



One

January

KATE IS HOLDING A white square with both hands. A piece of paper. She will remember this later, in the hospital. She will try to remember if she could see anything through the folded paper – handwriting, perhaps, or printed words, or a restaurant bill. But these details will not come back. The square will remain a perfect blank, a square cut from the fabric of her memory.

Details that will return:

- 1) His breath.
- 2) His aftershave, petrol-smelling.
- 3) His body, which despite her six-foot-one frame seems to tower over her.

There is a long moment where neither of them moves, and the only sound she is aware of is her own heartbeat, whooshing in her ears.

Joe Heap

‘Give it to me.’

‘Why? Why are you so angry?’

‘Give it to me.’ This is all he will say, over and over, as though he’s broken.

‘Tony, you’re scaring me.’ She says it with a laugh, because it is silly that she should be scared by him.

‘Give it to me.’ He advances another step. Kate forces herself not to step back, to stand her ground.

They have fought before, are even proud of their fighting. Marriages are supposed to be passionate. Her husband has a temper, but better than someone who doesn’t give a damn, right? Their fights are loud. Sometimes she cries. Sometimes they throw things. But this is different – it is the silence, the way he won’t say anything, the way the air in the room seems to be running out.

‘Give it to me.’

‘No. What is it?’ That is all she wanted to know, from the moment she saw the white square. One moment they were chatting in the kitchen. Kate had already been out of bed for an hour, chopping carrots and celery for a stew and listening to the morning radio. Most of the news was about New Year’s celebrations the night before. They had stayed up long enough to see the fireworks.

Tony had come in, showered and dressed for work, and they had talked. Everything normal, normal, normal, until the moment he reached into his wallet to take out a note to pay for the groceries.

Tony’s wallet is black leather, with PROPERTY OF THE METROPOLITAN POLICE in faded silver letters. There is a badge with ‘police’ written in Braille. The square of white

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paper had fallen out of the wallet's inner compartment, onto the kitchen tiles.

In the hospital, she will remember the white square like a hole in the floor. Like a hole that might open up, a hole she might fall through, into endless white sky. But she does not feel this yet.

She bent down to pick it up. She was going to hand it to him, but then she noticed the tension in his body, and before she could say anything—

‘Give it to me.’

‘Why? What have you got to hide?’ She smiled, holding the folded piece of paper to her chest playfully. But he wasn’t smiling.

‘Give it to me.’

‘What is it?’ Still playful – still expecting this to be a game, wondering if this is a surprise for her. A printout for airline tickets maybe, or the receipt for a present. Maybe he has bought something to go in the new flat that she has been renovating for them both. Mundane objects, mundane desires. Remembering them later, she will feel disgusted with herself.

The air in the room is choked with his aftershave; she can’t breathe. She used to like the aftershave, but now it’s as though she’s locked in a garage with the car running

and running

and running.

Both her thumbs are on the piece of paper, her arms tucked close to her body. She will not let him have it. Kate needs to know what’s written on the paper. She will stand her ground.

When he lunges forward, trying to grab the paper out of her hands, she steps back as a reflex. She has forgotten the

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crate of wine bottles that she placed on the floor by the sink. Kate stumbles back, already falling, the white square clutched over her heart.

She lands, the back of her head slamming into the floor. There is a moment of bright pain, like a lightbulb blowing, then darkness.



‘This place is great – they have a sandwich named after me!’

It is late morning, and the Soho lunch crowd is starting to form. Nova is swinging her brother’s hand back and forth like a pendulum. The air smells richly of coffee and toasting bread.

‘You’re joking, right?’ Alex looks at her.

‘Nope. Check the board.’

He looks up. On the order board, below *Chicken Club* and above *Hawaiian Special*, is *The Safinova Surprise*.

Alex laughs, shaking his head. ‘What did you do to deserve a sandwich named after you?’

She breaks her hand away, mock-offended.

‘Excuse you, but what haven’t I done? I think I’m very deserving of sandwich fame.’

Alex raises an eyebrow, though she can’t see this. ‘Seriously, what did you do?’

‘Check out the ingredients.’

Alex gazes up at the board.

“*The Safinova Surprise* – pepperoni, pickles and peach slices.” His brow furrows. ‘Did you . . . invent that sandwich?’

‘I had a hunch that foods starting with the same letter naturally belonged together – that you sighted people used

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words of the same letter because they were similar. So, I came in here and ordered one. Hallelujah – a sandwich was born.’

‘But, peach slices?’

‘Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.’

‘I don’t think that’s going to happen.’

‘It’s not for the faint of heart. Maybe one day you’ll be ready.’

‘Do many people buy your sandwich?’

‘Just her.’ They’ve gotten close enough to the counter for their conversation to be overheard and Mike Zephirelli – broad and black-bearded like a cartoon pirate – calls over to them.

‘Mike! Looking good!’ She waves her folded white stick at him and he explodes with laughter. This joke, in all its variations – *Looking good. Good to see you. Have you been working out?* – never grows old. Alex rolls his eyes, another thing his sister can’t see.

‘How you doing, Nova? You want the usual?’

‘Yes, please.’ She turns to Alex, grinning. ‘Extra peach slices, please.’

‘And for you, sir?’

