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Stories About Things

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kopimi

Introduction

(Don't worry, it's short.)

These are stories about things.
Some from this world. Some from other worlds.
Small things. Disconnected things. Meaningless things.
Just things.

~A.

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Part I. Thought and Memories: things of this world...

ONE

Teacups

Dirt.

That was a more pleasant smell.

Dirt didn't smell dirty. It smelled like life and it smelled like growth and it smelled like comfort.

It was more pleasant than this.

This was old and it smelled like old.

Like oil mixed with dust mixed with rags mixed with closed doors and no airflow and dark. Like the smell of an old barn. Like the smell of someone's grandmother's house forgotten on a lot with too many trees grown up around it.

The smell of neglect.

The china was cold.

It shouldn't have been. It should have been warm, it should have been hot—too hot to hold and filled with tea too hot to drink.

He wiped a finger around the flowers. The paint was fine, thin, almost flat, but he'd always been able to feel the designs on the cup, just a little bit.

He couldn't feel them now.

The flowers were covered in dust, and the dust was all he felt.

She wasn't like this.

He bent down to the shelf. He shouldn't, he knew he shouldn't. His back seemed to know it, stiffened as his head tried to bend down to the little china cup. He shouldn't. Not here. Not in the place of closed doors and no airflow and dark. Not here. But his head bent down anyway and his nose brushed the dust at the bottom of the teacup and he sniffed.

The dust went in his nose.

The dust and the oily smell of the dark and airless antique shop.

He turned away.

His eyes shut and he straightened up and turned away from the shelf. He turned away even though his eyes were shut, because he didn't want to face the cup.

It should smell like the ground.

It always had.

The tea in the cup had always smelled like the earth after a warm rain. He never tasted it, but he would smell it. As a child, he hated the smell of his grandmother's tea.

Now, the memories were sweet.

It shouldn't be here.

The dust and the smell of the dust and the dark and the forgotten air of the antique shop was no place for this cup. But there was no place for it now.

It shouldn't be here.

~~He opened his eyes and looked back at the cup. It looked sad. It looked like it missed the heat~~
the water and the steam and the smell of earth just like he did.

A sticker on the handle said \$25. He'd only gotten \$5 for it.

But he did not have \$25.

One hand brushed out and swept the cup to the ground.

Out of it's misery.

"Oops," he said, because he felt like he should.

"Hey!"

An old man hobbled out of the back room, but he was too slow. The teacup lay shattered on the
ground a bell jangled and then the door banged shut.

Time

Dr. Ellis had nearly given up on time travel. He had built a solid theory, as well as a solid machine (several in fact,) but it was all useless. The machine sat in his laboratory, and the theory sat in his head because he had not yet devised a method to power them with. He had tried nuclear power, solar power, hydrogen fuel and even a wood-burning stove. None of it worked.

The answer came to him one day when he was very hungry. He was considering a slice of cherry pie in a store window, the sweet goo pouring out of the flaky crust, yellowed with butter under a large swirl of cream. For what seemed like an hour he stared, tried to remember how much cash he had in his pocket and stared some more. When the bakery manager came out, Dr. Ellis was startled out of his trance. Wiping a little drool from the corner of his mouth he apologized, blushed, and hurried away but not before catching sight of the clock.

"That's it!" he shouted, then blushed again as passers-by stared. *We've had the power source with us all this time*, he thought, silently this time.

And so they—that is to say, people—had. For as he walked away from the store and the cherry pie, he noticed that barely two minutes had passed, yet surely it was an hour! He knew then: the *mind* powers time.

And we are the machine! he thought in triumph.

Upon arriving home, he scrapped all his old work and began to work on a new theory using the human mind as both the vessel and power source. He experienced great success in this venture. Soon he could, in theory, make hours race ahead, allowing, for example, one to experience the end and beginning of a dull dinner party without any of the in-between parts that made it dull. Or, he could slow seconds down to a near stand still allowing more time for enjoyable things, like love-making, cherry pie, and good books.

There were two problems with his research. First, though he could slow down time or speed it up into the future, he had not yet figured out how to go backwards. He hypothesized, however, that this was possible, and kept working at it. Perhaps a combination of factors could exert enough force on the mind to make it turn backwards.

He tried many formulas to achieve this. For example: a lecture on the tree-ant's sleeping patterns plus full logarithm tables plus a twelve foot pile of manila folders to be filed. That one was pretty close; it managed to bring time to a near standstill. But still it would not go backwards.

The second problem was the interference of the subconscious. If left alone, it would drag the hours through the dull moments, expanding seconds into hours, and collapse hours into seconds during the fantastic moments.

Dr. Ellis theorized that this was an evolutionary mechanism, and quite a powerful one. Nature wanted the organism to realize just how boring the boring moments were, so it would avoid those in the future. The organism also needed to get through the fantastic moments quickly so that they could seek out more and more of these. While no doubt a biological advantage, this was exactly the tendency he wished to counter.

