SHORT STORY

The Ones Left Behind

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"Pompeii Archaeological Park" by Joykrit Mitra

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I watched it as it gasped for air, flopping around in the very last seconds of its life. As a kid, I desperately wanted a pet. I'd wanted a dog or a cat, my mum settled for a fish. "Low maintenance," she said. I didn't know what she meant, but I accepted it. The issue was, I wanted it next to me, and since I couldn't fit in its small bowl, I decided for it. I removed the small creature from its home and placed it on the patch of grass in front of me. We'd share a life together, I thought. But life, it turned out, was brief.

It had been two years since I had last gone to visit her. Two years is too long without seeing the one I first met on this Earth. But at first I couldn't and then I just wouldn't; there was too much in the way. I calculated the cost and the length of my stay. I translated into numbers the emotional journey that was about to take place. Because being back home felt like inhabiting the past I had run away from.

"I miss you," she said. She'd been saying so for more than ten years now, and I could see her eyes well up across the screen that had become our main medium of communication for over a decade. "Just four months to go now," I replied, and she noted that there was so much to organise. "I have to clean the house," she said, looking around, staring at the life that existed outside the square in front of me, the life I had missed.

She had always been like that; preparing for things that were months away and not arranging enough for events that were taking place the next day. She avoided calls, trips to the doctor, the everyday mundane took up too much space.

It had gotten worse since I moved away; there wasn't anyone to push her to step out and smell the roses, and why would she? She had perfectly nice flowers where she lived.

I'd be coming home to visit her next year; I always knew far in advance when those trips would take place, because you must plan well to travel for twelve hours on a plane. I would arrive early in the morning, always choosing an overnight flight. She would ask if I wanted her to come and pick me up and I'd refuse the offer. I had gotten used to arriving in places by myself.

I could barely get to her house without looking at my map. I didn't grow up in the area, it was her childhood neighbourhood; it felt like entering someone else's past.

She would have followed my flight overnight, she'd done so every time, barely able to close her eyes. She'd be waiting outside before I arrived, and the house would smell of a time before mine.

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She took me outside, where she had set the table for breakfast. It was warm — it was always warm, sun shining on my head. I can't remember the last time I had been in São Paulo with a jacket on, climate change was reflected in my wardrobe. Most of my clothes were still kept in boxes; choices a previous version of myself had made — one that liked tie-dye. I'd wear them as a costume for the length of my stay, method acting in a way, an impostor wearing flowery sundresses and sandals. Most times I'd borrow her clothes too, timeless blouses that had been her favourite before she opted for her black and grey colour palette. Her shoes had similar styles and similar shades, as if colour would disrupt her routine in some way. Bright colours belonged in her garden, not her socks.

The garden was her private jungle, pots and plants sheltered her from the world outside, a world she had no control over; no amount of water could predict in which direction it would grow. Her worries cascaded from her watering can into her plants. She could prune this space, make it neat, and wait for the sunlight to do its thing. She showed me around, introducing me to her new acquisitions, she pointed at the marmalade bush in the corner, she said it reminded her of me.

She poured strong black coffee in my cup, she always complained I didn't make it strong enough. She got the *pão de queijo* from the oven, she would make ten and I'd eat two — even though I'd be craving those cheesy balls for months. "You eat like a bird," she liked to joke.

She offered my favourite fruit, ripe mangoes, and guava. "I like the whites best, but I know you prefer the red ones," she said, as I bit into it. I'd swallow the seeds; I'd swallow a lot of things. She prioritised me during my stay, she'd get the things that would please me, she'd put me first, she had always put other people ahead of her. She bought enough food to feed a family. We were a family, just the two of us.

"You are leaving so soon," she said on day one. She mourned events before they ended, it was easier pre-empting loneliness. I pictured the rotten fruit sticking to the bowl in two-week's time, the sweet juice attracting the flies. The death of time.

I looked at the porcelain, always the same plates and cutlery; the nice ones were kept on the higher shelves, for special occasions that never seemed to take place. I wondered what kind of event would move them down, what would justify reaching up that high and dusting off the past from those thirty-year-old pans? She'd gotten them as a wedding gift and they sat there gathering dust, just like my dad.

Dad's ashes had been kept in a box for the past twenty years, she had never found the time to locate his final resting place. "You might as well do us both in one go." She would joke,

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wanting her ashes to be scattered with my dad. Maybe that had always been the plan.

