

Feuilles

[Sheets] A short story by Madison Lofmark

Summer air has a smell to it. It's light and crisp but lacks chill in its bite. It always brings me back to elementary school when scandal consisted purely of late-night books nestled under sheets with a flashlight. The thrill of disobedience when footsteps drifted from the hall knowing I held those pages at such late an hour, all while Rossignols sang in tandem with the breeze that carried the scent of dew and freshly brewed coffee from the café.

I met him in those years of innocence with nothing more intended than a quest for friendship, and though I've questioned him numerous times he holds to the fact that he had similar motives. It was in that innocence that we found each other wandering in the dark for companionship. In whatever new school, new shirt, new favorite thing each of us found we always came back to each other.

There weren't many places to go in Èze.

But together we grew into adults and this is our last night together before he leaves for good. Before he escapes and leaves me behind. I made him promise me that he wouldn't wake me up to say goodbye in the morning.

"You're being ridiculous, I want you there to see me off." We were cooking dinner together, a salmon with rice pilaf and green beans, and the smell cracked in the air.

A heaviness set into my chest to see him standing there at the counter so full, I thought I would cry. It was a strange feeling in the moment — that fullness. The knife was in his hand, eyebrow cocked as he chopped herbs that filled the room with the scent of them. The freshness, the novelty so finely trimmed and consumed. I had no idea why I wanted to cry, then. It was meant to be a peaceful moment, an intimate moment but the urge to weep mounted. I didn't press him about my request, and so we ate together

with a tall, plainly scented candle and scuffed dishware arranged neatly on the table as the sounds of the town waned to the nature of evenings.

I couldn't rip my eyes from him, like if I risked a moment to glance anywhere but at his face, he would disappear prematurely. My gaze was an anchor that meant he couldn't drift away, and I held down the line as though my very life depended on it.

He noticed, of course, but was accustomed to expect this behavior from me, so he sat silently with his salmon and smiled when he knocked his foot into mine. I thought nothing of it, but then he hit it again. I kicked back, and he returned, and soon we were a laughing mess of tangled ankles at our cleanly set dinner table and I pleaded with my brain to remember him like this. To remember us like this.

"I don't want to watch you leave," I said with a pause.

He looked at me through the ends of his hair and scrunched up a bit. Then, he padded across the wooden floor and offered me his hand. I knew then that he had agreed to my offer, and so he led me to our bedroom.

They tell you love is hot and passionate in movies and shows and music. They say that sex is violent, aggressive, and loud — almost a fight for skin between two opposing parties. How terribly wrong they are. It is sweet like death is. A part of me dies and is new again each time.

I map out every charted line of his skin again just to make sure they're right. I understand when he's running his hands down my arms why captains go down with their ships— why they can't bear to get off the deck even as the wood buckles and water spills over the guard rails. I would much rather lose it all than lose the familiar grain of his back.

How else are we to spend this darkness together then to touch, vowing silently not to speak so the time could be unburdened by words. A pit is forming in my stomach with each kiss like he's pulled a dagger right down my middle and I'm spilling out onto the bed so he could reach in and take a piece. That one piece he will always carry like a

souvenir. Like a war trophy. Does he know that I hold a piece of him as well? Is it even the same thing?

It's over far too soon and we lay there peacefully still phased together— still unsure of whose limbs are whose. He turns and ruffles the sheets to wrap his arms around my waist and I think to myself that this is it. The checklist has been scratched off and there is no “next” part of this night. There is only this. This moment. This peace. Maybe this brief period where my window is squeaking and a summer cold shiver flows in but can't penetrate the warmth of our skin is what we have. Maybe this is all we were meant to have.

It felt like the hum of a train engine, this thing we shared between us, always chugging along even as the days slunk through the gaps of the ones spent together. We always wanted them to go faster, those days in between. That desolate purgatory survived only by the promise of future days.

Those weekdays where we waited and talked in school hallways and yearned for the weekend. The time we could spend wrapped up in each other. And yet here we are, tangled in each other once more and I long for those between times. Those waiting times. The times when I would stare at my phone on the wall and wait for his call. When I would feel the carpet of my room under my feet as we stepped forth into it and I pressed him into the wall, all while humming into his ear that he looked quite handsome in those pants.

I will never feel this thing again, this fullness lying beside him. Our skin is touching warm like blankets, my face in his neck exchanging kisses as the minutes tick by. I am both terrified and calm in our placid aftermath.

I feel as though he will have taken a piece of me when he leaves through the door that I will never get back. It's like I'm lying here now with a chunk gone knowing I have one of his too. I see it in his eyes, the nervous tension. The easy smile. His skin is cool and salty like a dive into cold water, every splash tipping my stomach over the bow of the ship, tsunamis of touch and tongues.

Maybe it was a dream, this year we have shared. Perhaps it was all in my head.

I remember the day after our first night together when I saw him in the cafe with a brown hoodie up to his ears hiding the purpled marble on his neck and he smiled at me and I could see it there again missing from his eyes, the piece I had taken and replaced with my own. It was exhilarating to see myself in that empty space. No one has ever come so close and climbed so high and grazed over me, looked at me excited and scared, asking if I was ok with the things I pleaded for. Am I ok with them? Was I ever? I don't know.

I forever feel like I am floating away from my body when he is near it, and I don't know if it's such a good thing to be consumed like that.

But I lay here now on our last night, and we've done this thing again. Across the street, I can hear mellowed jazz from a pied-à-terre. There's a glow surrounding the silhouettes of dancers.

“What time is it?”

“Who cares.” It was a stupid question. And so, the everlasting night ticks on as we steal the numbers off the clock and the chirping of the cigales pick up. His hair is soft between my fingers. He likes when I trace his face, so I do it and feel him purr like some kind of cat. I touch his chin, his nose, flatten the stray eyebrow hairs so when he leaves in the morning he is untarnished. It feels almost motherly to do this thing. I see the boy in him when he gives in to the touches and feel immensely sad knowing he deserves this gentleness but is new to it— greedy for it. It is my privilege to give it to him.

I think it's unfair that he gets to go somewhere foreign and unscathed in the morning. A place that's not tainted with lasts. I will forever enter this room and know what we did, a twisting sickness that flips between elation and disgust. Who am I now? What is this town without him? What more do I have to hide from him? Maybe that is it. Maybe that's why I'm scared. He's seen and kissed all of me, thoroughly searched me for anything hidden. Perhaps the anger is at myself for being vulnerable. I laid it all out for him, bare, and he devoured me like he was itching to do so.

Somehow, I crave the ignorance of before-him time. I miss not knowing. I miss the peace. Being with him is like getting out of the car in a hurricane and now that he's leaving, I'm in the pouring rain and I don't know what direction is home.

Since we've known each other, he's told me I overthink things. Well here I am, doing just that, but through it all I know I will be sick without his skin on mine. I want to be held by him, this man that knows me closer and more intimately than any other person does. What a strange thought. What a phenomenon. Maybe I'll cry into this pillow that's tainted when I wake up in the morning and he's gone. Maybe I'll wash the sheets.