The subconscious problem was a particular beast. The doctor worked obsessively on it. He thought it was rather as if the subconscious controlled walking. One could try all morning to arrive at work only to end up at the theater or the bakery.

To solve the problem, he tried many methods of distracting the subconscious. (Would it falter for a raspberry torte? Or a well-proportioned blonde?) If it were distracted long enough, then the conscious mind could sneak off through time. He also tried tricking the subconscious mind into inverting its

natural patterns (would a caramel cheesecake make work meetings fly by? Would a persistent ito make a holiday last forever?) The subconscious, however, was a stubborn and well-disciplined creature. It had made its patterns and stuck with them like cement.

Still, he worked and he worked. One night, as he was fiddling with a distraction contraption he built, he cut his finger on a piece of aluminum foil. He tried to ignore it, but the blood dripped all over the contraption and ran onto his notes. He went to the bathroom to find a bandage.

He opened the door, with the non-bloody hand, and walked into the bathroom. There was somebody there! He jumped in alarm, shoulders twitching, hands shaking. Seeing the stranger's reflection, he whirled to accost the intruder. But his knee gave way, spilling him to the floor. When he looked up, the stranger had gone. Shaking, knee throbbing, he stood, gripped the sink. There! He went back! Slowly this time, but still trembling he turned his head. But as he did, the stranger turned away. They turned back and stared at each other, the mirror in between.

Dr. Ellis looked at his own drooping skin and pale eyebrows.

"No!" he yelled. "I don't know how to go back yet!"

He stumbled back to his desk. His notes were all in disarray. He clawed through them desperately.

"There must be a key in here somewhere!"

Crimson drips fell from his finger.

Through stacks of diagrams and formulas his withered hands searched.

"I know I can fix it...I know I can fix it..."

The faster he searched, the longer his grizzled hair grew. Joints groaned and stiffened. His concave chest struggled to expand enough for air.

"There must...be a way...to go...back."

His head spun, and the panic grew wilder. His hair grew faster, and his joints grew slower. His breaths grew weaker.

Thunk.

The cement floor ground against his bent back. Failing fingers clutched a stack of papers. Pupils quickly clouding with cataracts, strained to see.

"How...how..."

Then time stopped. At least, it did for him.

The Name

Goddamnit.

Everyone else was tried not to let their sobs drown out the eulogy.

Not me.

It wasn't that I wasn't sobbing (but I wasn't.) It wasn't that I wasn't listening to the eulogy (but I wasn't.) It wasn't that I wasn't totally remembering what a great guy the dearly departed was (Of course I was. Who needed reminding?)

Goddamnit!

It wasn't any of those things.

It was the name.

What was it?

He *was* a great guy. Totally. Fun, energetic, handsome; the kind everybody liked. That was the reason they all attended his funeral. That's why I was there, anyway. I remembered the laughing, good-natured, slightly drunk face very well.

But not the name that went with it.

Mother always used to scoff at the people with funny names. But I remembered every single Dallan or Anferny I'd ever met. My mental landscape was full of Toms and Justins, and Jessicas and Katie's. They were as common as paving stones and slipped by without notice.

Could have been Justin. Could have been Tom.

Tom... Tom?

The name started to insert itself into the memories. *Tom*. That could have been it.

No stop that.

It would have been awkward if it slipped out of my mouth. Or it *would* be awkward if it turned out that it wasn't actually his name. For all I knew, it could have been. But if not, would "Oops, wrong name at funeral," get me out of that one?

There must have been some mention of his name in the "Dearly Departed" clause. Too bad I was trying so hard to remember it to pay attention then.

Then,

Oh.

JACK, it said on the temporary grave marker.

Oh. Jack. Right.

Got back to the apartment.

"How was whasisnames funeral?" said the roommate. "What was his name anyway?"

"I don't know, but the ceremony was great."

Maple Syrup

Syrup dripped slowly, not like blood. Syrup was sweet, too, but Chi didn't know what blood taste like. Rusty, maybe, from the iron, iron like in magnets. He used to think that was why people stuck to the earth: they had metal in them, and so did the planet. He didn't think that anymore. If it were true then why did dead people stick just as hard as living people, even when all the blood was drained out? Why didn't they go floating up away? He used to think that was why they nailed coffins shut.

Sip. Click.

The flask snapped back in its seat on his hip where a magnet stuck it in place. Mother thought it was rum, and he let her think that. Rum didn't work, though. Rum erased what maple syrup remembered. Other people drank, remembered things that didn't happen and forgot things that did. Chi wanted to remember what happened and forget what didn't.

Sip. Click.

The store itself was not the temptation. Not that Chi could ignore the rows upon rows of maple sugar cookies, gallons of syrup, lollipops in the shape of maple leaves, and tawny fudge squares. He couldn't. He was a good boy, though, and he wasn't tempted by the things that he shouldn't have.

