

The Pith

A quick wisp of limbs filled her awareness and she felt compression, a moment of falling, resentment projected onto her, pushing her into a dank eaves cupboard. A triangle of light funnelled to a ribbon in slow-motion, the door giving a dull, muffled gargle as it swung, like the second after a head breaches water's surface following a dive. She knew better in her lucid state than to scream, reflex overriding itself. Instead, she waited a beat to be awake. With her eyes open, she didn't move for a moment, allowing her chest to equilibrate and her mind to process its physical environment.

She rose carefully, not displacing the sheet. The purple light seeping from beneath the blind onto the window ledge told her, predictably, that it was dawn. She looked over at the defined torso generously displayed, bordered at the naval by the sheet – his sheet. In his kitchen, she dropped a teabag into a mug and watched her reasons, her rules, boil with the water. Between sips, she lost herself meditating on a crack in the wall tiles. She traced the lightning bolt cranny like a palm reader, reassured by the stubborn and unpredictable path cut, subsidiary tendrils still assured but deliberately fainter and precise in their lifespan. She regarded the flecks of dried paint sparsely flanking the crack like spectators and considered which most resembled her. When she returned the half-full mug to her lips, its lukewarm liquid was sooty and flaccid, like a muddy cup of rinsing water whored to fraying paintbrushes. She jabbed it at the sink sharply and watched the splash of brown fill the basin like a clap, before slowly melting into the drain like forgetting.

Carefully, she pried open the kitchen window and threaded herself through the modest cavity onto the grated metal fire escape, shortcutting the more conventional route she'd taken last night with the owner of the larger-than-cavity-sized body now dormant in his bed. On the roof, she busied herself to intercept her thoughts, calling her brother whilst lighting a cigarette. He picked up and said, "What's up?", as though anticipating a hiccup in a plan agreed upon moments ago.

"Hey. I wanted to say happy birthday," she replied apologetically, before adding, "Happy birthday!"

"Thanks. You didn't have to call. What are you doing up anyway? What time is it there?"

"Yeah, I'm up early. Of course I was going to call. What have you been up to? Have you had the day off?"

Their quick exchange paused dramatically like a frenzied fly come to rest, a creeping shadow, an imminent swat. He'd only ever approximated a brother, their relationship an optical illusion, askew at a second glance – perceptiveness that came short of sensitivity, empathy that was an accusatory indignation at the best of times.

"Are you dreaming again?"

She scrambled to tighten a cap on her bottle of anxiety as it fizzed at his words. She steadied herself before replying quickly and deliberately, hitting a nail on the head with a hammer held in a shaking hand.

"Yes, I have been. But I'm handling it."

"Well, going back was your decision. You're going to have to deal with it."

"Yes, I said I'm handling it."

"Why have you been dreaming again? And for how long? Were you ever really fine?"

A pair of hands that are hers, the new commute to the new job, a hug when Ayesha saw her last week. A hug and a sentence – “you’re going to be fine, promise”. A pair of hands that are hers, that are proof, that are numb but there, a cigarette in one and the phone in the other. A desk and a screen to do her work on. A hug, a promise, and her hands as proof. It would be fine.

“I will be fine. I hadn’t dreamt until about two weeks ago. But it wasn’t random.”

“What set it off?”

“She’s been acquitted. Reasonable doubt, apparently.”

“And what, you’re scared she’ll come get you?”

She’d considered whether this was the source of her new wave of anxiety and had identified that it wasn’t. It was a natural emotional response, the triggering of the traumatic memories. It was not a result of reasoned consequence, probable or improbable, and it didn’t have to be. She had feelings attached to the events and she always would, and she knew now that ignoring these walls would only make them stronger. She didn’t have to explain. She waited out a brief silence.

“I said this then and I’m saying it now,” he said. “If you act like you deserve something, or act like you’re to blame, then that’s what it is. You can’t get upset. That’s how life works.”

The simplicity of her brother’s doctrine was foreign and disarming, almost to the point of compelling. Were her perceived additions and conditions upon the adage simply hallucinations? Was it possible to exist so upfront and skin-deep?

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“I’ve got to go. Thanks for calling, I guess.”

She watched the city gently shuffle awake. From the roof, she could see a map of her memories against a backdrop of the glass, sky-scraping guardians. They never intervened in her life, they just stood and watched and reminded her that whatever happened, and no matter how alone she was, they would be able to testify that she was the same her who first stepped onto the city’s wet concrete five summers ago, even after her bones had endured the alchemy of trauma. Her memory map touched the big park just a mile south where she’d do laps of the perimeter the year she’d fallen in love with running. It touched the power station where Ayesha and her huge brain worked, its hugeness for a second unintimidating against the colossal machinery of the turbine hall, that evening Ayesha had snuck her in. A bruised tenderness surfaced as her eyes and mind grazed the riverside apartment complex where she once lived with Sophie and Zara before they’d paddled and then gratefully drifted away from her shipwrecked self. Before the aftermath, when everything was unsaid and numb in perfect proportions, and she could count on both of them to go translucent with her for a day. And the hurt, the despair, the mortification, and the incredible nothingness of those days they would disappear together, could all be attributed to a funny chemistry. A motion in the foreground caught her attention. It was the 71 departing from the bus garage. She was pricked by the memory of taking it, twice a week, for her therapy sessions, where she quickly adapted to sweating out premeditated musings like bespoke Tetris blocks, perfectly compatible with the predictably shaped ones of her therapist’s discretion. She much preferred deducing an unloosenable knot from the necessity of her own simplifications, rather than being confronted by a too-late and too-small lifebuoy. It was only outside these sessions, in early morning moments like the one she was in currently as she sat on the roof, that illusions and pretences could finally be put aside, and she was able to make some genuine progress in healing. She was grateful for his patience through

the process, never asking of her or entrusting himself with more than what was welcome. There outside the greengrocers on the street adjacent to the station is where she'd first met him a few months ago, there waiting next to her to weigh his cherries, his cello strapped to his back, the same one now taking him to Venice with his orchestra. He was good, so she'd brought things to a close last night, adamant to reclaim an ending on her own terms for once. The zoom of a motorbike engine nudged her.