Scattering his ashes was admin. It was like going to the bank, calling the phone company, going to the doctors. My mum had grown allergic to such tasks, she'd break out in hives by the sheer thought of stepping outside the bricks of that house. She didn't need to see anyone, she claimed, she had enough books — and she could always buy new ones.

The last time I visited she talked about the cat that came to visit her, which she fed. I never saw him for the length of my stay, I wondered if I'd see him this time. "He's shy, he doesn't like me going too close either, but I notice him watching me." The feline was the only one witnessing her daily life. Who was witnessing mine?

I snuggled under her arm in the mornings, the warmth from her bed clinging on to me, like I used to do as a kid. Nowadays, I knew she needed that more than me, those moments that justified everything.

As a baby, I used to sleep next to her, holding her ear in my tiny fingers, as if asking her not to leave. She got used to that touch, reassuring her that I was there. I wondered if she could still feel it somehow, a phantom touch that would visit her in the night, convincing her that I was alright.

I ran every day in the park near hers, as she walked behind me. I'd circle her like a satellite running past her time after time. After I left, I knew she'd see me run past; old versions of me, from a parallel time. It was also a future she'd look forward to, I'd come back to run past her once again, the sun would always rise and, one day, I'd arrive.

She pointed at a spot, up the hill. "There, that's where I want to be scattered. Me and your dad." I didn't know what he would have wanted, I never asked. I had been too young for the emotional admin that comes with death. "How did he like his eggs?" I asked her, as we looked at their final resting place. I wanted to know the simple things, the small things I didn't know about him and never got the chance to ask.

I woke up one night, with the cat outside, he made noises and wouldn't let me sleep, but I didn't want to open the gate that late. Was he calling for her? Was he hungry? What did he want? The next day she said she couldn't hear a thing. I tend to have quite vivid dreams.

We walked around her neighbourhood, and she told me stories I had heard multiple times before. I told her that she needed to create new memories. "I don't need more things to look back on," she replied. I ate my mangoes and kept quiet, feeling guilty about leaving her without a return flight.

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“Is there anyone in your life?” There wasn’t, there never was, not of the sort that she expected anyway. I stopped sharing details of my romantic life, because it felt like teaching her a new language and she already spoke so many. She had her vocabulary and was happy with it, who was I to teach her new tricks?

“I worry about you being alone,” she said while we watched *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and I thought about the cat, the one who sat on Audrey Hepburn’s lap, and the one my mum fed. They were the same, in a way. Hepburn being the personification of the feline who has no home, no owner, independent of everything and everyone. Who was the cat, me or my mum?

One night she walked out of her room all dressed up. “I put a bottle of Prosecco in the fridge, we can make Aperol Spritz.” She had discovered the cocktail on our last trip to Portugal, we went there to find our roots and ended up with a lot of booze. At least we got something from it — besides fighting our expanding ennui.

We had spent most of our days walking up and down, my mum reminiscing about her honeymoon with my dad and me seeing his face in every man with a hat. We’d try to make sense of a Portuguese accent we no longer understood, feeling like we didn’t belong in the place we supposedly came from.

I asked her if she thought he’d like to be scattered there. “Don’t be silly,” she said, “there was a reason for him to leave.” And that was the end of it. “Home was with us.” And I looked at the water that brought him to Brazil on a boat, so many years ago.

I got home late one night, during my stay and the cat was waiting for me. “Hey there, were you waiting for me?” and I meowed at it, drunkenly. It got closer and closer to me. “Don’t leave her like I did.” Unexpected tears streamed down my cheeks, I felt like I might drown in them.

“You could take some of him perhaps, in a little bag?” Surely the Aperol had gone to her head. “I can put him in a little jewellery box,” she said, as she stood up, heading for her room. She came back with at least a dozen boxes, red and black ones. “Just a spoonful,” she looked at me, tentatively.

We always waited till the very last minute to say goodbye at the gates. She would wait until I messaged saying that I was safe on the plane, and then she’d leave for her house, her home, her place, and I’d leave for mine. Her bowl of water, my patch of grass.

I put down my suitcase and started taking everything out, dumping my clothes in the washing machine, like my guilt would be washed away with it. In the very bottom I found a small jewellery box. I had not travelled alone this time.

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“How’s the cat?” I asked.

“He died; did I not tell you?” She said flatly. “That’s just life, my dear, we get used to it.”

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