The temptation wasn't the cookies and syrup and lollipops and fudge; it was the key. The key hung on the wall by the door after dark when his parents had gone to bed. He looked at it every evening at six, when his mother and father locked up the store and brought in the key. Sometimes, he would get up in the night, come downstairs quietly, and stare at the little piece of silver hanging on the peg by the door.

Sip. Click.

It was funny that the taste hadn't gone away all these years. Chi had thought that eventually he would get used to the sticky sweetness of the syrup and wouldn't be able to taste it. But he still did. Maybe it was a symbiotic relationship--the syrup and the memories--one kept the other alive. The memories hadn't faded, and the taste was part of the memories. The taste kept alive the memories which kept alive the taste... Whatever the reason, the maple sweetness was just as clear as the day he first drank it, and it recalled that time perfectly.

Sip. Click.

"No, we're not supposed to!" Geo had said the first time they snuck into the shop after dark.

Chi agreed. They *were* good boys, both of them. But rows of sweets, stacked neatly in a dark storeroom will sing to any young child, and Chi was listening. Now that he stood, key in hand, with his parents sleeping in the house, he heard their song loud and clear. Geo was not really trying to resist anyway; he was just making a token protest to fall back on later when they were caught. All Chi needed to do was make the token argument to cement the deal. It was the standard contract of light mischief. So he said,

"Who'll know?"

He took one of the little jugs of syrup and poured it into their two bottles (white ones that you

couldn't see inside of.) The shelves only took a little rearranging to conceal the empty space. And the empty jar of evidence they buried by a tree. They sipped the syrup slowly so it would last. It was difficult, though, like eating a chocolate bar slowly is difficult. No one can drink maple syrup except drop by drop, one sip at a time.

Sip. Click.

It went in a metal flask now instead of a white water bottle. He was almost grown now, and grown men who didn't play sports and worry about nutrition and hydration and those sorts of things didn't carry around water bottles everywhere. No one carried around hip flasks either, but Chi did it anyway. He needed something to carry the memories in, and the flask had come with a nice holder with a magnet.

"Don't dwell," they told him, all of them, parroting each other. "Look ahead of you, not behind you."

But he wanted to look behind. There were rocks back there, and if you weren't careful you could fall on a trip. You had to look. His mother put it a different way.

"Don't run backwards," she said. "Don't run backwards."

And don't push, either, he would add, but silently in his head so she wouldn't hear it.

Sip. Click.

He sipped the syrup carefully, one drop at a time. And he remembered carefully, one moment at a time. There was only one thing he couldn't remember.

Sip. Click.

Sip. Click.

Sip, sip, sip.

Click.

No matter how hard he tried, no matter how carefully he went over the memories, there was one he could not recover. For ten years, maple syrup held all the memories except that one.

Why was he angry? He couldn't remember.

Sip. Click.

Push. Thud. What were they fighting about? It must have been something important. It *must* have been. But if it was so important, then why couldn't he remember?

Sip. Click.

Slip.

Crack.

"Geo? Geo?"

That was the moment when he forgot. He had been angry, he knew he had, but at the sharp crack of bone on rock and the thud of Geo's body hitting the ground, he forgot.

The blood ran fast, and so did Chi. He ran and he ran, back to the house, though his stomach ached and his legs all cramped up, and he couldn't breathe fast enough to get oxygen to the muscles.

He ran for his father and mother, then his mother ran for the doctor down the street, and someone else ran for the policeman.

"Geo's hurt," he'd said, and everyone listened because they were good boys and never got into trouble.

They all ran very fast back to the field behind the house. But the blood ran faster. It was all out of Geo by the time Chi got back with help.

Sip. Click.

Drinking water would give him more energy. If he had more energy then he could run faster. But Chi didn't run anymore. There was no reason to. Blood was like water, and it ran fast. If you had a race with blood, it would always win, no matter how fast you ran. Maple syrup ran slow, and you didn't have to race against it. He was done racing.

His mother thought he was too slow.

"You have to get out of the room," she'd say. "Get a job, meet some friends."

She wanted him to go forward instead of backwards. Chi didn't think he was *going* backwards though. He was *looking* backwards, and that was an entirely different thing. *Looking* backwards was important, even when you were standing still. He had to see what was there. There was something back there, and even if everybody else didn't see it, he had to.

Sip. Click.

"What happened?" they had asked.

All of them, the doctor, the police, his mother, asked the same question. His hand still held the baseball. He'd forgotten about that too. When he looked down at it, it answered for him.

"Accidental?" they'd said, already nodding sadly, because these were good boys and when trouble happened, it was an accident.

"Yes," Chi said. "He was running backwards and tripped on the rock, smacked his head on the pile. He was running backwards to catch a ball."

"Yes," his mother said. "He comes out with his friend to play baseball all the time," she explained and they nodded. You could see the worn grass between the bases - three trees and a shrub for home.

They were good boys and it was an accident. The grass was wet, and he wasn't looking behind as he ran back. Slipped and hit the rock too hard. Too bad, they said, shaking their heads.