His morning alarm sounded just as she clambered back into the flat. She regretted not slipping out moments earlier – their conversation last night had an air of finality, and she wasn't prepared for a prolonged goodbye. They stepped into the entrance at the same time. His faced said he thought she'd left already. She didn't know what to say. If she spoke, an apology or promise of contact would likely escape from her, so she stood stupidly in silence instead.

“Did you want a coffee at least before you go?”

“No, I'm fine, I was just leaving. Thanks.”

He stepped aside for her, but swiftly took her hand as she stepped past. She stopped and faced him but instinctively stalled her own thoughts, demanding her brain to produce the product of 18 and 23.

“You're always saying a day at a time, so all I'll say is, I'll miss you today. And that I'm proud of you. I know you know you'll be fine.”

In her head, she stretched a leather belt as far as it would go. She let herself beam at him. His cherries, his cello, his chest. Then she left.

She felt proud for a while, but sat on the train, she soon forgot why and contemplated feeling crap and alone again. Would anyone on her carriage believe she had a valid claim to pride if they were presented with her crumpled life? She looked up and glanced around at her companioning passengers. Diagonally across to the right, a kid sat with his legs swung onto the aisle, his head against the felt seat, his lower lip drooping slightly. He watched the world go by outside, hardly blinking. His look implied an understanding, beautiful brown eyes devoid of judgement held what they captured with admiration and sentimentality, with an ardent intention to scrutinise and curate moments, extracting all meaning they could offer like juicing fleshy oranges to their dry white husks. She used to tediously remove the whites, the pith, when serving oranges to her family. Lately her world felt like a pith-regenerating orange, the ordeal of separating the undesirable parts never-ending. Watching the brown boy with the brown eyes nonchalantly juice his oranges made her feel equally inspired and inadequate. The alternative consumption of life was quenching, economical, assertive. Most of all, she felt an unadulterated and un-adult love as she watched the boy, and it was just enough.

At home, she busied herself in the kitchen. She diligently peeled, chopped, fried, spiced, and stirred, feeling almost accomplished before remembering that everyone feeds themselves every day. She was almost done, her grumbling stomach sighing in relief, when she remembered the untouched can of coconut milk in her cupboard. She emptied its contents into the pot to thicken the sauce and served herself. One bite and she immediately threw her cutlery down onto the plate, exasperated, ejecting the morsel of chicken from her mouth with enough force to form a rice crater.

“It's off it's fucking off of course it's off,” she yelled at no one in particular, to which her stomach replied with a defeated grunt.

She poured her afternoon's labour into the bin and sat on the tiled floor, inhaling deeply and waiting for the pulsating in her temples to subside. But she'd had enough of waiting, of being reasoned, of fiddling with pith. She clenched her jaw until her neck vibrated. Then she snatched her phone and called Ayesha. She caught herself after two rings and hung up, embarrassed and guilty for her impulse to unsolicited venting. In any case, Ayesha was supposed to fly back home today, which she'd selfishly forgotten until now, forgetting even to wish her a safe flight. Typing out an apologetic goodbye message, she now registered warm tears tickling her cheeks. The doorbell shocked her into motion. She hadn't been expecting a delivery. She hurriedly rinsed her face before opening the door.

"Ayesha?"

"Flight's postponed!"

She gushed and hugged her friend tight. In moments they were balled on either end of the couch like it was a raft, with their blanket life vests and pizza box cargo. The stuffed crusts were an anaesthetic, and she now stretched herself out, resting her head on the arm, Ayesha accommodating her legs between her own. She felt sleepy and homely, Ayesha's presence a fireplace.

"Tell me something," she said.

"What shall I tell you?" Ayesha replied.

"Anything."

Ayesha thought for a minute then said, "There's this thing, system frequency, which is a function of the National Grid's energy generation and demand."

"This is the something you've chosen to tell me?"

"Shush, let me land. Anyway, it's the job of the people in the control room to balance system frequency. And obviously demand changes throughout the day, so at night for example a lot less generation is needed."

She yawned silently and nestled deeper into the couch as though preparing to spontaneously colour-shift and camouflage herself. Ayesha spoke softly through a warm smile.

"When they reduce generation, they do so in cost order, turning off the most expensive energy sources first and so on." She paused. "I feel like people's relationships form a giant network which keeps us all somehow connected, like a National Grid of love. And we each generate a certain amount and demand a certain amount."

Her drowsiness cast a real-time nostalgia upon Ayesha's words, a voice not separate to her, a spring feeding her own stream of thought. Raindrops tapped a quiet static against the glass and for a second her life was just a serendipitous radio channel playing in an unageing couple's holiday rental car. Ayesha squeezed her calf and brought her back for a second.

"So, no matter how little you demand, and no matter how self-sustaining you want to be, no matter how much you want to show the world how fine you are, your external supply of love, no matter how small, should always include me. Because I'm so cheap for you, the cheapest you'll find. It costs me nothing to love you. You got that?"

She replied with a hum and an unguarded dimming of her consciousness, passing herself off into a dreamless sleep.

She woke the next morning in the same position, completely rested. When she looked at the white square of paper left next to her head, she felt not fine, but loved.