‘Oh, um . . . an egg and cress roll.’

Zephirelli chuckles. ‘She’s never convinced any of her girlfriends to get the sandwich, either.’ With that, he swings away to start making their food.

‘You bring dates here?’

‘Sure. Wouldn’t you want to sleep with someone who had a sandwich named after them? Come on – find a table; my feet are killing me.’

Alex finds a table and Mike brings the coffee.

‘So, what did you want to talk about?’ Nova asks. ‘Not that

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I mind – it's good to eat somewhere other than the Scotland Yard canteen.'

'Tell me about it – hospital food is as bad as its reputation.'

Nova smiles but says nothing – she is waiting.

'So, I wanted to tell you about something. Something I read in a journal . . . an operation.'

She frowns, still smiling. 'What kind of operation, doctor? Are you trying to get me lobotomized?'

He ignores the joke. 'An operation that could cure you. I mean . . . restore your sight.'

He knows that 'restore' is the wrong word – you can't restore something that was never there. This is the moment that their sandwiches arrive, and Nova stays silent. When she speaks again, her voice is quiet.

'What are you talking about?'

'Eighty percent, maybe more.'

'Chance of seeing something?'

'Chance of seeing *everything*.'

Her brother's voice, so familiar to Nova, is made exotic by excitement.

'That's . . . a bold claim.'

'Yes' – she can hear him smiling – 'but true.'

She sits back, kicking her Doc Martens under her chair. The quick echoes of their words tell her that they are in a corner booth. He is trying to judge her reaction. When she speaks, she feels like an actor, her responses pre-prepared.

'Most people think of blindness as darkness.'

'I know. But you can see black and white, and red in good light . . .'

'No, that's not what I mean.' Her hands form shapes in

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front of her, which Alex guesses are supposed to convey hesitation, or thought. ‘People think of blindness as binary, as an on-or-off switch. Either you can see or you’re blind, right?’

‘I . . . guess so.’

‘But it’s a spectrum. Even if you can see, you can only see a tiny portion of all the light that’s really there. Did you know that? I’ve always found that comforting, in a stupid way. It’s cool.’

Alex says nothing. He’s looking at his sister, in her biker jacket and *I Want to Believe* T-shirt, wondering how she can still infuriate him this much, after all these years. Her ridiculous sandwich is sitting in front of her, with a toothpick Union Jack flag claiming it for Britain, oozing sweetness onto the plate.

‘Just think about it for a second. You feel the heat of the sun, like I do, but you can’t see the infrared light glowing off my skin. And you can’t see radio waves, even though you know that when you turn the radio on, you’ll hear the breakfast news. And it’s all made of the same stuff – you just call the bit you can see “light”. But it’s *all* light. Fizzing around our heads. Even at night when you can’t see your hand in front of your face, there’s light shining all around.’

She’s grinning like she can see it – all the extra light. Alex looks around the café, at the chrome counter and the vinyl seating, as though searching for backup. He grunts, smoothing his eyebrows with thumb and forefinger.

‘Stop being . . .’

‘What?’

‘A smartarse.’

Nova smirks. ‘I have a point though, right?’

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‘This is medicine, not science-fiction, Jillian.’

She huffs. ‘Nobody calls me *Jillian* but you.’

‘Would you rather I called you *The Safinova Surprise* – pepperoni, pickles and peach slices?’

‘Now who’s the smartarse?’

‘Look, I’m not saying this would even work, but it’s a straightforward choice. Either you can stay blind, or maybe you can be cured. This isn’t a mind game, or a riddle; it’s about being able to read a map or look at your outfit in a mirror. What’s so complicated?’

She shakes her head, dark hair tumbling over her face.

‘What could be more complicated? How do you learn to see? Because all that extra light, those X-rays and cosmic rays and radio waves – they’re all *really there*, Alex. This big field of pure light is rippling all around you, right now, and you can’t see it.’

Alex says nothing. He’s watching her face, her body, reading silently in a language she doesn’t know. Nova goes on.

‘So, say I’m an alien, and . . . and I’ve got big ol’ bug eyes! I can see all those extra colours, so your puny human vision seems pathetic to me. I could “cure” you with my ray gun because, to me, you seem to need curing – and you would see *all* the light. Night would be like day, shining with colours you’ve never seen before . . .’ She pauses for effect. ‘What would you see? Would you understand it all? Would it scare you, Alex?’

He sighs, grasping her meaning reluctantly.

‘You were always good with words.’ He is quiet for a minute. ‘I can’t tell you what it would be like for you to see, any more than I can tell you what music would sound like to a man who’d been deaf from birth. I can find you case studies, first-

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person accounts. But I'm a doctor, not a poet. You need to ask a philosopher. Or an imam.'

Nova pouts. 'You know I don't do that.'

Neither of their parents is religious. The source of Alex's faith has always puzzled Nova. He'd tried Buddhism, then Christianity, and had settled on Islam as though he'd been shopping around for the best deal. It interested her for a while, mostly for the words.

'I know, but the question you're asking isn't medical. What was the line from the Qur'an you used to recite to me?'

She knows the one he means. 'No vision comprehends Him, but He comprehends all vision.'