"That's why you don't do that," his mother said, crying. "That's why you look where you are going."

"It was baseball. He was running to catch a ball. He was looking at the ball. You do that in baseball."

Sip. Click.

Ten years of drinking maple syrup had rotted his teeth prematurely. Chi didn't care. Teeth could be fixed, the past couldn't be. He wondered if memories could be. He wanted to fix his memories.

They weren't broken that bad, he thought.

Everyone else's were worse because they only looked ahead. The taste of the syrup had recalled the day for him, recalled it crystal clear, for ten years, except for the one thing. Sip after sip of maple syrup, flask after flask, jug after jug, and he could not remember why he was angry. He could not remember why he pushed Geo onto the rocks. That had been wiped from his mind the moment the other boy fell, and no amount of looking had brought it back. He kept trying anyway.

Sip. Click.

The Swing

When the swing fell again, the tree died.

That wasn't how it was the first time. Then, it had been just a matter of getting a new rope and stringing it back up. They couldn't do that anymore because there was nothing to string it up on.

The first time, Bridget has seen the rope make a graceful arc from bough to ground. It had sounded like a candy bar snapping in half (not one of the gooey ones, though—a crisp bar. Like Crunch or Hersheys, not Twix.) A soft, crisp pop, then the arc. Broken from hours of carrying her up into the sky, it was a beautiful, not a sad injury.

She had shared the wound then, too. The seat disappeared from beneath her, somehow falling much faster than her own body and the rope's. Of course, she should have been holding on like her father always said to, but she liked to drape her arms lightly around the ropes. That way, it was more like flying.

That time, she really had been flying. Her body was weightless, not like a bird struggling to keep itself aloft, but really weightless like the air itself.

For a second.

She saw the broken rope falling beside her, and wondered how it felt to finally be free of the tree. They landed beside each other in the leaves which crunched beneath them. It sounded like applause.

The second time the swing fell, there was no applause, and no flying.

The saws screamed so loudly that Bridget couldn't even hear the snap of the branches. She imagined it must have sounded like a much bigger bar of candy - maybe a solid block of chocolate filled with nuts.

The branch with the swing went first because it was lowest. The swing fell silently, or at least whatever sound it made was drowned by the hysterical saw. Its branch made a soft *whump* against the ground, which was again brown with leaves.

Bridget couldn't help cringing, just a little, remembering the bruising fall. The swing and the branch laying beside each other reminded her of her and the rope laying beside each other, looking at each other. But she had been happy then, despite the bruises, and she couldn't imagine the rope feeling sad either. Both the swing and the branch looked sad now. They hadn't flown, just fallen. The grace was gone.

Maybe that was why the leaves didn't applaud.

She looked for one second, then another limb fell on top of the first, then another and another. Then the trunk joined the pile and the screaming finally stopped. For a while she just stared at the pile, unsure of whether she were looking at it from the outside or whether she were still trapped down there on the ground with the swing.

That Night, There Was No Dinner

The filet mignon was tempting, but the stewed tomatoes were heavenly. Of course, Cora's attention was not caught by dish itself, but on the one who could transform the hated food into such a delicious piece of art. The medley of spices masterfully blended made the single tomato into an entire meal itself. After that first bite, she paid little attention to the other dishes. The other chefs were good, but they were only human.

Caleb was a magician.

She read his nametag when she snuck back to the makeshift kitchens to investigate the origins of the miraculous tomato dish. He was there cooking, surrounded by a cloud of spices. Those spices would always linger in his hair and his clothing. Her mother argued, scornfully, that Cora had only fallen in love with the scent and the spices but not the man.

"He isn't *handsome*," the older woman would protest. "And he can't afford to make himself so."

Cora disagreed.

Her mother's party had brought the two together. Her insistence on gourmet and fresh-cooked refreshments for her aristocratic guests was responsible for Caleb's presence in that neighborhood, one in which he would never have been seen out of uniform. Her mother was responsible for their meeting. But she had skipped the tomatoes that evening, and hadn't cared who made them. It was only when the cooking dared to woo her daughter that she even noticed him.

Cora's pleading never bought her mother's approval; but Caleb's talents in the kitchen could tempt even her. When she eventually deigned to try her son-in-law's cooking, she at least had to admit that her daughter's heart—or perhaps her stomach—had never stood a chance against that charm. Even the stubborn heiress could *attempt to* forgive the pale, rotund man his looks and poverty for one of his homemade meals.

Still, even after three years of marriage, the audacious woman would call her daughter from time to time about some attractive (and always well-off) young gentleman she'd met at one of her clubs. Just last night she'd suggested one.

"He can afford an entire kitchen of cooks!" she'd argued.

"But I love Caleb," said Cora.

"Oh Cora..." she sighed. "Forget him. Please?"

Cora hung up.

