PRESERVING TIME

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Last summer, the plums turned into jam on the side of the road. They had fallen onto the black tarmac and, in the sizzling heat, had begun to cook, the cloyingly sweet aroma drifting between tanned legs and dry grass and mingling in the air with wafts of sunscreen and BO.

Last summer, a woman clicked her way along a cobbled street, alone. The nape of her neck burned red; sweat crept slowly down the small of her back. Even the walls seemed to melt, blurring butter yellow in the corners of her vision.

She was going to be early.

In the square, a crowd had already started to gather. Giddy expectation wound its way into the alleyway, carrying with it the low thrum of a bass-boosted speaker. Did she hear Beyonce?

Turning a corner, the sound crystallised: high-pitched laughter and the clinking of glasses, conversation dancing among the breathless congregation. Women in floral summer dresses stood arm in arm, hair elaborately pinned and curled and box-dyed for the special occasion. Little children held fragrant bouquets. The men readied their iPhones, two fingers zooming in and out, from 0.5 to 1x and back again, in preparation.

“It’s the best angle, y’see. Look at that. Whole building’s in no problem.”

Bouquets were passed from hand to hand; noses teased with honeysuckle and rose and that cloying fruity smell that no one could quite place and –

“Is there more champagne?”

Glasses refilled and cans of lemonade popped open, were pressed into little scrabbling hands alongside ice cubes and a promise to keep still.

“Molly, do you have a mirror? I think my mascara’s gone all weird and I just need to- perfect. You’re an angel”.

Mirrors clicked open and painted nails patted at pink cheeks. Sweaty fingers wound frazzled strands of escaping hair. Handheld fans buzzed to life.

“OMG you brought your digicam? That’s sooo cute. Send me those later, right?”

She tried to slot to the back of the hoard, but was caught in a sudden roar as the doors of the courthouse flew open. A beaming couple appeared, grinning at their friends before swooping in for their first kiss.

[Last summer, Philip & Feli were married in the middle of a heatwave.]

Extricating herself from the crowd, her heels clicked onward. A glass shattered behind her; laughter cracked through the air.

She turned a corner and the sound fell away, replaced by shade and silence and the stilling of the breeze. A new hour began, signalled by a distant toll.

When she arrived at the church, the doors were locked. She sat on the sandy steps and leant back, gazing into the violent blue of the sky. Her ears pricked up at the swish of a distant tram, fingers drumming against the black of the stiff, synthetic skirt she’d bought at the airport.

She checked her phone.

Hey Mags I’ll be there at 12:45. Tysm for doing this. Ily <3.

She scrolled through the news for a while, unsure of what to do with herself.

She hadn’t even known him that well.

But her friend had needed her, so she came, of course.

And she was early.

Sighing, she got up to stretch, surveying the little square as she did so. The church was small but ornate; saints and emperors peered down at her with unreadable expressions. A few scraggly plants pushed themselves through cracked cobbles.

Perhaps there was another entrance.

There was, round the back. A little brown door with a verdigris handle that swung open with a slight twist and a small push.

Inside, the air was darker. Her skin prickled.

The vestry was wood panelled and small, an open cupboard spilling glass cleaner and a mop into the middle of the floor. It smelt, too. Slightly damp. Maybe mouldy. But spicy as well.

Interesting.

She turned on the light.

Might as well get to work.

The service sheets didn't take too long in the end. A fold, two staples, done. A fold, two staples done. A fold-.

She put the finished stack near the entrance of the nave, her steps ringing in the silence.

Somewhere, amid the talking and swishing and tolling of the city, a deafeningly joyful wedding party danced away the day.

The stone in the church was cool and still.

She turned and went back to the vestry; a small clock chimed, indicating the half hour. It played a little tune, too. Tinny and unnerving in the empty space. Time creeping by.

She should've made more of an effort, really. To know him. But she'd been busy and tired and she'd been nice enough. Really, she had been. She'd bought him a pair of headphones for Christmas. Good ones. And Pippa had been happy. Very happy.

[She wondered if he'd bought a ring.]

When the musicians arrived, they unpacked and tuned their instruments in the vestry. Strings were gently plucked and pegs were softly turned, an A440 sliding from flat to sharp, sharp to flat, buzzing in the background while she pulled their unwieldy music stands into the choir stalls.

She left them on their own to practice, sitting down and sighing deeply for the second time that day. She leant back against a cupboard door, head angled in such a way that she could see the three strips of light falling from the vestry windows, the motes of rosin and dust suspended in the air.

The space, simultaneously liminal and definite, distorted the musician's practice. The sound came as if from the sea, leaking through the walls, submerged and muffled, the body of the church made cavernous by rolling musical waves, the transept left suspended, dusty, fuzzy; the music not quite hers, but not quite separate from her either.

She could almost see the ring.

Bang!

A car door, somewhere. Then another. A dog joined the chorus with five staccato barks. The chatter from a walking tour bled through the window.

She checked her phone. 12:42.

She wondered how long she could spin three minutes. If she held the second hand, if she couldn't see time passing, it would surely stop.

[If no one was in the forest when the tree fell, did it make a sound?]

But time continued onward and Pippa arrived and Pippa was crying and all Maggie could do was wrap her arms around her and squeeze and squeeze and squeeze away as much of the hurt as possible, put in as much effort as possible, and guide her slowly inside.

During last summer's heatwave, a funeral began.

Outside, the plums split and bled in the heat.