SHORT STORY

I have no beginning, no middle, no end

by Karla Hirsch



"Autumn Nights" by Cecilia Martinez

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The funeral is a small affair: a priest and two workers who stand by the open grave like bored statues, facing yet another rerun of a ritual blunted by time. The priest has been assigned by the cemetery administration. He gives countless eulogies a day and, to keep up, has scribbled the names of the bereaved onto a crumpled piece of paper that he keeps in his pocket. He pulls it out discreetly and checks the next one when a raindrop lands on his hand and his indifference turns into annoyance.

Iris doesn't see any of this. She stands at the grave and stares at her husband's coffin, her hands kneading the woollen gloves she has taken off to sign the documents in the administration office, where it was even harder than usual to concentrate on the letters on the page. They performed their well-known routine: an aggressive dance to a wild beat only they could hear. She signed hastily, eager to escape the impatience in the room.

Her gloves are soaking up the rain now and become heavy and cold. Every time she squeezes them, a trickle leaves and lands on the tip of her right shoe with a thud. She focuses on the sounds. A squeak, then a plop, then a squeak. Then the drizzle turns into rain and washes the noises away.

"Ma'am?" the priest says. He has stopped talking and all three men are looking at her expectantly, waiting to be released. She swallows and wants to say something, but her voice is gone. Instead, she nods. The coffin descends, and when she still doesn't move, the two men start to shove the earth onto it until Arthur has disappeared under a blanket of complacent mud. Her chest hurts. She lifts her right hand and puts it there.

"My heart hurts," she says and in her ears her voice sounds wrong, as if coming from far away.

The priest glances at her, a look of panic on his face. The last thing he needs now is for this elderly woman to have a heart attack in the middle of his cemetery. He decides not to take her words literally.

"Time will heal your wounds," he mumbles as he walks over to give her a clumsy pat on the shoulder. She looks a little unkempt and gives off a sour smell that even the rain can't mask. Her pale blue eyes staring straight ahead make him wonder if she's a little wrong in the head. He hugs the bible to his body and signals to set off.

"Right," he says and clears his throat.

She continues to stare at the mute patch of brown earth in front of her, one hand still on her chest, the other clutching the two dripping gloves, so wet that their blue has turned to black.

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The cemetery workers have left. The priest shuffles uncomfortably and clears his throat again. When she doesn't react, he mutters routine condolences and walks away. In an hour, he has to perform another funeral. He thinks about lunch and the warmth of the pub, and when he leaves, he has already forgotten the lonely woman and her confused stare.

Iris might agree with the priest, if she knew his thoughts. Without the person who filled her life for forty years, she feels like a balloon, bouncing off the world around it. She stands at the bus stop for a long time without getting on one. Eventually, her body turns and starts the walk home.

She enters her flat and stops in the corridor. Arthur's shoes are on the floor and his coat on the hanger behind the door. He could come out of the living room any moment now, telling her that he's going for a walk.

Would you like me to bring back some cake? she imagines him asking. His words linger in the air like a warm cloak.

Arthur, like Iris, never needed many people. He had his books and his academic work, and they had each other. They got married and moved into a small flat, settling into a peaceful routine that required only the two of them. Now, the place is soaked in their life together: Words and thoughts have seeped into the framed photographs on the walls, the small army of her cacti — an orderly row of prickly soldiers on the windowsill. They're in every note that Arthur has written, bits of paper, which he would leave lying around on the carpet like leaves fallen off a tree.

Iris undresses and goes to bed. Sleep is the only thing that doesn't make her feel lost, but it's an uneasy rest. Her body seems confused, now that the weight next to it is missing.

She wakes up when it's dark. A new silence fills the flat, foreign to her, stark and absolute. I'm alone, she thinks. Can I trick my mind? Can I make myself believe that Arthur has gone out and will be back? Any moment now. Her chest hurts again, a lump pushing against the insides of her body. She places her hand there and pushes back, but it refuses to be squashed. A car goes by; its lights wash over the walls silently, leaving behind more darkness. No living thing within these walls, she thinks.

Underneath her, in the neighbour's flat, a radio begins to play. A young woman has moved in recently. They only met once, weeks ago. The woman, presumably a student, greeted her

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and smiled warmly before she proceeded down the stairs with ingrained purpose. Now, Iris is grateful for the tune seeping through the walls, reminding her of another life close to hers. She thinks about getting up and eating, but the idea of lifting the blanket, sitting up and climbing out of bed feels too exhausting. She goes through the motions in her head, again and again and again. Unable to make her body perform them, she lets the music lull her back to sleep.

*

Time trickles past her unobtrusively. Iris is barely able to leave her bed. She sleeps or lies awake — her body pulled into the mattress like a magnet. Eating becomes a necessary chore, performed mechanically, when her hunger grows painful. Once, when she goes to the bathroom, she notices a pungent stench from her body and washes half-heartedly. Afterwards, she's so exhausted that she sleeps for eleven hours.