That night, like every night, she fell asleep thinking about him and woke to the same thoughts the morning. In the hazy moments before fully waking she felt the weight of his limbs wrapped around her like a comforter. Her chin rested on a hand as big as two of her own. And against her back, his solid chest leaned like a pillow. She felt absolutely secure. In those moments, she shifted in and out of the pre-dawn doze. Her thoughts lifted her up lightly, like clouds, and she rested on them in lazy contentment. Her mind entertained only one subject.

His teeth shown like alabaster - all of them - when he smiled, and the rose in his cheeks never paled. His arms were heavy, but gentle; her own barely reached around his waist. She felt tiny in his arms, but safe. And always, the scent of spices lingered in his hair and clothes and over his skin.

The house, too, was always full of their perfume: steak sautéing in onions and peppers, spiced tomatoes, stuffed olives, and herbal breads. She drank in the aromas in every breath, and at night they wrapped her up like a comfort blanket.

"I must remember to get cumin for the chili tonight" she reminded herself before the shifting ha
dreams swept her away again.

But as she drifted off, a lead dart punctured the clouds she lay upon.

The smile she remembered had faded and the cheeks dulled.

That day there had been no dinner.

Beans sat soaking on the stove but the soup was never made.

The hospital had a dining room but it was not the same.

She could not have eaten anyway with the elephantine weight crushing her chest. Even breathing was hard. Each breath seemed insufficient to sustain her until the next. The blanched waiting room was like a lifer's cell; she could not imagine the world outside it. Hours and hours pressed in on it until it seemed no bigger than a closet. Beneath the petrification that gripped her body, a tremor shook her heart.

Only when the news came did the scalding tears fall from her frozen lids.

They were tears of relief: Caleb had survived.

She vaguely remembered that there was a person in the other car and that they didn't make it, but that seemed inconsequential. Seeing her husband's face, the smile only a little less broad, sent the drips from her eyes cascading onto his gown and blanket. The color returning to his face lit up the room for her like a torch.

When he walked again they walked together, always. When he cooked she stood over his shoulder watching and learning his secrets. When she shopped, they walked hand in hand down the aisle picking out the perfect ingredients. And at night she could smell the spices in her own hair.

Again her thoughts were like clouds, As wakefulness crept upon her she kept her eyes closed still wrapped in the delicious memories. Not for long though, for they could not tempt her from the real thing.

But today he was not beside her when she opened her eyes. As her mind woke fully to the daylight the weight of his arms and the warmth of his body disappeared. But as she looked at his neatly made up side of the bed, she smiled at his attention to detail.

Oh how much tidier he is than other men, she thought

However, when she sat up, he was not there, and no sound from the bathroom or downstairs betrayed his presence. The silence buzzed obtrusively and the room felt strangely empty. The dress top was cleared off, and only her dresses hung in the closet. Then her eyes fell on a box, half packed by the door. Caleb's comb lay inside, and a tie poked over one side.

"Where are you going?": she called to the house.

The empty room yawned around her like a mouth. Legs with just a hint of tremors sought the floor. Down the empty hallways she walked and the great mouth opened further to encompass the whole house. She peered around each doorway cautiously as if it were a tooth threatening to chomp down. Staring down the stairs, she saw a slide that would whisk her away to its dark end. She went down anyway and stood in the dim foyer. Stretching her eyes, she tried to see the familiar hulking shapes dozing on the couch or coming around the kitchen door. A fluttering hand touched the light switch, but as the room brightened the only shapes that resolved were the tall bookshelves, the fireplace and the furniture. On the fireplace mantle there was a curious vase without flowers or clippings. She walked to it and stared at her face in the polished brass. It had a lid which she lifted with one hand.

Grey ashes the color of his sparkling eyes stared up at her. The lid crashed to the hearth chipping

the stone. Her shoulders drew together so tightly they ached. Fingering pressed on her brow as her memories tumbled over her, supplanting fantasy.

Again, she remembered.

Again, the morning woke her to the memory she'd fallen asleep to.

Only the hearth, chipped in hundreds of places, where the urn's lid had crashed down again and again, knew many times the memory had been forced back on her.

Another crash made her twitch and before she could stop herself she called his name.

"Caleb?"

Then she felt herself blush and looked away in disappointment as her mother walked in. Cora stared at the urn before two manicured hands swept it away.

"Why do you stare at that like he's still here? You should be moving on, forgetting the past. That's how you deal with it dear; it's what they all say."

Cora had not found her mother's pop psychology advice helpful in the least and ignored it now. She was silent as her mother moved about the room brushing off tabletops and straightening rugs. She had hidden the urn behind the bookshelves.

"Honey, it's been three years. Honestly, sometimes it's like you don't even know he's gone."

Cora didn't listen, she was still trying to crawl away from the real memories. But they chased her down. Her mind sat in the hospital waiting room--it really was a cell now. Still waiting, waiting, waiting. But they wouldn't come home together. She didn't look at her mother.

"Now, this one's a real gentleman so try not to scare him away before the second date, okay?"

