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Julia Prendergast

Breath on brown paper

He visits her at the bakery where she works. He tells her that she is beautiful. He says he wants to go out with her. He visits her when she is working alone, usually around five.

She looks down at the floor. She says she's not interested.

He tells her again: *You are beautiful. You are so pretty.*

She passes him his rolls in a brown paper bag. He wants to touch her arm. Sometimes their fingers touch, momentarily, but it is fleeting and weightless, an autumn leaf fluttering across the ground. It leaves him feeling empty.

My name is Harsh, he says. It means happy. In my language it means happiness; delight. Harsh EQUALS Happy. When he thinks of it now, of course, he knows that nothing can ever really equal anything else. He thinks that harsh does not necessarily mean happy.

You are really pretty, he says, clutching the paper bag, walking backwards towards the bakery door. You are beautiful. It is true. So beautiful, he says, stumbling slightly over the lip of the doorframe.

As he gets into his car, his grip is clenched around the opening of the brown paper bag. He sits in the driver's seat and watches her a while. If only she would look at him, if only she would look hard and long into his eyes, then she would understand that he means it, he absolutely means it, when he says that she is very beautiful.

In Australia it is not okay to touch her arm. Here it is utterly unacceptable. And she is here, of course, not in his homeland, much as he may wish upon stars. In his homeland, she would understand that his hand on her arm equals adoration.

Here it is not acceptable to say: *You are so very pretty, what is your phone number, please take my phone number, please call me, I have been waiting for you to call me, why haven't you called me, you are so beautiful, what time do you finish work, you are so pretty, we should get together, we should have coffee when you finish your work, or tea, I mean tea to drink, or dinner, to eat, what time, what time do you finish your work? I will wait in my car for you, I will wait for you while you finish, I will wait because I think that we should get together, you are so pretty, you are so very beautiful...*

He sits in his car and he imagines his fingers on her arms, on her beautiful, on her pretty arms. Sitting in his car, he watches her beautiful, her pretty wrists as she takes the bread and puts it in a bag for the customers. He sees her beautiful, her deep eyes, and he notices that her eyes smile (*sitārā kbuśa* – starhappy) just like his beautiful, his beautiful Nani, back home.

Her lips are hidden behind the customer's head now, and he shifts left, towards the passenger seat, but he can't see, and it doesn't matter that he can't see because he doesn't need to see her lips. *I don't need to see*, he says aloud and then he takes a sharp breath: *Stop it*, he says. *Who would be talking to their own reflection in the mirror?*

He doesn't need to see because he can tell by the stars in her deep, deep eyes that she is smiling, like Nani when she star smiles for Nana, only for him, eye smiling in their secret lovestar language. He catches sight of himself in the rear vision mirror and he practices the true meaning eyes, like a husband for a wife. He checks to see if she sees him, but she has her back to him now, reaching for the bread that is stacked on the high wire shelves. The bread dust falls as she takes a loaf. He has seen the bread dust on her forehead and her hairline. He has seen it, like stardust, on her eyelashes.

He doesn't need to see her lips but he wants to see them, he likes to see them. He wants her to pass bread to him. Only to him. He doesn't like the puffy bread that she sells but he buys it, nevertheless. *Nevertheless*. Nani's head moves to one side and the other as she says it. It is one of his favourite words, like *momentarily*, because he can see Nani and her talking head in those words, and those words don't equal anything, and they equal everything.

He buys bread that he will never eat just so that he can see her lips move, for him. He throws the bread to the birds when it is not puffy anymore, but he keeps the paper bags because they remind him of the moon-arc of her beautiful wrists. With a flick of her wrists, she swings the paper bag, up and over itself, twisting the corners to seal it. He keeps the brown paper because it makes him feel like things are more than nevertheless.

With his head on his pillow, he can see the paper bags, and he can see the bread dust that has settled on his bedside table. He reaches out his hand, carefully, taking a paper bag. He purses his lips together and blows into the neck of the bag. His hot breath crackles against the brown paper and the bread dust fills the air like moondust, *sitārā kbuśa* moondust, falling through his fingers like fine sand.

It is okay to touch the arm of your wife, and if we skip forward to the arm touching, and the wife passing her husband bread, and whispering to him in the moondust language, *sitārā kbuśa sitārā kbuśa*, then it is not stalking. Then we can see the truth: the very beautiful truth, the absolute pretty truth, of the smiling stars in her eyes. Those stars are the same over the sea and he thinks that, nevertheless, they could be like Nani and Nana. They could have their own starhappy language, a language of smiling stars, just for them, a language that doesn't care about seas apart and arm-touching rules... stale bread for birds.

* * *

The policeman has freckles. Australian freckles fascinate him because they are so much darker than the skin, like black stars against a pale moon, as if nature could not have made it happen, as if something else altogether must have had a hand in it, something more potent than the sun, something like fire, fire for Australian freckles and fire for freckled char on roti.