He smiles at the memory, but she doesn't see this. 'Yes. Maybe your "extra light" is like that. Like God.'

It's her turn to sigh. 'You know what I think, doctor.'

'Yes, I do.' His tone hardens to something smooth and professional. She tries to win him back.

'In your case studies, how do people react? Are they happy?'

He doesn't say anything for a minute, and when he does, Nova knows he isn't telling the whole truth.

'They find it difficult, but they recover. Anyway, it's your decision to make. If you want, I can refer you to someone who knows more about the procedure.'

'Okay, but one thing.'

'Yes?'

She leans closer to the table, grabs her sandwich, and takes a huge bite. Through stuffed cheeks, she says, 'If you tell our sweet, Pakistani mother about this "cure", I will destroy you.'



Joe Heap

Kate wakes on the sofa. There is a blanket over her. The lights in the flat are off, and the sky she can see through the front window is dull. How long has she slept? She doesn't remember. The sun is setting so it must be about four. There is no sign or sound of Tony.

She remembers the fall, and the argument that preceded it. Lastly, she remembers the piece of paper, a white square.

Experimentally, she turns her head, but the sinews in her neck are like high-tension wires. Her head aches, predictably, but there is a spot at the back of her skull where she can feel nothing at all. She reaches back and touches it, just to make sure her head is still there. She looks at her fingers, but there is no blood.

Slowly, feeling the strain of supporting her head, she sits up. She's queasy, but she doesn't feel like she's going to pass out again. Kate is certain now – Tony put her on the sofa and left the flat. Why did he do that? She was unconscious. He should have taken her to the hospital. A wave of sluggish anger rises, then subsides. She's too sick to be angry.

Kate goes to the kitchen, swallows painkillers with a glass of milk to line her stomach, and puts the radio on, half listening from the table.

After a while, as though on a whim, she gets up and walks through to the study. She doesn't know why. She reaches into the space behind the bureau and pulls out a black art folder. It is scuffed and dusty, and a peeling sticker on one corner reads, 'Katerina Tomassi, 7F 8F 9F'. She unzips the folder and opens it with a sound like dead leaves.

She hasn't looked at the folder since they moved to the flat, hasn't looked inside it in even longer. Now Kate can see the

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colours of her old paintings – watercolours, acrylics and pencils. She can see a tree, and a still life of fruit and acorns. She does not touch any of the paintings, as though they might stain her, or as though she might stain them. When was the last time she painted? It must have been . . .

Kate zips up the folder again, replaces it behind the bureau, and returns to the living room. On the sofa by the window, she listens to the traffic outside, while the contents of her head shift and rearrange.



Two

February

‘**U**NATTENDED LUGGAGE MAY BE destroyed . . .’
Nova stands on the platform, waiting for the train doors to open. The February wind bleeds heat through the denim of her jeans. She dislikes Paddington. She dislikes all the big London termini. The Tube she can manage, and the smaller stations. But King’s Cross and St Pancras, Euston and Paddington – they’re all too big, too loud and echoing, with too many people in a rush to be somewhere else. With Paddington, at least, she remembers the way to the ticket office from previous journeys, where she can ask for help in getting to the platform. Now she just hopes there won’t be an alteration.

Sometimes, Nova wishes she still had a guide dog. It would help with big journeys like this, with so many connections. But, day to day, she can find her way with her white stick and doesn’t have to clean up after a golden retriever. She knows dozens of journeys around London, from her flat in Brixton and back. She had a guide dog as a teenager, but Bruno always felt like more hassle than he was worth.

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The train doors unlock with a beep-beep-beep, and Nova starts forward cautiously. Suddenly, there is a hand on her arm.

‘Do you want a hand?’ A female voice; elderly. It’s almost always a woman. Men are afraid to touch her for fear of causing offence. Then there are the men who use it as an excuse to grope her, but that’s another story.

‘Yes, please. What carriage is this?’

‘Oh, uh, it’s coach B.’

‘Ah, lucky me!’

The woman guides her forward, but gives no information about what’s coming up until—

‘Big step now!’

Nova steps forward uncertainly, until her boot connects with the footplate. She climbs into the carriage and waits for the old lady to catch up. Lately, Nova has become very aware of her reliance on acts of kindness like this. Mostly, she can get by, but the average day contains several offers of help, a few of which she accepts. This is how it has always been. She accepts that this kindness is part of human nature. If she could see, would everyone leave her alone? The thought saddens her.

‘What seat are you, love?’

‘Thirty-two. I think it’s a window seat. Not that I need it!’ Nova quips. The old lady clears her throat uncomfortably, clasps her elbow and guides her through the carriage until she is at her seat. Somebody is sitting there already, but is persuaded to move by the old lady.

Nova slides carefully into the space by the redundant window seat, clasping her rucksack in her lap. If she puts it in the luggage rack she might never find it again, and wouldn’t know if someone tried to steal it.

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It's a month since her first conversation with Alex. She has seen experts in human eyesight, neuroscience, and psychology. She's spoken to her parents. When she wakes in the morning, exotic words and phrases like *rhodopsin*, *pupillary light reflex* and *occipital lobe* repeat in her head like a tune she can't stop humming.

