

Days of Melancholy

Sarah watches a fruit fly drift silently past her head and reaches for it, knowing she will never catch it. It moves around her hand, opening and closing on the air, dipping softly and disappearing into the saucepan she's been eating out of. Sarah should rinse the pot but she just moves her gaze away.

Above, a pale painting of a lady with a crooked neck watches the apricots leaning against each other in the fruit bowl. They sit together in silence. Sarah's eyes are grainy and sore. Every morning they burn and itch, and she can't escape them. She can't stop herself so she just sits and rubs at them. She imagines what she must look like – a blister-eyed creature in a dressing gown, with greasy hair and feet hard and cold against the kitchen floor. She's sure her skin itself is going grey.

James had given her a kiss on his way out the door, not asking why she was sitting in the kitchen on his office chair that belonged in the spare room. A perfunctory morning kiss that said, 'Hello, I'm glad you're here but I have to go to work; are you going to do something today?' He had stroked her hair absently, noting the greasy feel (she imagined), and closed the door softly behind him, as if Sarah was still asleep.

After dragging the chair in to the kitchen, she thought about doing the dishes but staring at them was enough. She realised the pots would clatter, or a fork would slip onto the floor. Perhaps she could try again when the sun climbs further and they don't gleam so dully at her.

By now James will be in the city at his computer, planning with pipes and paths on a screen. Mapping a future for somebody in concrete and steel. It's absurdly innocent to Sarah. In five years, this will all be here. Faith. Sarah imagines him on the bus every morning, briefcase settled on his lap or perhaps held tightly against his chest if it's crowded, his stubble scraping across the canvas every time he moves. She wonders if he talks to people, if he has people he nods to that take the same bus every day. Sarah doesn't have anywhere to be so she takes different buses and recognises no-one.

She's still staring at the sink. The neighbour walks past and looks curiously in the window, so she ducks her head and picks up a dish cloth. When he's gone, she puts it down again. She keeps her muscles rigid so as not to let the cold into the relaxed spaces.

She wants to do something today. She needs to go to the bank, needs to vacuum and bake something and make the house warm and inviting. She wants to communicate with someone, to reassert her personality in the world before it fades away forever. She could visit friends but doesn't want to. The phone looks cold and uninviting. A letter, then. She feels ready to write a letter, but what would she write? And to whom?

She wants to write to her sister. They had kept in touch vaguely but Sarah hasn't known her sister in years; doesn't know what makes her laugh, what interests her. They used to repeat lines from funny movies they watched together. How sad to write the same old jokes, as if she hasn't progressed. Maybe it's time for a chatty letter, one that's friendly but dry and not too involved.

She could tell her sister what she'd been up to... 'Dear Chrissie, this morning I sat in my kitchen and looked at the dishes and thought about what my husband saw in me. I decided not to go to the bank but I did eventually have a shower and put on some undemanding clothes. How about you? Has everything stopped? Do you feel as if your skin has turned grey?'

She puts the paper down, unmarked. She decides to shower first so her letter will not be a lie before she even writes it, a catalyst for other exaggerations.

There's a dead moth in the bottom of the shower. She hates the feel of their fat, soggy bodies, but hates more the feeling of responsibility she wishes had never occurred to her. She knows they don't know anything about her; they wouldn't notice the difference between living and dying but she considers the little sacrifices of her own that will add up one day. When she and James shower together it's different. She lets him direct the water at the bugs, flushing them down the drain. It never occurs to him to feel responsible and she doesn't feel the same guilt when he's there. This one is already dead anyway. Sarah turns on the water and bows her head, watching the little body tear apart.

Not long after they had married, they had sat inside the house with the lights on, watching the moths crawl along the glass from the outside. She thinks of the moths now – as James had pointed out to her back then – fluttering and bumping into each other. Not mating,

feeding or even fighting; they were concentrating so hard on the light that they had become irrelevant to one another, unrecognisable as members of the same species. She remembers his kiss bumping against her forehead on his way out the door and holds her arms tight to her chest, so the water pools up against her.