The policeman says: *If you set foot in that shop, ever again, you will be charged with trespassing.* This is what the policeman says, but he hears: *Your story is frog-shit mate. You knew exactly how old she was. You don't fool me.*

He thinks of the paper bags for the rolls, stacked on his bedside table, ironed flat by his hands, and he thinks of her wrists, the pretty moon-arc of her wrists.

The court liaison officer wears a bright red scarf and a bracelet to match, exactly the same shade of coral red. Her skin is translucent, like apple juice jelly on shiny Australian skin. She says: I know in India you might approach women in this way, in fact *I know a man who met his wife on the train...* She giggles momentarily and then clears her throat. *I understand that it might be considered okay, over there, but here it is not okay, here it is stalking.* This is what she says, quite kindly, tenderly even, and slowly, as if he were a child.

He says: *I didn't know how old she was, I mean, how young. I thought she was the same as me, the same age as me. I was mesmerised. She reminded me of... She was... sitārā kbuśā.*

WHAT? I wouldn't go doing that in there. The court liaison officer points left, in the direction of the courtroom. *If you start chattering in Hindi, the magistrate won't like it.*

His fists are clenched but shaking. He pounds them, very lightly, on the desktop.

The court liaison officer says: *You can agree to the order without admitting fault, that is, you can agree to leave her alone without admitting that you intended to do her any harm.*

This is what she says but he hears: You're obviously lonely mate. I mean it's clear you want some... company, but stalking underage girls, it's just not on.

The judge is old, even older than Nana was when he perished, the puff draining right out of him like the stale rolls. The judge rests his elbow on the enormous desk, his hand under his chin, tired-like. He looks through the window to the empty courtyard: brown pavers; potted palms, an empty bench. The judge looks at him and says: *You cannot go within two hundred metres of her workplace. You shop somewhere else. Do you understand?* This is what the judge says but he hears: *Go back to where you came from. Go back to your lot. These are our rules, you hear?*

He says: *Yes Sir. I mean yes Your Honour.*

The judge says: *This is not a criminal conviction but be clear, be very clear, if you breach the conditions of this order you will be locked up, you will face a fine of up to \$30,000 dollars.*

He cannot see what thirty thousand dollars would look like. He tries to imagine it, stacked up like the brown paper bags on his bedside table, but he can't picture it, try as he might, and so he looks out into the courtyard at the brown pavers, but that's no good either because he can only see paper bags for bread. The empty bench and the potted palms are right there, right in front of his eyes, and they could be like a holiday or an invitation, but the green and the brown merge together until they are just a swampy blur of in-between colour, a dirty, smudged colour that equals loneliness and desire and locking up. He can see Nani's eyes, momentarily. He can see her eyes turning starry for him because of the in-between dirtiness and the locking.

The judge talks to the Mother. *He says: Does your daughter work there anymore?*

The mother says: *No.*

The judge looks at him. *Because of your actions. You understand?* The judge sits only a few steps away but he takes the opportunity to lean forward and talk into the microphone.

The other people in the courtroom turn to him with their star-less eyes. They don't say anything, they don't say anything at all, but he hears them, loud and pumped like a football cheer-squad.

He hears them say: *Look what you've done. Curry munching punk. ...Curry munching punk.*

He looks out into the paper bag courtyard again because there is nowhere else to look. He sees her pretty hands, holding the corners of the bag, flipping it, upending the puffy rolls, sealing them away from the air that will make them old and nevertheless.

The judge says: *Is this clear?* He hears the judge but he can't speak because he is caught in the airlessness of the paper bag courtyard.

The judge says: *IS THIS VERY CLEAR?*

He says: *Yes S... Yes Your Honour.*

Then she turns around and glances at him, momentarily but nevertheless. She is crying and her eyes are like Nani's at the end, holding Nana's hands, nursing his wrists, staring at him with her star-less eyes.

The judge talks to the mother. The judge says: *You can wait in the other room for the order to be written. You can take your daughter and wait.*

And they go.

And he stands there and waits for Your Honour to tell him where to go. He stands and he waits, and he feels as flat and useless as dry leaves in a courtyard. He keeps his eyes on the leaves and he waits for the wind. As the stray leaves flutter, he imagines the rustling inhale and exhale of the shifting leaves, the same noise that made you wonder if Nana might, yet, take another deep breath... but the leaves are still again, and wondering does not equal possibility.

And without the wind, the leaves are just wrinkles on flat pavers, they are Nani's stippled forehead on Nana's perishing wrist, dried out, hanging on.

He stands and he waits and, in the nevertheless waiting, he cannot distinguish between the dry, brown leaves and the flat, brown pavers. He cannot separate one from the other, not unless the wind shifts, lifting the leaves off the ground momentarily, like hot breath on brown paper.