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For Esme with Love and Squalor

by Victoria Watson

Esme thought she was in love. He had bought her flowers, spelt out her name in baked beans; he had even stopped wearing that really smelly Motorhead t-shirt when they went to the cinema. She lay awake at night thinking of him, trying to remember his smile, the way three lines formed at the side of each eye when he was concentrating over something. It reminded her of birds' feet.

Although she found it hard to conjure up his face, remembering still made her feel good inside. That was love, she was sure it was.

So, he had occasional bad moments, bursts of anger when the bird feet stepped into heavy sand, but everyone had mood swings, everyone had black days. Esme pushed the memories down, tried not to think about her ignored text messages or phone calls. The many times she had waited for him on freezing dark evenings, hoping to see him running towards her.

She needed to "man up" that's what her best friend Sasha told her. She needed to be more like Sasha and less like her, put away her heart on her sleeve and not give a damn. Sasha was strong and sassy and always drank Newcastle Brown from the bottle. She had a nose ring and more self confidence than her tight black jeans could take. Sasha gave up her A levels to go to Art School. Sasha had a tattoo of an eagle on her shoulder. Sasha was single and still sucked her thumb in her sleep; but only Esme knew the last bit. Only Esme knew that despite Sasha's amazing "fuck you all" eye liner she was terrified of spiders.

Esme wished she could stay a teenager forever; but with a gnawing sadness she realised that one day this would all be gone. She looked around her bedroom walls adorned with posters of Kurt Cobain, at her Snoopy alarm clock and the complete collection of Mr Men books. It all looked like part of her somehow; it made her, her and she wondered who she would be without it.

Why did things with Josh feel so wrong?

It was crazy to think Sasha was jealous. She had called him a “twerp”. Such an ineffectual small word, in Sasha’s eyes he was not even worthy of “creep” or “bastard”. Twerp was for teaching assistants and the man your mum flirted with at bingo.

Esme had not told Sasha she was in love, or even (she scrunched her toes) getting engaged. She could see the scoffing retorts, then the earnest protests that he was just a “twerp”.

Sasha did not believe in marriage. She thought it was just another way for men to deny women of their rights to freedom and autonomy. Sasha said stuff like that all the time. Things that made Esme blink. She hated that Sasha could force her to think of things she usually filed away. What did Sasha know anyway? Her parents split up when she was only a baby. She never saw her dad and her Mum had told her she had met “the one” more often than Sasha painted her nails. Sasha did not understand love.

But she was still her best friend. She did everything with her, but now she found herself spending a more time in the library. She found turning pages calming and they seemed to slow her racing thoughts. She was not sure if it was the slow curve of the page as it rippled beneath her fingers or the satisfying thud as the covers came together again. But she knew she liked the way the pages knew where they were going. She had discovered Rosetti’s poem one afternoon; lines that had spoken to her,

Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.

She felt the words turn a lock inside herself. A tiny cog of thought slid into place so that in that moment, it all made sense.

The William Faulkner line had done the same when Mr Humphreys told them to learn it for the exam.

Memory believes before knowing remembers.

She wondered if everyone else was as struck as her.

When she watched her mother place her father’s dinner in front of him, she saw how they never looked at each other anymore, never even spoke. She saw how one of them would walk into a room, just as another would walk out; like the couple in the Alpine weather house on the mantelpiece that her father had given her mother. The woman always so confident and knowing in her dirndl, the man holding his umbrella with a look of anxiety on his face like all he wanted was to stay at home.

Esme knew that the words clicking into place, or the woman from the weather house were talisman to take note of. She knew it was foolish to ignore them and she knew that forging memories should feel better than this.