The train pulls out of the station, and Nova listens carefully to the announcements before putting her headphones on. She listens to the playlists on her phone until she finds the one she's looking for – '80s disco tunes that she hasn't listened to since university.

That's where she's going – back to Oxford. She hasn't been since graduation. She's stayed in touch with people, but it seems like another world now. After ten years of ferrying herself between work and home, Oxford is a distant galaxy.



Nova gets a taxi from the station. She can still remember how to get the bus, but she doesn't need the hassle today. The taxi deposits her a minute's walk from her old college, and Nova stops someone to help orient herself. The first person is a tourist, so she tries again and finds a student.

'Am I near the Modern Languages building?'

'Yeah, you're just around the corner, on Bristol Street. Want me to take you?'

'No, thanks; I've got my bearings now.'

She edges down the street, swinging her stick ahead of her in narrow arcs, tapping at the wall until she finds the turning into a wide courtyard.

Joe Heap

When people talk about Oxford, they talk about the soft, golden stone of the buildings or the jewel-green of the lawns. They talk about dreaming spires piercing the sky. But Nova's memories are all of the sound of Oxford. The gentle hum of a city where so many people cycle. The murmur of the quads. The threnody of bells from colleges and chapels.

Oxford, to Nova, is like a well-worn quilt, soft and blanketing. Its sonic signature is all the more striking for leaving London behind. The contrast is as clear as the first time she stepped from an air-conditioned plane onto the airport concourse in Pakistan as a child. The climate here is different.

Nova stands and listens for a moment, then moves toward the steps of the Modern Languages building. Her stick taps in front of her, to the left as she is stepping forward with her right foot, to the right when she is stepping with her left. The motion is as automatic as walking itself, though sighted friends have told Nova how difficult it is. They veer off course when they try it. They say it is nerve-wracking, which makes Nova wonder if she got over the fear, or just got used to it. She can feel everything the stick is telling her – the gentle undulations of the path, the border between the path and the lawn, the varying textures of the stones.

Getting lost is always a possibility. *Just a chance to meet new people!* she'll deadpan, though it's truly frustrating. She wants to ask sighted people what it's like to know where everything is, when you're standing still. What it's like to know that the path is curving to the right, and there are trees over there, and a lake on the horizon. Do they see these things constantly, like an instrument playing an unbroken note, or do they come in bursts? Is it difficult, seeing all that stuff?

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She knows that sighted people can be distracted by things they see, like a man crashing his car because of a flashy billboard. Is it difficult, seeing and carrying on a conversation, or walking? She guesses it must be like walking with the stick – you get used to doing both.

Nova comes to the steps of the Modern Languages building, and her feet remember the height of each stone, so that the climb is quick and easy. She feels for the door and grabs the handle just as someone starts to open it. She starts to topple forward, then catches herself.

‘Oh, sorry! Saw you coming and thought I’d be helpful.’ The girl’s voice is panicked.

‘Not to worry!’

This is something else Nova does not understand – how someone can see through a window or a glass door. No matter how often people use words like *transparent* and *opaque*, the idea feels impossible, like trying to sing two notes at the same time. Seeing through solid objects is as strange as passing your hand through them. Like walking through walls.

Another familiar thing now – the smell of the corridors. Nova supposes it is something to do with the plastic floors, or the kind of cleaning product they use. But the smell, so long forgotten, is instantly recalled. It’s a clean smell, though not a homely one. It reminds her of long hours spent in the library and computer labs.

She knows her way very well now. She could move without her stick, except there might be objects in the hall for her to trip over. But she walks quickly, turning corners and counting down doors until she finds it, Room 204. She runs her hands over the door until she comes to a small sign, written in Braille:

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Sanitation Supplies and Hamburger Storage Area.

Nova smiles; the dumb joke must be superglued to the door. She knocks gently and listens for the shuffle of feet within, the hand searching for the handle. The door opens.

‘Yes?’

The voice is familiar, though perhaps a little thinner, in person – a voice no longer entirely in its prime.

‘It’s me, John.’

‘Jillian Safinova! Stay there so I can get a good look at you.’

She stands still while the professor puts his arms on her shoulders. This is their joke – John is as blind as she is. More blind, even (Blinder? Is that a word?) – he has no light, no pastel colours, as she does.

‘A little shorter than last time I saw you.’

‘It’s true – I’ve been shrinking. Saves on renting a big flat in London.’

‘Come on, come in, make yourself comfortable.’

He retreats from the door and she steps into 204. The smell in here is quite different, but every bit as familiar. Nova can break it down into three main components:

- 1) bergamot from countless mugs of Earl Grey tea;*
- 2) the books that line all of one wall;*
- 3) the leather armchair that sits in one corner.*

John closes the door after her, and Nova finds the chair in which she has always sat. Everything is always in the same place in 204, just like things are always in the same place in her own home. There is never a fear of bumping into an

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unexpected obstacle. She hears John cross the room and settle himself into his own chair.

‘Can I get you anything? A drink? I’ve still got the cookie jar.’

‘No, thank you. It’s good to be here – it hasn’t changed.’

‘Really? I suppose you’re right. How are you?’