In her dreams, Arthur comes to her. His face hovers in the air, sometimes only parts of it — his smile, his eyes — a ubiquitous, bodiless presence, bringing back memories of a happiness from another life. *Iris, Iris,* he would say softly when she shared a thought that amused him. When she had to work up her courage to talk to a stranger: *Iris, Iris,* he would mutter, his eyes smiling, before he ordered the coffee for her.

When she had handed her life over to him, he had taken it willingly, holding it with caution — the fragile creature it was, with all its unfinished thoughts and anxious bones sticking out. He tied her to reality and now, alone in her flat, she feels abstract, an undefined concept with no legs to connect her to the ground. She squeezes her eyes shut to make her dreams come back and Arthur with them.

One night, she is woken up by strange noises. A loud wailing fills her bedroom, and choking sounds, so alien that she can't place them at first. The pain in her chest has broken free, and she covers her mouth with her hands, trying to silence herself, but the sounds spill out of her, carrying snot and saliva with them, and torrents of tears. They refuse to stop. At last, she falls asleep.

The sounds come again in the afternoon and at night. They make her entire body ache, a burning pain that shoots up and down, exploding in noise. Afterwards, the pressure in her chest is gone but only for a while.

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Eventually, she runs out of food. The milk in the fridge has gone sour and soft mountains of mould are growing on an open yoghurt. Shopping, like all activities that require leaving the house, had been Arthur's domain. Every morning, he would go to the supermarket, sticking religiously to the short list of things that Iris had told him to buy. He would circle back past a few shops and a park, home to his wife to relate matters of interest to her. On weekends they went to the park together and watched other people's lives happening around them, before they had cake at a small café nearby. Iris never minded those days at the park, but she preferred the weekdays, when she got to see the world through Arthur's eyes.

In the corridor, she stuffs her hair under a woollen hat and puts on her coat. Only when she has already left the house does it occur to her that she hasn't washed. Her body feels like a shell now, dried up and stiff, her skin as if peeling off her bones and veins. People pass her by in the street. She feels their eyes that linger on her, then slip off quickly. Some are pointedly friendly.

In the supermarket, she imagines other people's eyes on her skin like probing ants and keeps looking at the busy linoleum floor. She rushes through the aisles, blindly picking items from the shelves, aching to get back to familiar grounds, however haunted they may be.

The cashier smiles at her with militant purpose.

"Hi, how are you today?" her teeth say.

She's laughing at me, Iris thinks.

Give her some credit, Arthur's voice says in her head, but it's only a soft hum, buried under her beating heart. Move your hands faster, she thinks, then worries about dropping something. While she packs her bag frantically, she stares at the mute rubber belt in front of her. Everyone must have stopped moving, she's sure of it. She imagines even the child in its pram watching, wondering at this odd creature she feels she is.

Back at the house, she climbs the stairs to her flat slowly, the bag with the groceries clutched to her exhausted body. Before the last flight of stairs, there's a window with a small marble sill. And on it is a book. Iris stops before she moves closer to look at it. A piece of paper is stuck to the pink cover. She focuses on the letters. *Read me*, it says, and these words, which she immediately feels sure are meant for her, make her heart flutter. Iris looks around her, but there's no one else in the hallway and, before she knows it, her hand has decided for her

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and grabbed the book.

In the flat, silence greets her. Iris closes the door and is swallowed by a sudden panic. What if someone has broken in while I was out? I'm alone now.

She drops the groceries and the book and checks each room. Her cacti watch tactfully from their spot by the window as she drops to her knees next to the bed and slowly bends down. No monsters. Arthur would have smiled at this. *Iris, Iris.*

Restocked and scrutinised for intruders, the flat feels safe again. She finds the book by the door and sits down on the couch. After a few minutes, she has deciphered the title, but when she turns it around, the words swim away like angry fish. As a child, when her teachers had told her parents that she had problems reading, lagging behind her classmates who sped through the books they were given, her mother had taken her to several doctors, but none had offered any valuable help. Eventually, it was easier to settle on the fact that Iris was simply not clever.

Arthur solved her problem by reading books to her and he filled the space around her with stories that opened new worlds. They grew in her mind and squashed her own thoughts, panicky little creatures that had filled her as long as she could remember, running around like headless chicken, set off by the smallest disturbance. When Arthur read, they stopped, lulled into a million other voices. Now that he was gone, he had taken the stories with him.

Still in her coat, she bends over the paperback and fights her way through the blurb, arranging each word, letter by letter, her mouth moving with them, repeating them to her brain. When she's finished, it's dark.

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The next morning, she stands in front of Arthur's books until she finds the right one. She takes it out and puts the new book in its place. She won't read it, unable to extract a coherent story from the too many letters inside, but it seems to feel at home on the shelf and she enjoys the presence of this new companion. She takes the novel that she has picked out and opens her front door. The hallway is empty. She pauses and listens for a while, then sneaks down the stairs and puts the book on the windowsill.