Date? Cora flinched. *Not again. Not Again!*

Her mind crawled faster, away from the memories of her mother's matchmaking attempts. She didn't know whether her mother did this to remind her that Caleb was dead, or to remind her of all the other men she could have agreed to marry instead.

"And please tell me you've cleared out his things. The last thing he needs to see is another man's clothes in your room. Come on now he'll be here soon."

"He?"

"Your date, hon. His name is Chris."

That wasn't the "he" she was thinking about.

"Go get dressed, honey! He'll be here soon, I told him to come for brunch."

She was tired, and didn't have the strength to fight this. Without a word or thought, she went and got dressed.

When the doorbell rang she opened it and she looked into a pair of brown eyes. But all she could see was grey ashes.

Standing in the living room, not listening to her mother's chatter she looked at the new pair of eyes. They seemed disembodied—they had no body that Cora could see, anyway. She could not have said whether he were tall or short or handsome or repulsive. It didn't matter.

The brown eyes swept over the shelves full of cookbooks.

"Do you cook?" he asked hopefully.

"No." she said. "I don't"

First Impressions

Those shoes!

To kiss those shoes... To bend over them, brush a cheek against the jade toes... Velour? Velvet? Or to caress that fabric and find out! Just the shoes... Just the shoes.

The skirts don't match.

Yellow petals brush the green toes. Each layer is translucent in the sun, but hung together, the piece is opaque. Like a daffodil.

A slender yellow stalk sways above the skirt. Dress... a dress, not a skirt.

"Don't take a pretty book home just cuz it's pretty," Mom always said, "and a girl neither."

Somewhere above the shoes, above the dress, there are eyes.

The flower smiles.

Not at him.

The flower has brown eyes, a bright brown, almost-red. They smile. They don't shine *in* the sun. They shine *at* the sun. A street sign, a bus shelter, a sidewalk, cement cubicles a hundred feet high--daffodil grows at their feet. Oh to look into those eyes and see them looking back!

But no, he couldn't bear it.

Don't look. Don't look... But it's like hoping the sun doesn't shine. *Look. Please look.*

They do.

Our children will have those eyes.

The sun is dumb beside them... shining down stupid on the grey world. No understanding, no discretion, bright only in color. But the eyes in the flower are bright. Intelligent. Looking on the world, smart and kind. The street sign, the bus shelter, the sidewalk, the cement cubicles--the flower makes sense of it all.

The eyes say so.

So much in two eyes in a flower. So much... Our children... our children will have them. Our children could be doctors with those eyes. Lawyers, or inventors or scholars. Those eyes could make president.

"Don't take a pretty book home just cuz it's pretty," Mom said.

"Why do you comb your hair so careful for the interview?" he asked.

"First impressions count."

First impressions count.

How? How... To hear the flower speak! But how? How...

The daffodil sways in the breeze, sways away... away.

Stop!

No, that's not it. Maybe...

Hello. Are you lost? I can help you--

But she might say no.

What beautiful shoes--What's your name?...Does that come with a number?

No.

Hi, I'm lost, do you know where I can find a map?

How... how to speak to a flower? to hear it speak back?

The shoes disappear around the corner.

"Wait!"

Where ... ?

"Wait! What's your name? I like your—your shoes are—"

Already gone, already gone.

Part II. Fairies and Things: things of other worlds...

ONE

Sun Set

“Never, never look into the sun. Don’t ever. There are creatures in there, a fairy relative of the salamander, and the sun is their circle. They don’t much like being looked at, and if they catch you staring, they’ll snatch you up and carry you off through their fiery ring, which is just as dangerous as any fairy circle on the ground.”

Sal’s grandmother always warned him like this when she caught him looking. His mother said that was silly, and he was old enough not to be scared by fairy stories. If he looked into the sun, she told him, he would go blind, and that was that.

He never understood how someone could say that— “Don’t look at it.” People looked. If they could, they did. Sometimes, Sal thought, if he wasn’t paying attention he could turn off his hearing so when the lawnmower was going while he was reading he wouldn’t even notice. He could turn off his nose too by breathing through his mouth. Touch was a sense that everyone ignored unless it was too bad or too good. Taste was the same. But he could only turn off his sight by closing his eyes, and he couldn’t go around like that. He had to look. He didn’t know how not to. If he could see something, he would.

He tried telling his mother and grandmother this.

“You keep your eyes on this world,” his grandmother would say. “No, you don’t go looking into others, or looking *for* them either.”

“You’ll go blind,” his mother would repeat. “Why can’t you just look at something else?”

Sal looked at the sun anyway, but only when it was dark orange and low in the sky. He would try to look when it was high up and yellow, but it hurt his eyes. When the sun was setting, he liked to make pictures out of the patterns it cast on the clouds. When there were big, puffy clouds, they looked like orange sheep prancing about a fiery pasture. When there were thin stripes of clouds, they looked like rivers of flame running into the sun – or maybe they were running out. Sometimes he saw eagles, herds of horses, or people, or creatures he had no name for.

