

Petrichor

by Francesca Ryan

Through the open window, came the smell of evening rain on the parched pavements. Petrichor. The word floated unbidden through her head. Another part of her brain considered why this word chose to surface. The world was ending. And here was a disconnected shard of stillness in the middle of the wreckage.

She could still hear the sound of the front door closing. On his way to work, leaving a whiff of his own particular boar taint. The minty toothpaste overlying the morning shit. Shit, shower, shave; his morning mantra. Laughing through the open bathroom of their small flat. Have you got your phone. Have you got your key? Her ritual questions as left for work. His own ritual answer; spectacles, testicles, wallet and watch. Crossing himself. The brush of his kiss against her cheek as he frowned at her. Have you been wearing my scarf again? It reeks of Jolie Madame. Your Eau de Tarts Boudoir, he teased. All the same, he'd bought her that large bottle back from Paris. Her favourite perfume. See you later darling, not sure when. Might go on till this evening.

The evening. She sat in a state of suspension. As if by sitting there long enough, the day might reset itself. The moment of the door closing; it would rewind itself somehow. In their small front room, the smell of the gas fire was familiar in her nostrils. She could see by its light the empty plate with biscuit crumbs. The half-drunk cup of cold tea. Mechanically, she had forced herself to get something down after the telephone call. The shock of it. The calm impersonal voice, asking if anyone was there with her. The effort to concentrate on the words the woman was saying. They swam out of reach of understanding. Shock I suppose, she thought automatically. Although that observation came from someone else, surely. She herself was not in her own body. Tea. Sugar. Eat something before you get in the car.

When she had returned from the morgue, she lay down on the bed without taking off her coat, without removing her sturdy brown shoes. It would have annoyed him. The thought floated by in a disconnected way. Light as a feather, drifting down in the backdraft other thoughts. I will just lie here and not move. I can make the hours reset themselves. The woman won't ring. It was all a horrible daydream, a rehearsal of disaster, a kind of charm against it ever happening. You always catastrophise he'd say, when she confessed it. Shake his head and grin. Have a word with yourself.

But the rewind wasn't happening. She was numb. At the same time, she could feel every sensation, taste the dryness of her mouth, smell the faint reek of the cat litter that needed changing. She should do that before he got home.

The pop and hiss of the old gas fire. Must replace that with a newer model. The lights of a passing car came through the open curtains. Get up and close them. She could not make her legs obey her mind. She was someone else. Not present in her body. Motionless in the strange silence after the bomb had gone off, the bomb that had exploded in the centre of her being. He was gone. He was dead. Get up and ring your brother. She pushed herself into a sitting position and convulsed, a spasm of something terrible shaking her. Who is making that awful howling? She slid to the floor. The telephone rang. The knocking at the door was getting louder.

Later, much later, she recalled how her brother had scooped her up into his arms, held her as she sobbed. The memory of that evening still rose in her chest sometimes, even after all these years. Could still paralyse her to a standstill. Ambushed by grief, whenever she smelt rain on dry pavements.