‘I’m okay,’ Nova starts, then stops. She is not entirely okay, and they both know she wouldn’t be here if she were. They’ve always stayed in touch, through emails and calls, but actual visits are challenging. They haven’t sat in the same room for years. John chuckles, softly.

‘Do you want to tell me about it?’

Nova takes a deep breath, as though she’s about to cross a crowded room, and starts to talk. She explains the procedure, the chance of success (good), and the chance of full rehabilitation afterwards (not so good). She describes the details – how it would be done and how long it would take, but does not mention her fears. She doesn’t pose riddles or thought experiments. She just wants to hear his reaction.

When she is done, Nova pauses, not prompting him.

‘Well . . . fuck me.’ John says, simply.

‘Yeah.’ Nova grins, waiting for more.

‘So, I’m making an educated guess here,’ he says, slowly. ‘You’re worried about what it would mean to see. You’re worried about not understanding it. And you want to ask me what I would do.’

Nova laughs at how quickly he has understood. ‘Yep, that’s about right.’

‘I see.’ John pauses for a long moment, thinking. ‘Of course, we’re not entirely the same, you and I.’

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‘No, I know.’

Nova has been blind from birth – other than the soft, gauzy light, she has never seen anything. John is sixty now, but was sighted until his early thirties, when an infection burned his vision away, leaving no consoling haze.

He pop-pop-pops his lips, a habit of his when thinking.

‘I wouldn’t do it,’ he says, suddenly.

Nova feels like the air has been knocked out of her. ‘What? Just like that?’ She says.

‘You wanted more?’ She can hear his smile.

‘Well, maybe a bit. Some context, maybe?’

‘Mmm . . . mm-hm,’ he murmurs. Nova has spent so much time in this office, listening to John Katzner thinking. He was her tutor, very briefly. He specializes in literary translation, but her degree was interpretation. The difference is important, to those who care. John is careful with language, in a way that Nova isn’t. She uses language freely, like someone running downhill, carried by her momentum. John uses language like someone picking their way over a minefield. He clears his throat and begins to translate his thoughts.

‘After I went blind, I still saw things all the time. Did I ever tell you that?’

‘No.’

‘At first I saw them only when I was dreaming. In my dreams, I would see as well as I used to, when my eyes were working. My house, my office, the campsite we went to when I was six . . . Then, I started to see things during the day as well.’

‘What sort of things?’

‘Oh, all sorts of things. Trees, traffic, pages of blurred text,

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hovering in front of me. Nothing so awful, though it was a sad reminder of what I used to have. A distraction, too – as if it wasn't difficult enough to get used to being blind!

He laughs, then sighs.

'Anyway, these hallucinations carried on for a long time. I got used to them. I even appreciated them – they were a memento of a place I used to live. Sometimes in the morning or evening, I would see a white semicircle hovering in front of me, shimmering. I think it was my memory of a sunrise, or sunset . . . '

He falls silent. After half a minute has passed, Nova prompts him.

'So?'

'So, after a little longer, these visions started to get fainter. I was starting to forget what it was like to see. I stopped seeing in my dreams all the time. I was sad that my keepsakes might not always be with me, but I wasn't too sad. I was getting used to being blind, by this time.'

He clears his throat, and Nova feels bad for bringing this up. John has always helped with her problems, but he's never talked about himself like this.

'One day I woke up and . . . how can I put it? It was as though my last memories were going up in flames.'

His voice is shaking, very slightly.

'I saw things that made no sense – endless grey bodies, walking up endless grey staircases, flashes of colour as I fell down infinite drops, grotesque faces that screamed then melted back into the grey. I was crossing over a threshold, you see – though my eyes hadn't worked for many months, I remembered what it was like to be able to see. Now, that

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was crumbling away, and I was stepping into another world. A nightmare world. I didn't know if I would ever escape it. For two weeks, I couldn't leave the house. For two weeks, the visions never stopped. Then, after two weeks, they grew fainter and fainter, and stopped altogether. And I felt peaceful . . . '

He sighs a long, shaky breath.

'So, that's why I wouldn't do it, Nova. Not because it wouldn't be good to see again. But because I don't think I could make myself walk through that door again. I don't think I could voluntarily step over that threshold. Becoming blind was a kind of rebirth, for me.'

After this, they talk about other things. What they have been doing with their lives. How students are getting more inventive at plagiarism (John). How criminals are getting more inventive at lying (Nova). How restaurants *still* don't have Braille menus. Finally, Nova asks her phone the time, and discovers it is time to be going.

'You must come back soon.' Perhaps Nova is imagining it, but he sounds more wistful than usual.

'I will, when I have a chance. You should visit London sometime. I can show you the sights!'

He chuckles at the bad joke. 'Are you happy down there, Nova?'

'I suppose. Not unhappy.'

'Well, if you ever get sick of talking to murderers and rapists, give me a call. They owe me a favour around here, and if you ever wanted a job . . . '

He trails off. Nova is too surprised to say anything meaningful, and just says, 'Thank you.'

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‘Well, just bear it in mind, eh? Talk soon.’

She’s about to leave, when she thinks of one last question.

‘John – do you remember anything? From when you could see?’

Again, the pop-pop-popping as he thinks.

