

Roots

The wind boxes the bare branches of the trees up the block, all grey and flat, stiff with winter even in mid-March. I long for something green, but through the café window before me, there is only a flight of stairs, a sidewalk, a short street, and a yellow apartment building. It is an unfortunate shade, the yellow of age, neglect, abandonment. An address placard at the corner has been bent by the years alone.

My fingers feel for the set of unfamiliar keys in my pocket. They clink. Somewhere in this city is a door which will open with a twist of these keys. I want to be behind that door now, sitting on the floor with my back to it, thinking, *This land of concrete will never be my home.*

The keychain is a fragment of my former life, a faded-purple heart of thick suede, which I thumb now for comfort.

A world away there are hills and valleys of gold. Warblers perch between sharp knots in the barbed wire, open their bright throats to the aimless-blue sky, and trill. With my thumb pressed to the softest patch of this heart, I can smell the pulse of that world: the hay-matted sweetness of manure, the purple-sour of grape orchards. No matter where you walk in a land like that, you could dig your toes into the earth and unfurl real roots. And your branches would never go bare.

The yellow building has five storeys. I count them to keep myself in this chair. Survive the cold blankness for a few hours, in a place where nobody looks at me for longer than a second, and I can return to the spot behind the door. A place I am to begin calling home.

Six pink balloons are taped to the inside of the second-floor window. Scattered across the glass like marbles, entirely without pattern or intent. Only joy. They make me think *birthday* or *baby shower*. Life passing, life beginning. There must be a blushing girl surrounded by faces with similar freckles. Wrapping paper strewn across the hardwood floor like an acre of crumpled flowers. A hand squeezes her shoulder.

I release the keys in my pocket, reach for my coffee, now cold in its cup. Tomorrow, this building will be the same. Even once the six pink balloons shrink, shrivel, and are plucked from the glass.

A child at a nearby table is exploring the extent of her power by lifting up an empty metal ashtray between her small pink hands and tossing it to the floor. After the clatter, her mother retrieves it, sits back, and continues eating. The little girl wears a red, woolen hat which rises to a gnomish point. Her eyebrows are high and invisibly blond. She stares at the chunk of metal within her reach again. Our eyes meet for a second... two... three.

She grabs the ashtray again and throws it even more vigorously to the floor.

by Audrey Camp

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