



Winning Entries

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Waiting

By Malavijka Nataraj

Terence had been confident of his hat selection. Until he saw Oona. She stood behind the counter, hands on her ample hips, smiling her wrinkly smile at a boy who looked remarkably like his own son. Terence hesitated outside the window, just near the painted "G" of Ginny's Tea Corner. His liver-spotted hands clasped each other on the ebony-topped cane. His hat suddenly felt tight and itchy, as though it belonged on someone else's head or indeed, still on the shop shelf. In the reflection of the glass window, the plaid beret suddenly looked too French, too foreign.

The door of the cafe tinkled open and the thick aromas rushed out to clog his nose. Frying bacon, eggs, coffee, burnt toast, orange juice. All morning smells, as constant and unchanged as he was, he thought. Inside, Oona laughed, a deep sound that snapped the last threads of his confidence. He fumbled in his coat pockets with shaking hands till he found his old clay pipe. As his lips clamped down on it, unlit, he leaned heavily on his cane, looking up at the grey sky. He had decided. He would not go in today. In his heart, disappointment mingled with relief. She had been busy, he reasoned. She wouldn't have noticed if I had gone in. He walked on, slowly, as though his momentary halt outside the cafe had been a planned one. The wind blew at him, cutting through the layers of wool and polyester. He pulled his hat down lower over his eyes. He thought of the way Oona's neat grey hair had gleamed under the cafe lights.

Tomorrow. He would go in tomorrow. His worn shoes slapped the pavement, making him stumble over the cracks. Suddenly, he felt dizzy. He stood for a moment, breathing deeply in the cold winter air. People brushed past him without a backward glance. Above, workmen shouted over the din of the traffic, stretching strings of lights from one leafless tree to the next. In a few days, the town would be lit for Christmas. No one noticed the old man, with his large brown coat hanging in folds around him, the bright colours of his hat standing out against the dull landscape.

Terence continued slowly on, following the stony path off the pavement. The park was deserted. The families that frequented the candy-coloured swings had found warmer pursuits. The pigeons huddled in fluffy groups, pecking at the ground for the last bits of grain. He sat on a bench, breathing in white clouds. He was hungry, he realised. He hadn't eaten since the night before. The wind lifted his soft grey hair, making him shiver. His thoughts drifted back to Ginny's Tea Corner and to Oona. He had not noticed her before the night of the fire. Perhaps it had been the

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determination in her eyes, or the light that had reddened her handsome face, but she had stood out from the rest of them. He had felt very little for anyone since Mary's passing a decade ago, he realised. He had become used to his own company, though if he were honest with himself, it was loneliness rather than solitude. But Oona stirred things in him that he thought were dead. Just looking at her made him tremble. He had forgotten how to talk to a woman, that's what it was, he thought. Of course, talking to Mrs Richfield hardly counted, although she was a good landlady, giving him his meals on time. She had even overlooked the few instances when his son's dutiful rent cheques from America did not arrive in time.

In his younger days, he thought wistfully, he had been as bold as a city pigeon, strutting around the pubs, confident of his charm. Yet now, he couldn't even conjure up the courage to speak to Oona.

He rocked to his feet and shuffled slowly out of the park. He felt old and tired. As he re-traced his steps past the cafe, he was seized by a sudden impulse. Without much thought, he pushed open the tinkling door and walked in. The thought of Oona and the smell of food made him light-headed, as he slid into the nearest booth and waited. Through the corner of his eye, he saw Oona come forward towards him, a little notepad in her hand. "Well, hello," she smiled. Terence's throat felt thick. Face burning, his eyes fell to the menu card. With a trembling finger, he pointed out what he wanted. "Right, so you'll 'ave fish and chips then," she said. "Some coffee to go with it?" He nodded, raising his eyes slowly. Her eyes crinkled into a smile. "That's a nice hat," she said, gathering up his menu card and turning away.

The landlady, Mrs. Richfield, felt uneasy. She couldn't put her finger on why, but she vaguely felt that it had to do with Old Man Terence. She realised that she hadn't seen her oldest tenant in two days. When she had last seen him, he had been climbing up to his room, smiling for the first time since the death of his wife. "Perhaps I'm over-reacting," she reasoned. "He could have just gone away for a few days." But she knew that he had nowhere to go and no one to see. When she could no longer fight the feeling, she climbed the rickety stairs with her son to investigate. The weak wood of the door gave way under her son's shoulders, suddenly engulfing them in a sickly sweet odour.

Dressed in a thin cotton night suit, the old man lay on the sofa, his eyes closed. His mouth hung open in a wide smile and an unlit pipe rested in his gnarled fingers. The lines on his face were relaxed, making him look younger than his eighty years. And on his head, the reds and greens of his hat criss-crossed each other, reminding them that it was almost Christmas.

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