It's night-time when she wakes up. The darkness that surrounds her is hollow and rigid, hovering in the room with nothing to say. She gets up and goes to the bathroom to fill the

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tub, watching the water drown out the silence. When she tries to wash her hair, she finds it stiff with dirt and oil. It refuses to take the shampoo, like dry soil when it finally rains. Eventually, after the fifth attempt, she can run her fingers through. When she's done, the tears come back and they bring with them the now familiar sounds. She sits in the cold water, her body pushing out the howls, and they bounce off the tiles in the bathroom, building a cave of lament around her.

Later, on her way back to bed, she passes the front door and can't resist. She opens it and walks to the top of the stairs. The hallway is dark. Only the streetlight in front of the house draws a square of brightness on the windowsill. The book is gone.

In bed, Iris can't sleep.

Who took it? Will there be another one?

She considers making a list of the novels she can trade but then stops herself, caught by a vague sense of superstition.

Am I pre-empting something instead of giving it the time it needs? What if I ruin everything by just thinking about it?

She forces herself to think about other things and it occurs to her that this is the first time since Arthur's death that she has thoughts at all. Then decisions. Each morning, she decides that night, she will pick one thing to do for the day.

Tomorrow, she thinks, I will take out the rubbish.

*

She sticks to her plan. Every morning, she decides on a chore, then proceeds with it. Make bed. Dust shelves. Cook food and put it in the freezer.

No new books arrive.

Arthur appears in her head: *Maybe you're jinxing it.*

She forces herself not to look for an entire day, afraid that this fragile contact with the outside world might break off as quickly as it has begun and leave her floating by herself once more.

A week after she found the book, she goes grocery shopping again and descends the stairs, looking down at her feet.

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One, two, three.

She passes the window without a look, shields herself with her umbrella. Winter has come almost overnight, with sleet and wind and grey light.

Iris lingers in the shop and looks at everything on the shelves to drag out time. The longer I stay out, she thinks, the more time there'll be for a book to appear. When she passes the cereal shelf a third time, a shop assistant comes up to her.

"Can I help you?" she asks with a loud grin. Iris flinches.

"No, no," she says. "Thank you."

She shuffles away to the till, flustered. Arthur would have shaken his head amused. She hears his laugh and it accompanies her down the street.

When she returns to the house, she shakes out the umbrella carefully and goes up the stairs. There's a book. No note. Her heart leaps towards it. She takes it and, like last time, spends the entire evening fighting through the blurb. Afterwards, she picks a collection of short stories from Arthur's shelves. She swaps it for the new book, sneaks out and puts Arthur's volume on the windowsill.

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Spring arrives and with it longer, softer days, foreshadowing summer. The pain in her chest comes less often now — only at night when her aching body wakes her. On the windowsill in the hallway, the books keep appearing like sudden dandelions out of tarmac cracks. She takes them and puts them on her shelf, and Arthur's books leave the flat one by one, off on an unknown journey.

One day, when Iris returns from the supermarket, her neighbour comes down the stairs towards her. When she sees Iris, she greets her with a friendly smile and Iris nods silently. Upstairs, she finds a new book.

Yes, Iris thinks, it must be her.

Back in the flat, she sits down in her armchair. She opens the book and the letters escape. She looks up. Opposite her, Arthur's chair stands incomplete and mute. Nothing has been moved since his death. His reading glasses, thrown on the seat carelessly, wait for his return, their blind eyes gleaming expectantly. She puts her book on the table and gets up to find one to give back but on the shelf are only the new ones now, their straight backs in a happy row. Her eyes sweep over the spines patiently at first, then with a terrified urge. No novels. All

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she has now is Arthur's collection of dry academic books and they're not worthy of the colours she carries into her flat every other day. Frustration gathers in her throat. She sits down in her armchair again and looks at its counterpart, but the speechless glasses only throw her dismay back at her.

That night, Iris lies awake, thinking of the empty windowsill and her colourful shelves and then of her neighbour downstairs.

Is she lying in bed like me? Enclosed in her own cave. We are stacked on each other, like combs in a beehive.

She sees another loss ahead, and she tosses and turns in bed, trying to shake this new kind of grief that hasn't even begun yet. When the morning light enters the room, she gets up, takes a bath, gets dressed carefully, and sits back down in her armchair, the latest book in her lap. Arthur's chair insists on silence.

Eventually, she gets up and leaves the flat. The hall is empty and cool. The echo of her nervous steps follows her down the stairs like a small dog. The book, clutched to her heart, feels it beating and throws the sound back at her. *I'm here*, it says. At her neighbour's door, the spyhole stares at her, expectantly at first, then bored. Behind it, she hears the noises of a life: dishes clattering, bare feet on the wooden floor, a talkative cat. She raises her hand to the bell.

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