‘Perhaps . . . ’ He sounds uncertain. ‘Sometimes I think I can remember what that sunset looked like . . . a semi-circle . . . a curve and a line . . . but the colours are all gone.’

Nova pats him on the shoulder. ‘Talk soon, John.’

She finds her way out of Room 204, out of the faculty building, out onto the lawns. The sun is starting to set. It’s raining, lightly, and she doesn’t have an umbrella, but Nova doesn’t notice much. She has more questions than when she arrived. She trudges off to find another taxi rank.



It’s the weekend, and Kate is alone. She has done nothing with the day – just sat and watched TV, hardly focussing on the moving pictures. Her head hurts, and she’s groggy, as though she never really woke up.

She stands up carefully and walks to the window. At the new flat there is a Juliet balcony where she will be able to sit and watch the sun rise and set. Here, the view is over standing waves of slate roofs, prickling with aials and chimney pots. This sunset seems especially colourful – a pollution sheen of bronze and pink, bands of silver and bruise-purple. Everything fading into the navy blue of the city night. It’s never truly dark here.

When Tony finally came home from work yesterday, he’d

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acted as though nothing had happened, coming up behind her in the kitchen and kissing her neck.

‘How’re you doing?’

She hadn’t turned to face him. ‘Well, my head hurts . . .’

‘Yeah, that was some tumble you took!’

Kate looked at him for the first time, and he was smiling, kindly, a totally different person from her memory of the man who had loomed over her in the kitchen. He was carrying a bag of shopping, and she could see the brand of raisin cookies she likes. Doubt crept in.

‘What was that argument about? The piece of paper?’

‘Argument? I didn’t think we were arguing.’ He put the shopping down and took her by the shoulders, looking into her eyes as though concerned for her sanity. ‘I was just joking around, not letting you open that piece of paper. Then you stepped back and . . .’ He trailed off into silence, shrugging.

His face was open and smiling – Kate couldn’t believe the version of events in her own head anymore. Had she misinterpreted the whole thing? She didn’t flinch when he pulled her into a hug.

Now Kate stands and watches the semi-circle of sun as it dips below the houses, watching the colours lose their lustre. She feels that this moment is important, but doesn’t know why. The feeling has haunted her all day – the sense that she has stepped out of her own life and into a story. She put on music earlier, and felt as though it were the soundtrack to the movie of her life. She keeps thinking of the folder full of her paintings, but does not get it out again. Perhaps she is going crazy.

It seems strange that one day she will know the answer to

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this question – whether her interpretation is right or wrong – but won't be able to come back and tell the version of her who is now standing at the window. She won't be able to rewind.

When the sun has truly set, she allows herself to sit down on the sofa. The flat is dark and quiet, and Kate is waiting.



Three

THE CAFÉ IS NOISY and Nova can tell it is dimly lit. The pastel haze that she sees in bright light has faded to nothing. She can smell cheap candles and bitter coffee.

She's sitting at a table somewhere near the door, with a cup of green tea. If she weren't waiting for someone she might put her headphones in and listen to an audiobook or music. She knows that sighted people will often sit in cafés, doing nothing more than gazing out of the window. They enjoy it. They call it 'watching the world go by'. But Nova must wait, in the dark, listening to the clamour of conversations around her, unable to pick out any words.

Nova is not jealous of sighted people. Not acutely. She used to be; as a teenager, she thought constantly about how everything would be better if she weren't blind. All her problems would be solved. But over time she came to realize that this wasn't true. Sighted people were not intrinsically happier than blind people. They had their own things to be unhappy about.

Joe Heap

She is thinking about this when a pair of hands lands on her shoulders, making her jump.

‘Ha-ha!’ A voice cries, triumphantly.

‘Fuck! Rebecca, you know I hate it when you do that!’

‘I know.’ The hands withdraw, there is a wet kiss on her cheek, and Nova hears Rebecca sliding into the chair across from her. ‘That’s why I do it.’

Nova sighs, smiling in spite of herself. ‘You’re late.’

‘I know, I know, I’m sorry. I had to wrap up some science-y stuff.’

‘You’re a *theoretical* physicist, Becca. Nothing was going to explode if you left early.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘No? What are you working on then?’

Rebecca clears her throat. ‘Semi-classical Virasoro symmetry of the quantum gravity S-matrix.’

‘Ah, of course,’ Nova deadpans, feeling unexpectedly awkward.

Rebecca reaches out and touches her cheek. A shiver runs down Nova’s back before she moves out of reach.

One of the questions that Nova is asked most often is how she knows she’s gay, when she’s blind. Sighted people tell her that a lot of attraction is based on looks, and Nova shrugs. She doesn’t understand this, any more than she understands why a slice of apple pie looks tasty, but she knows what it smells like and how it tastes. She has early memories of feeling different in the company of girls – she liked the soft tone of their voices, their perfume, the way they were gentle in their play. But anything more than that is a mystery – it’s just the way she is. Rebecca has soft hands, and a soft voice – low alto, smoky with cigarettes.

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‘How are you?’ Rebecca asks.

‘I’m okay. Tired.’

‘You don’t look tired.’

‘How do I look?’

‘Pretty. Pretty as a picture!’ Rebecca sing-songs. Nova hears her pick up the cup of tea and slurp.

