SETTLING DOWN

Kaitoro Walker

They always ask me what I'm going to do if I meet someone. My "forever." What I'll wear, what my hair will look like, how I'll know if he's "different", if I'll fall for him straight away, how I'll know he's the one.

I will.

He'll be charming. He'll smile at me, he'll make me laugh, he'll know exactly what to say.

He'll make every room feel brighter until, slowly, I'll realise I was

Meant

to
touch
the
sun.

So I'm here.
In this sweaty, crowded club.
Alone.
And then I see you.

And so I wonder, as I look at you across the crowded bar, why the room empties when you look at me. Your hair, messy from dancing, leaves my thoughts just as disordered. Your face, flashing under the blue strobe lights, burns itself into my memory. Your jawline, breaking through the haze of cigarette smoke, cuts straight through my defences. I want you.
The music swells. The crowd shifts. You emerge from it. Introduce yourself.
Colin I. Zation, huh?
Foreign. Exotic.

Hot.

You ask if you can buy me a drink. I let you. Nursing a glass of whiskey, you tell me stories of where you've been. The oceans you crossed, the places you were welcomed into, the sunsets you've seen. You promise me all of them.

You lean closer. Smile at me. "I think I'll stay a while. You don't mind, do you?" I smell the whiskey on your breath, the tobacco on your lips, the sweat on your face. I swallow.

"Not at all."

I wake up in your arms. The sunrise is beautiful. Each ray rippling across the wind-swept ocean. I shift. You pull me closer.

I wonder, as I look at the gifts you have given me, how effortlessly you closed the gap between us. Each week you give me treasures from places I never knew. Each week I receive an ornate wooden figurine, or a delicate plate, or a twisted silver ring. Each week I say how you spoil me, and ask how you have the money for this. You always smile. You never answer.

You never miss my calls. Never let me hear your voicemail tone. We go out each day: to the woods, to the river, to the beach. We swim in the ocean, the mid-morning sun reflecting off the water so brightly I'm blinded. You just laugh.

You take me out most nights. To musicals or restaurants or bars. You know my favourite shows, my usuals, my drinks order. You laugh at my stories as if you had waited all day to hear them. I listen to you talk as though you had commanded me to do so. You promise to show me the world. I ask you to be in mine.

The next morning, when I wake up, I smell coffee. Your usual sign of goodbye. I ask when you're going to leave. You smile at me. "I think I'll stay a while. You don't mind, do you?" I smile back.

"Not at all."

I wonder, as I look at how easily I became yours, why I don't mind changing. It started with something small. Taking my shoes off before coming inside. You just laughed, dismissing that habit as outdated. I laugh with you. I don't do it again. You approve. You tell me there are easier ways of doing that now. Better ways. Vacuums. I suppose you're right.

Sometimes I tell you stories I heard when I was growing up. Stories about giant octopuses, and fished-up lands, and ocean gods, and men riding on whales and sea monsters breaking open harbours. You always listen politely, never interested. You tell me to focus on the present. I stop

telling those stories after a while, and start telling ones you like. I guess this is what being in a relationship is all about. Compromise.
We spend all our time together. What was mine becomes ours. I guess this is the price of love. You're at my house more than your own. Your toothbrush has joined mine in its cup. Your clothes have begun appearing in my drawers. Your mug has taken the hook next to mine. I ask if you're planning to move back into your place. You smile at me. "I think I'll stay a while. You don't mind, do you?" I look at you.
"Not at all."
I look out the window. The midday sun warming the ocean shallows. The light weakens slightly as a cloud passes.

I wonder, as I look around my apartment, why I feel like a visitor.
The first thing I notice is the bookshelf. Once lined with books of pūrākau my koro gave me, it now holds books about kings, empires, and expeditions to Africa. You tell me it looks better like this, more interesting. Useful. I nod. The worn storybooks from my childhood lie boxed up in the top of one of my closets. Out of sight, out of mind. After a while, I forget what those stories said.
The korowai that hung on my wall has gone. I don't remember when you took it down. I guess it gets to a point when you stop noticing the changes. You replaced it with a painting of the sun, its golden, evening light casting long over the ocean water.
The first thing you changed was the doormat. Handwoven, it had sat at my doorstep for years. You just rolled it up, replaced it with a stiff brown one from the hardware store. You told me this was more practical, better for getting the dirt off your shoes. I agreed. It says WELCOME on the front of it. I guess it's nice. I can learn to live with it.
I look at the word beneath my feet. WELCOME. You put your arms around me from behind. "I think I'll stay a while. You don't mind, do you?" I close my eyes.
"Not at all."

I wonder, as I look through my camera roll, why my life changed so quickly. It's quieter now. No more calls with friends until 3 am. Weekly dinners with Sam and Solomon and Marshall became bi-weekly, then monthly, then every six months, then just whenever. I haven't seen any of them for months.

You answer the phone for me now, pick up before I can reach it. They ask if I'm okay. You tell them I'm fine. Then hang up. They've stopped calling. It took a while to notice no one talks to me anymore. Apart from you. I just wonder when it happened. I don't bring it up. You'd just say that no one understands what we have. You always have a reason.
I can't remember what my sister's favourite song is. It's strange, how close we were. I haven't seen her since I met you.
I look up as I hear you take your keys. I ask where you're going. A short reply. Pub. I ask how long you'll be. You look at me. "I think I'll stay a while. You don't mind, do you?" I turn away.
"Not at all."
The sunset shines through the window. The ocean tides pull back. You lock the door behind you.

All I said was that I didn't like the doormat. You hit me for that. Told me to stop being ungrateful. Told me I can't live in the past forever. Told me I'm lucky you found me.
The sun sets behind us, its last light going behind the hills.
I told you to leave.
You don't mind, do you?

I wonder, as I look back, why I loved you so much. Why I changed so much for you, why I did so much for you, why I adorned my wax wings and flew. Just to be closer to you. Why I loved you the way tide loves shore - returning, even after being thrown back.
The wax you melted ran down my back. The ocean caught me as I fell, its water cooled the burns the wax left behind. My skin, once untouched, now lay covered with white rivulets of flesh.

You just couldn't let me go, could you.

But it's funny.
Even as I fell I reached for your light.

I thought you were my forever, Colin.

But slowly, beneath the ocean surface, I realised you would

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