, blue, yellow, how I love the nursery. My feet have decided to take me back to work. I need to sit down in the cool back room and try to pull myself together. Maybe I have heat exhaustion.

My shoes crunch, then catch on something, and I stumble. A woman catches my arm and rights me. She looks familiar. Anna, Anna! You

have blood on your forehead. Who? I ask, but then realize she owns the little jewellery shop next door to Monroe's. My eyes are drawn to my feet. I stand in the middle of broken glass.

Shards whirl around me as I cower and cover my belly. Anna, it's OK! It's over! I can't remember her name, but she showed me a tiny mama necklace last week. For June, I can get a pearl or moonstone. I've always loved pearls. That would make a beautiful middle name. Pearl.

Abruptly, the siren stops. The air empties out. The funnel cloud has moved on with its own noise. The armoury quieted.

Two men carry a woman who is bleeding from her arm and leg. The blood. I remember the blood inside the store, on the new girl who was too close to the window when it struck. And before the red of the blood, the sky had turned sour, chartreuse. What a nasty colour. It would clash with the nursery.

I hear people exclaiming and wailing, but from a distance so far away, I might be encased in amniotic fluid, dreaming of bears with yellow shorts and blue suspenders.

A Trip to the Library

Tharseo Ziyet Jovita

Writhing and rolling. Written around his body in the colour pale of dim moonlight was the word pain. Morning comes.He survived. Today is going to be a good day, he's sure. Food first. Like everybody who understands that it's about the fill and the nutrients, he puts everything in the pot and turns on the heat after. He doesn't forget to make tea, in the past three months he forgot once – not to make tea, but to buy a new pack when the last one finished. He makes time to complete his work, due by noon, but doesn't make his bed. He leaves his room, leaves the house. It is a cloudy day and it affects his mind, that is his guess at least. I know that the weather has nothing to do with it. It is really about whether or not he should be participating in any of this, all the world's a stage and this actor doesn't like his role.

Like many other days, he will take the longer

path – the path strewn with bushes. He does this because he likes to avoid meeting too many people on the road. I understand – they are always asking too many questions. Sometimes it's about how he walks, is one leg longer than the other? Why is he always listening to music with no lyrics? Or why he never uses headphones but just blasts it with his phone speaker, does he even know the names of the instruments being played? For the few that feel like they know him well, how good or bad are his grades? Or why he's so weak and slow, is he a sickler or chronically ill? One boy who found himself funny asked how much more time he had to live on earth. This question he answered: "Not very long."

His face brightens up. For good reason too, it is a beautiful view. The mix of brown, green, blue, white and grey. I would take it as evidence of a hand, a good hand over everything, but the wretched boy will disagree. Wriggling in a print formed in the loose earth is a dying worm. When he bends to have a close look it stops, "Hmm, even insects are shy. Or is it stage

fright?" He is silly too. Continuing to walk, he stretches his arms but he can't hold two blades from both sides at once. The farmer was wise to give enough room for the path. The crops are doing well, millet stands so tall, long compact pannicles that reach for the sky. The sea above us, many ships floating across it. And then it crosses his mind, that sharp pain that only visits at night. It always feels like a shark is gnawing away the muscles of his stomach. The first time it happened he told me he was surprised that he didn't die of shock.

He takes his phone from his pocket. There are brighter things in them, plastics that glitter. Twitter doesn't help as he sees her new update. Yesterday he called twice and she didn't pick up, didn't call back. I would tell him not to bother but he never hears me. I am the one cursed to see and hear him all the time, yet he wrote in his note that no one sees him. I do. And every disgusting bit too. A deep sigh comes from him, we are tired of this play. It will happen soon either when the shark pops out, when the pain switches off his brain, or when he eventually leaps.

At the library, the security causes us trouble. We are here every day but he thoroughly checks our card like he has never seen us. We find the card in between our notebook.

Four storeys is enough reason to install an elevator but the admin of this place does not agree. Maybe we're being unrealistic, places like this don't get enough funds and we should just be grateful that we have a space like this.

Someone is sitting on my spot and I don't like it. This woman is always here too, she knows that is my spot but she chose to sit there, how can they be all so inconsiderate?

This seat isn't too bad.

The one book I've been wanting to read for a long time is only good on the first page. Somebody should explain this to us, we deserve better. I spend the next two minutes drawing aimless lines, wandering and swirling around the page like me – us in this world, before I notice it. The windows anti-burglary is damaged and hanging from one end. We wonder how it got damaged and I laugh at how it's highly improbable that a burglar would try on the fourth flour.

We begin writing the note: "To Thelma… I should tell you this every day, but it is fair to me that I should only say it on a day like this, I love you."

He stands to make for the window while I am screaming. He hears me for the first time as I tell him to just go there and ask for his seat.

We reach there and she raises her head and smiles, she is looking through a photo album. I am stunned by the detail. What kind of camera was used to capture this insect? "What is this called?" He and I asked at once, in sync finally.

"There is no one else here to disturb, sit beside me and I'll tell you all about it," she said. I excuse us and write another note: "To Thelma… not today."

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