‘You’re in a good mood . . . ’ Nova leaves the sentence hanging.

‘What are you implying?’ Rebecca asks. Her tone is still jokey, but she knows exactly what Nova is implying. Still, Nova needs a sofa for the night, so she can’t afford to piss Rebecca off too much.

‘Nothing. I’m just tired.’

‘Sure . . . So, what brings you back to these parts? You were pretty vague on the phone.’

‘Just catching up with old friends.’

‘I’m an “old friend” now, am I?’

‘I wasn’t talking about you. I went to see John Katzner earlier.’

‘Oh, really?’ Now Rebecca’s tone sours. Though they have never met, she and John do not like each other. It was John who told Nova to break things off with Rebecca.

‘Look, Becca, I have news. There’s an operation . . . I might be able to see. To not be blind any more.’

There is silence from the other side of the table for a long time, and Nova starts to wonder if Rebecca has simply walked away. This is something that sighted people do from time to time, forgetting that she can’t know they’ve left. It is something Rebecca has done frequently, just to fuck with her.

‘Becca?’

Joe Heap

‘Wow. That’s really something.’ She sounds more earnest than Nova can ever remember. ‘So, when are you going to do it?’

‘Well, that’s the thing – I don’t know *if* I’m going to do it.’
‘Why not?’

Nova thinks about how to explain it to her. She thinks about giving the same spiel she gave to Alex, about the radio waves and the ultraviolet, all the fizzing light that goes unseen. Instead, she dips her head and says, into her chest, ‘Because I’m scared.’

Rebecca doesn’t say anything for a long time.

‘Do you remember that time you asked me what I imagined, when I was doing physics?’

Nova tries to remember. ‘Maybe . . .’

‘We were in the laundrette, eating ice pops and waiting for our clothes to be dry.’

‘Oh yeah, I remember that.’ Nova hasn’t thought about that day for years. She’s amazed that the memory has existed inside her all this time, that it hasn’t withered away.

‘You asked how I pictured something that was a particle and a wave at the same time. Or how I pictured four dimensions, or eleven dimensions, or whatever bollocks I was talking about at the time.’

Nova is strangely touched that Rebecca has remembered her words, carried them around with her all this time. She didn’t make an effort to forget her – it was like something her body had done for her, like fighting a virus. Her immune system had rejected Rebecca.

‘And I said that I pictured this or that – sometimes lots of ping-pong balls, or a slinky toy . . .’

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‘Okay?’ Nova questions, not sure where this is going.

‘But the point is – none of those things that I’m picturing in my head are real. I can never know what those things look like, even though I think about them all day. Those are just pictures that help me think about the problem I’m trying to solve. And I bet every single person in my department has different pictures. But if you gave me the opportunity to see those things for *real* . . .’

She trails off.

‘What?’ Nova asks. ‘What if you had that opportunity?’

‘Then I would take it,’ Rebecca says, and Nova can hear her shrug. ‘And I bet it would be really scary. I bet it would drive me a bit crazy. But it would be worth it. It would be worth it to understand all that extra stuff.’

Her hands reach out and take Nova’s. Her hands are big and cool, and Nova doesn’t pull away. They sit in silence for a long minute.

‘Wow, Becca, that was like, a real thing.’

‘Meaning what?’

‘Meaning it was very sincere, for you.’

Rebecca chuckles, and squeezes her hands. ‘I can be sincere! I’m a very sincere person these days.’

There’s a heat in Nova’s chest that is taking her by surprise. Rebecca’s perfume smells like coconut.

‘These days?’

Rebecca is silent for a moment. ‘I’ve missed you.’

Now Nova does pull her hands away. ‘I thought you were being sincere?’

‘Don’t be mean. I have – I’ve really missed you. My super-nova.’

Joe Heap

Nova softens, smiles at the old nickname.

‘I’ve missed you too.’

‘So, do you want to get a drink? Other than tea, I mean?’

‘I don’t know if that’s such a good idea . . . ’

Nova leaves it unspoken. They both know what she means.

‘I’m different these days.’ Rebecca leans closer, so Nova can hear her. ‘I’m not like that any more. Just one drink. For old time’s sake?’



The next morning, Nova wakes on Rebecca’s sofa. It’s Friday, and she needs to get back to London for her early shift tomorrow. She regrets staying, a little, but at least she’s on the sofa. She remembers kissing Rebecca and winces. Still, her head is clear and she didn’t do anything really stupid.

She opens her eyes wide,

wide,

wide,

letting in all the light that can be let in. It isn’t much. She’s lying on the sofa facing the front windows, through which the morning sun is streaming – she can feel the warmth on her face. But the most that Nova sees is a grey haze, like a misty morning.

This is the most she has ever known, so it should seem ordinary. But for the first time in years, Nova peers intently into the gloom, willing it to reveal the shapes of things on the other side. She wills the mist to dispel. If she could just have a glimpse – a sneak peek – she could make her decision.

The warmth of the sun fades, and Nova hears the patter of

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rain on the window. She knows the shape of rain from a book she had when she was a child – it had a shape made from silky fabric, curved around and pointed at one end. After a long time of feeling the shape, running her fingers over the soft fabric, she had asked her brother what the shape was.