Today, the clouds were patchy, some voluminous, some thin and wispy, all criss-crossing all over each other. Squinting into the aerial landscape, Sal began to make out shapes in the clouds about the setting sun. He saw hills and fields and rivers and even a forest.

There were animals today, too, but they were in the smaller fields and he couldn’t tell what they were. Sheep maybe, but you had to be careful with clouds; when they were all white and puffy, they always looked like sheep. In fact, as he looked closer, straining his eyes to the field closest to the sun, he thought the herd was more cow shaped than anything. Their heads were square and he thought he could see longer tails on some of them.

How intricate the patterns were tonight! So many different types of clouds were clustered together. They almost made an entire town. On the hills and fields he almost thought he saw houses and people.

and dogs and cats and some water, a lake or seashore perhaps. He could even see the crests of the waves.

There must be a real storm coming, Sal thought, one with all kinds of rain and wind, and maybe even some snow.

He stared and stared at the orange and white paintings in the sky, and then it occurred to him that he recognized some of the features. That one hill (a giant cumulus mass) looked like the hill beside his house. If the animals were cows indeed, they could be his neighbor's who always grazed in the little pasture by Sal's house. And there! His house was beside them. Then a smaller cloud drifted out of the house-shaped one. It was a person-shaped cloud. Why, that could almost be his mother! She stood in the yard looking about and calling—he could see the cloud open its mouth and cup its hands around him. He waved to her, and called out, but she went on looking and looking.

He tried to run towards his house, for he was sure by now that his mother was calling for him, and it was time to come in for dinner. As he ran, the sun sank lower and lower. Within a few minutes it had slipped over the edge of the world, and the hill, the house, and his mother disappeared in the shadows.

He looked about him. The sun had sucked most of the light down with it, and it was already deep twilight. He could see enough, though, to wonder at the landscape. There was a forest, close and black, and an obsidian lake that looked like stone. He turned in a circle and saw that hills surrounded him even where a moment ago the sun had been. His house was not sitting atop any of them. As he looked at the trees and the water, he realized that they were not the trees and water that he knew.

“Mother!” he called.

There was no answer.

“Mother!” he called again.

And there was a whisper, a high whispering laugh, from the shadows. It was not his mother.

Then the twilight vanished, and, in the dark, there were voices and movements in all directions. Dinner was indeed ready, and he was just in time.

Shark

Nobody liked Josiah.

Under the sun, he was a bleached bone laying on the sand. Like a skeleton buried on unhallowed ground apart from decent folk, he kept away from the living flesh. When the sun went down, he was shadow on the edge of our bonfires, a silence outside our ring of laughter and flirtation and drinks, lots of drinks.

He was always on the beach. Every weekend, every night, every day. Nobody invited him. They didn't need to; he wasn't really in on the parties. He just shared the space. I guess he just liked the water.

A skinny kid even in the baggy clothes he wore to school, in swimming trunks he was skeletal. In the light of the fires at night, he looked like a snowy ghoul.

"Shark," the girls called him, and giggled.

They laughed to cover up their unease, because he was someone who made people uneasy.

He was a shark, no doubt about it. Not that he was vicious, at least, not in any way we could tell. Really, he just looked like one. There was a pointed look about his face, cheek bones all sticking out at unlikely angles, and a razor of an upper lip. He had a finlike crown, smooth and narrow which was situated atop a stretched frame, always stuck up above a sea of heads.

He moved like a shark, too, in a stalking kind of walk with a pronounced grace about it. He had that kind of grace that you almost wanted to watch, if only it didn't make you so nervous.

"Shark," they would say, and laugh. They laughed together, because laughter in number is safer than laughter alone.

As creepy as he looked prowling the sand, indoors he was a goldfish.

He was the type of twerp I'd give wedgies to, and push into the lockers in the hallways between classes. He was the type who had his name scrawled next to funny remarks on the walls of the toilet at school. He was such an easy target, taunting him wasn't even much fun. It was just an imperative part of the social food-chain.

I intended to keep my place on it.

This year, as soon as the sun rose on the first day of summer, I was on the sand and in the water. College was coming, and scouts would be there either to usher it in or to bar the way. I wanted to start training early.

But as early as I started, Josiah was ahead of me. That first day he was there, standing in the waves two minutes after the sun had cleared the horizon. I didn't wave or call to him; guys like me usually didn't even look at guys like him, even when we taunted them they were invisible.

But he looked at me as I ran over the sand. It was hard not to look back because he was the only one on that long beach.

He looked at me with these blank eyes, and he yawned.

The yawn stretched.

Then he smiled. I'd never seen him do that before.

The smile stretched.

He just stood, waist deep in the surf smiling and yawning, teeth glinting in the morning sun, hands hanging at his sides. I squinted at him.

Did that kid always have extra teeth?

I looked at his arms and realized they weren't so much hanging by his sides as glued to them.

I looked back up to his face. There wasn't much of one left. His head had grown forward over the mouth, the pointed crest of his skull elongating. The small black eyes sitting in ivory skin just looked at me. The mouth with rows upon rows of teeth continued to smile.