She tells him about the moths after going to the bank and looking in a bookstore; after they both catch the bus home from the city in silence. He kisses her again, on the mouth, and says her imagination works interestingly sometimes. She cycles through feeling hurt to

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feeling loved and then, as always, melancholic. ‘Don’t you see who I am? Who the moths are?’ she wonders. And then directly on the tail of that thought: he knows and he’s trying to gloss it over. And after that: he knows and he doesn’t mind, and he wants me not to mind. So, she tries not to mind.

The dishes are still heaped on top of one another when they get home so he pours a glass of wine and fills the sink. He makes it hot and bubbly, as if he’s run her a bath. She starts scrubbing and the dried food slips away. He lets her keep her hands in the water while he dries. She doesn’t like to dry because it’s like putting filth back onto everything. After another glass of wine, she says she’s sorry for being so much work and he says she thinks too much of herself. Sarah smiles and, absurdly, wells up with tears. She pushes his arm so that it skids along the pot he’s been holding; it meant that he wouldn’t notice. They’d eaten on the way home so once the dishes are washed, they have another glass of wine, standing steadily on the brown linoleum and looking at each other. James asks what she had done today and she says, ‘Not much’. She shrugs and smiles; it’s an effort to let him know she won’t be like this always.

“Shall we go into the city and look at the divers?” It’s a favourite joke. It brings back a memory; they don’t need to go because going wouldn’t compare, but the suggestion shows the memory is there and it belongs to them. They had gone to a strip club, drawn in by a pink light. Inside, it was so smoky, everything looked soft and perfect. Sound seemed to be absorbed; loud drunk voices coming in were soon lulled into murmuring, watching the stage in a rolling cabin of liquor and shell-pink.

They had been drinking wine, like tonight, finishing a bottle at the bus stop from the neck like teenagers. The bus was so late but when it came, they thanked the driver anyway, got on, smiling at everybody and rolling slightly when the engine started. Sarah had been quiet on the bus but James knew she liked to feel each movement, watching the condensation and warming her back on the brightly coloured seats. He hadn’t believed her at first when she said she loved buses – even when it was a soggy trip into the city – but to see her then, smiling slightly at

each stop, he would believe anything.

They were going out to meet friends and dance but they were so late, their friends had gone home. So, the couple allowed themselves to be caught by the bright light that had pulsed out of the club door. After ordering drinks, they saw the divers. When you dropped money into a pool, a dancer would swim to get it. When they had first heard of it, they had thought it would be beautiful, picturing soft pink mermaids in a pool, turning like elegant fish. But here was one now, hair straggling across big yellow goggles, bubbles streaming from her nose. The tank was tall so she had to kick to keep upright, splaying her legs awkwardly, bunting the glass and bobbing around. They looked at her as if she was in an aquarium. She blinked out at them and the image provided a backdrop of hilarity – a sign that things could not be so serious. After running out of money, they wandered home, with Sarah clutching James’ sleeves to stop spinning in the headlights of waiting taxis.

It’s different these days. Tonight, they don’t go out but think about that memory. They have another glass of wine and watch TV. The bottle sits swaddled in a blanket between them. The curtains are closed against the moths outside. They grow social and invite friends but it is too late. Everyone has set their alarms and planned for sleep.

Sarah becomes tired and goes to bed. James stays up with a bottle of merlot and his computer. Eventually, he crawls in next to her in the morning. They rest against each other like tired travellers, forehead to forehead until Sarah wakes and feels condensation from his breath on her lips. She cannot think how to thank him for marrying her so she gets up, puts on a load of washing and puts the empty bottles in the recycling bin. Today, she will write her sister. She will write about their trip to the city, pretending it was last night instead of years ago. She will also ask how her sister has been doing.

Sarah finds a blank page, discards her pen after the indent does not fill with ink, picks another from the drawer and writes. Her fingers are cold, with words stumbling over themselves.

Eggs

Bread

Tomato sauce

Avocado

Apricots x4

She crosses out the ‘x4’ and replaces it with ‘x2’. Last time they had gone soft. 



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Originally from Taupo, Tiffany now lives on a farm in Kuratau (a small village north of Omori, on the western side of Lake Taupo) with her partner and her brown dog, Otto. She loves gardening, reading and watching the sheep being mustered from her window. She enjoys writing short stories and hopes to be published one day. Working as a high school teacher, Tiffany is grateful to every teacher she has ever had.

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