‘That’s a drop . . . a drip. Like rain. Or when you cry.’

Nova still does not understand how tears and rain look alike. She closes her eyes again, shifts until she is comfortable, and sleeps a little longer with the blanket pulled over her face.



There is a harpsichord playing as Kate eats her breakfast, from the kitchen stereo that Tony got her for Christmas. Handel’s *Messiah*. Kate likes classical music. Tony doesn’t care much about music, but doesn’t mind stuff without words. She’s eating marmalade on toast, with a coffee recently magicked out of a golden plastic pod.

Her head is throbbing, both the spiky harpsichord and the acidity of the Seville marmalade prodding at the ache like needles. She skips a few tracks to something with just strings and dilutes each bite of toast with a swig of milky coffee. Tony appears, smelling of two-in-one shampoo and shower gel, fastening his tie. Not a real tie, of course – the sort that pulls off if you grab it, like a gecko’s tail.

‘Anything going on?’ Tony asks, spotting that Kate is reading the news on her phone. He pecks her on the cheek and sits next to her.

‘Just the usual.’ She puts the phone down for a moment and squeezes his knee.

Joe Heap

‘Are you wearing that to work?’ He points to her outfit, a navy-blue T-shirt with tiny cactuses printed over it and a pair of jeans. She hasn’t worn the T-shirt for months.

‘Oh, I spilled something on my blouse. You don’t like?’

‘No, it’s just, maybe . . . not for work.’

‘Okay, I’ll change into something else. I think my cream blouse is clean.’

Tony is checking his own phone now. ‘Mm. What are you doing today?’

‘Job over in Borough. The office I told you about.’

He nods, though she’s not sure he’s remembered. Why should he?

‘What are you doing?’ she asks him – an old joke, since the answer is always the same.

‘Catching criminals. Saving the world.’

Kate nods sagely at the stock answer. Sometimes Tony comes home with cuts and bruises. He’s had black eyes and a fractured radius in his left arm. Often, he won’t say anything, but Kate will notice him limping or catch him wince when she hugs him.

She’s met some of his friends on the force and gets the impression that Tony has a reputation for doing crazy things – chasing people down single-handed, jumping into the line of fire – but they clam up when she asks for details. It worries her, but Kate always knew Tony was a thrill-seeker – skydiving and bungee jumping at university seeming like placeholders in his life for something genuinely scary.

The pain in her head turns up a notch, and she decides she needs to take something. She gets up and rummages in the cupboard over the tea and coffee area, where there are

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various boxes of pills, jars of vitamins and bags of loose-leaf tea.

‘Feeling off?’

‘Just a headache.’

Tony doesn’t respond. She’s been having headaches since the day she hit her head. She should probably go to the doctor, she thinks, but he’d only give her paracetamol, and she can’t take time off work. She finds a box of pills and pushes a couple through the foil.

‘What time are you home?’ Tony asks. ‘We could rent a movie.’

‘Sorry, hun, I’m seeing the electrician at the new flat after work. I’ll probably be back late.’

They’ve owned the new flat for a couple of months now, but it was a wreck when they got it, the only sort they could afford. Kate wanted something she could make her own. She has stripped it back to almost nothing, knocked down an unnecessary wall, and raised all the floors with sound insulation. It’s still an empty space, but once the electrics are done, she will make a start on decorating.

‘Okay.’ Tony nods, drinking his tea. ‘How much longer do you think until we can move in?’

Kate swallows the pills with her coffee and turns, resting against the worktop. ‘I don’t know. A couple of months? Depends how much time I spend there.’

Tony nods slowly, and Kate senses where the conversation is going.

‘That’s a long time . . .’ he says.

‘Well, we’re comfortable here, aren’t we? There’s no rush.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’ Tony sighs.

Joe Heap

No, Kate thinks – I know what you meant. The subject of children keeps coming up recently. She doesn't want to argue about it now, with her head throbbing.

'Look, I'm happy to start trying as soon as we get into the new place.'

Tony puts his head down as though examining his shoes. 'I don't see why you need to wait.'

'Because I'm renovating the flat. Because I have work to do!'

Tony looks up and his eyes narrow. 'There's always *work* to do.' He spits out the word 'work' as though she's mentioned the name of a lover.

'Just . . . can we talk about this later? I don't see what the hurry is.'

Tony stands, pulls on his jacket, takes one last look at her and leaves the room without saying anything. Kate hears him moving around in the hallway, gathering his things. She hears the front door open, winces as it slams shut.

She hunches over the sink and cradles her head in her hands, willing the pills to find their target. She watches water from the tap going drip . . . drip . . . drip . . .

She knows already that the next time she sees Tony, she will agree to try.

Kate has always wanted kids. She repeats this fact to herself through the day, standing in the shower or sitting on the bus, as though trying to convince herself of its truth. As though it is a prayer. These are just nerves, she tells herself. She has a good life, a good job, and soon she will have a good home – the risk of upending everything is what makes her pause. Once she has made the decision, the nerves will vanish, and she will feel excitement.

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Pretending hasn't occurred to her yet, but the possibility is there. It will be easy to justify to herself – just for a while, until she has finished renovating the flat.

The pills are not difficult to hide.

He'll never know.