The shark dove. A fin wove back and forth between the waves a few times, before it disappeared.

People who live by the ocean don't worry about shark attacks. Most swimmers and surfers couldn't stay out of the water even if they did worry. "What are the chances?" they always say. Every summer a few arms are lost and maybe a life or two, but with all the tourists crowding the waters, really, what are the chances?

But the tourists and the swimmers and the surfers and the people that live by the ocean don't *know* the sharks. And the sharks don't *know them*.

I don't go down by the water anymore. I can't imagine I have a friend there.

The Dinner Bells

The chimes laugh.

The window shade, coarse and old, chafes Mort's fingers. *Tug. Release. Tug. Release.* But only moves down, brushing the chimes as it goes. The rude, tinkling chuckle continues.

Again, he reaches up to the rolling mechanism at the top of the window and fiddles with it. crumbles a little, but doesn't move. Like the nail holding the chimes in place, like the hinges on the front door, like the keyholes, like the screws on the filthy toilet, like the whole damn house, it rusted in place.

Mort yanks on the shade. It rises an inch or two, then stops.

Was it always stuck?

Grandmother Morris made that window a decorative nook long ago. Mort had only ever seen the chimes hanging with some dried flowers over the closed shade.

Dead flowers crunch under foot. The shade sands his finger. The chimes laugh.

He never asked.

He never asked about the window with the chimes. He never asked about the flowers or the shade that was never opened, or about anything in the run-down mansion or the wild lands about it at all.

He didn't ask because he didn't care.

As a child left unsupervised for long summers in a too-old and very likely haunted mansion, Mort would have much rather been at home watching a movie about a too-old and very likely haunted mansion. He explored the house, not out of curiosity, but out of boredom and a desire to avoid the too-old and very likely crazy old woman who made decorative nooks out of unused windows.

He never found anything interesting.

The flowers slip underfoot. A drop of blood stains the sharp edge of the shade. The chimes giggle.

Crazy woman!

When he couldn't avoid his grandmother as a child, he did his best to ignore the funny way she talked and the crazy stories she told, none of which he remembers now.

His mother said that Grandmother Morris was old and could do or say whatever she wanted. She said that he was put off by his grandmother because she was very old and children are often put off by the very old. But, she had told him, they really should respect their elders anyway.

Mort showed respect with silence.

If he could help it, he didn't talk to her at all. And because she was funny like that, she didn't seem to mind. She didn't talk much to him either, except when neither one could avoid the other.

The first thing he did when he moved in after she died was take down all flowers and the silver trinkets. He would have removed the chimes too, but like the shade they were stuck. The nail and the chain on which they hung had rusted, and held fast when he tugged.

I'm going to cut them off with a chainsaw!

But that must come later. For now, he is determined to make the shade, and the entire house functional. It is a window none will see, in the washroom that hasn't been used since there were servants living in an attic that hasn't been used since the rest of the house forgot it.

But he will not have it broken. He will not live in a rusty old antique. He was not a child who thought old things were curious. He is not an adult who thinks they are quaint. He liked—then and now—things that work, and serve their purpose. That way, the world makes sense. That way, the world

is functional.

~~But Mort doesn't like to make things work. He just likes them to be working when he needs them.~~
The shade defies him.

Two buttons on his shirt hang loose. One pops off as he reaches up to beat on the roll at the top of the window. It rolls behind the toilet and pings against the porcelain. One fist opens to tug at the tie that feels like a choker, but it already hangs limp around his collarbone. Frustrated sweat drips from the once-pressed silk armpits .

Fuck it. Couldn't see shit anyway, it's so dark.

One sweaty hand tears the tie off completely and drops it to the dead-flower-strewn floor.

Nothing worth seeing through that window anyway.

Somebody disagrees.

The creeping shadows out on the lawn think there is something well worth seeing through the attic window. The shadows had always kept a close eye upon the ancient charm that hung in the old house. It had been still for a long time. The bells were on the inside of the window, untouched by the wind and somebody had been very careful not to let them stir for many years.

Now they stir. Now they tinkle, laughing gleefully. And the shadows remember the sound. But they had never forgotten it.

Who forgets hunger?

No. Though the people no longer remember their dues, the shadows do.

For almost a hundred years they had waited. They had hid, shadows in the shadows catching on what they could. No one knew the appropriate calls anymore. No one remembered what was due to the darkness.

But someone had rung the bells, somebody had struck the tones that called out the shadows for their sacrifice. They were hungry and came swiftly out of the trees, over the lawn, following the ancient summons. Careful in their excitement, they crept towards the house. They growled in hunger and ground their teeth in anticipation.

Mort lay in an ancient bed under blankets that smelled a little like potpourri and mold. The creaking of the old frame hid the long nails scratching on the steps.

He was miserable and cold. But despite his discomfort, he was tired and soon fell asleep. He slept deeply and without waking.

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