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## Roots

by Victoria Watson

It all started with a dream. I was growing roots. I would walk into town by the path that wound itself around the castle. The clock would strike and then it would rain. Once I was at the edge of town, I would reach the river and be far enough away from the day trippers and tourists. On the corner of two worn down streets I would see the cafe with a striped canopy and potted geraniums. I peered through the window and could see empty tables and a woman behind the counter folding napkins and wiping glasses.

I would sit by the window and order my coffee, watching the clouds sail down the river beside me.

The dream became reality as each day on the urge to join the library or set up a bank account, I would walk past the shoppers' banter at the fruit and vegetable market stall and end up at the same cafe.

The woman smiled at me now. I watched her billow out each table cloth then smooth them down with scarred hands. I always wore the same clothes, arrived at the same time and never strayed from the same route to sit and watch the river roll away.

As a young man I had been determined to travel, to prise open my suburban life and strike out at the world. At first it had been cheap campsites in Tuscany where my tent was stolen, then dusty train rides to the south coast of Portugal; drunk on cheap wine and sleeping on the beach. The stamps in my passport blanked out my life before and I soon knew I could never go home.

I travelled further to the cityscapes of Hong Kong, Japan and Russia; teaching spoilt bored housewives how to order when dining with their husbands on trips to London.

My family once amused by my travels, soon began to despair at my nomadic shallow existence and letters asking for news were soon replaced with less than subtle hints about settling down. I stopped sending them my forwarding address.

Rebecca poured my coffee and smiled. I noticed the slight indentation on her ring finger and the small sigh she made as she sat down beside me. She asked me what I did and I felt loathed to answer; I liked my anonymity. I decided to tell her I was a teacher and she told me a dull but touching story of her brother's undiagnosed dyslexia; how at last he had been "seen" by his English teacher through kind words and poetry. She told me about a vacancy in the local school, how since lockdown teachers were finally being recognised for their altruism and dedication. She looked at me and I wondered if I was the person I saw reflected back in her eyes. I agreed with her, that it was truly a thankless but honourable profession. Once she had risen from her seat I turned to the river and watched its easy escape.

A few days later two women walked in and sat down at a nearby table. Rebecca's welcome was both warm and genuine; this was evident by not just the ever-present smile but the way it reached the lines beside her eyes. She hung up their coats and umbrellas and talked to them like old friends, even though one of them repeatedly called her Rachel. Her gaze kept turning towards me and at one point both women turned their neat bobs to look directly at me.

"I hear you're one of us," the taller of the two women threw across the room.

"We both work in the English department, Sally's been there for over twenty-five years."

I smiled and feebly raised my cup to them. Rebecca pulled two extra chairs to their table and looked back at me. I saw the roots clearly then, they sprouted below the table legs, next to their shopper bags holding homework to be marked and academic calendars. They squirmed their way towards me and wrapped themselves around my calves pulling me across the floorboards.

I took one more glance out the window and watched a swallow drop like a stone to the water's surface and rise magnificently against the backdrop of dirty grey sky. It bobbed once, twice along the air currents and then rose high up and out of view.

I rose from my seat, fumbling in my pockets for the exact amount of change to place next to my cup, before smiling and taking my leave.

That was always the point when I woke up and inevitably found myself staring down at a cheap paperback novel bought from another train station kiosk. Some dreams do come true but others you are never sure if you really wanted them in the first place.