

Nel Herche

Uneasy Night

The flood of her fellow elevator passengers forced Sadie into a sloppy queue that halted before the only two functioning exit stalls in the tube station. It was a miniature mechanical Scylla and Charybdis, everyone frozen in indecision before settling on one of the two. Sadie chose Scylla to the left since it seemed the lesser of the two evils. Charybdis was backed up by a man still trying to pull a card from his wallet.

Her turn, and after a close call with her messenger bag snagging on a door flap, she made her way to the open archway and out onto the pavement. Rushed along with the crowd of bodies flowing out onto the street, Sadie found the sky visible above the familiar red brick buildings outside. This evening sky gleamed with a showy bright blue at the apex of its luminosity, perhaps even already dipping over into edges of a deeper sapphire. The waning or waxing gibbous moon — she could never remember the difference — was large enough to see its lunar seas against the whiter glare of its higher surfaces. A single star winked. The clock face on the tower glowed like a phosphorescent sticker against the darkening heavens.

She had to pick up a few things for dinner, but she should pop over to Mitch's to see if he could squeeze her into his schedule next week. Sadie ran her fingers through her hair and turned onto the smaller walkway lined with shops and daytime cafés.

The pedestrian avenue was already a dimmer sketch than the main street. Heavy shadows and a snappy wind blew open her coat. Folding tables, whose contents drew the eyes of lingering wayfarers, were being cleared of the champagne flutes, piecemeal tea sets, tattered biographies, framed antiquarian postcards, and scenes of hunting dogs. A man with a thin spray of hair standing up against the breeze turned sideways to pass through the doorway. Sadie caught a flicker of her boot and ankle in the wide gilded mirror held in his thick hands.

Looking through the glass door, she saw Mitch reclined in the hair-washing station chair. She sighed when she saw the two women inside, knowing she would have to be polite.

"Sadie, this is Nisha, and she is just about to leave for a big trip."

"That's great," Sadie said softly, gracelessly. She inquired about Nisha's itinerary, feeling a thorny prickle from inserting herself into this person's intimate comings and goings. However, Nisha seemed more than happy to share her adventure over the next six months with a complete stranger. Sadie's eyes darted from Nisha's face to the waning light behind the glass. She could barely discern the bulky figures passing by the window. Darkness swallowed each form as it briefly touched the warm light filtering thinly from the single bulb inside the shop. Sadie pulled her small appointment book from her bag and cast around for her pencil.

"Your roots are terrible," Mitch announced. Sadie stared at her feet, defying an absurd shame. How dare her hair grow efficiently over the last three weeks.

"Are you tired?" Mitch studied her face closely.

"Yes," Sadie responded, not having been aware of the feeling until he named it. "I am a bit tired."

She laughed it off, over her shoulder whilst making a hasty retreat backwards. She pulled the door shut tight and turned into a draft that smacked her cheeks with its chilled hands. It had been stuffy inside the shop. She let the wind kick around her coat, ruffling her shirt against her warm belly.

Sadie turned back to face the high street. Most of the shops were dark now, pitching the path into a cavern of murkiness. The cobblestones shone in the weak light, but everything else was nebulous. Sadie wished she could go straight home. She ran through the list of ingredients she needed to buy for the night's dinner — beef mince, onions, mushrooms, courgettes, and maybe some pomegranate seeds. She remembered to check her wife's additions to the text thread she had sent earlier — *sliced bread, napkins, fruit, maybe a pack of smokey rashers for breakfast?*

With her two bags, Sadie began the trek uphill to their flat and was struck with the impossibility of rising to the challenge of that insurmountable incline. She hadn't done much that day, just attended an afternoon class, but her body ached as if she had finally used the pilates class coupon gathering dust on her nightstand from her birthday.

Sadie gained some traction as she passed by Amélie's bakery. It seemed like years since she had asked for a tomato, mozzarella, and basil sandwich on an olive baguette earlier in the afternoon. Usually, it was her favourite quick lunch. Today it tasted of

sour milk. She had eaten half of it and thrown the remainder into the bin on the train platform.

She stopped to change the bags in her hands, switching so the heavier one was in her stronger hand.

After they sold their car and had to walk everywhere, Sadie and Meg's daughter had divided the journey to and from their flat into four distinct sections. Sadie had just arrived at the beginning of the last chunk — the home stretch. The gloom enveloped her in a heavy weight that prevented her from moving through its density. Sadie paused. She set her bags next to her legs and leaned against the tall stone wall next to the narrow pavement running alongside the road. She had never thought to place her shoulder on the moss-coated stones before but felt ravaged by the ethereality of her dizzy head.

The black night was lit occasionally by the passing cars playing chicken on the single-lane two-way road, but mostly she felt hidden in the arms of the shrubs overhanging the walkway. In a brief quiet, Sadie could hear a robin singing gayly to herself in the dark behind the leafy foliage. Sadie thought it strange that she was sweating in her light raincoat, with the cool air blowing and rattling leaves.

After a short rest, Sadie breached the crest of the hill and coasted in measured steps down to their row house. Night swirled at her feet threatening to trip her as she felt her way blindly down the steps, gripping a rarely used handrail to avoid tipping down the stairs. At the door, she rang the bell. She couldn't be bothered to try to find her keys.

Meg's brown bobbed hair and big smile met her at the door. The smile began to fade when Sadie handed over the two bags.

"I'm just feeling a bit tired."

Sadie sat on the end of the couch she rarely used, propped rigidly upright against one midcentury block arm.

Meg brought her Prosecco in a champagne coupe dotted with floating pomegranate seeds. Sadie sipped. Meg put on her favourite Oscar Peterson album *Night Train* before returning to the kitchen. The sounds of muffled chopping filled the room.

The sparkling wine tickled her stomach. She joined Meg in the kitchen. Pressed the beef mince into thin steaks. Seasoned the patties with onion powder, salt and pepper. Poured the filtered water into a pot to boil the rice. Dripped some oil into the pan for the vegetable stir fry. Couldn't follow a word Meg was saying to her. Gave up. Wanted to sit down. Frustrated with this everlasting standing and stirring.

Once everything was set, nearly ready but waiting on the steaks, Sadie felt a restless pacing dominate her limbs. Instead of sitting back down on the couch, she wandered through the lounge past Meg, who now scrolled her phone absently while clicking an ice cube around her glass of bourbon. Sadie wiggled the key in the French doors and pushed them open.

"Bit cold for open doors, don't you think?" Meg asked her, yanking her cardigan tighter around her shoulders.

"The air just feels stuffy," Sadie said, ignoring Meg's shiver and nudging the doors a little further open. "And the scent of cooking grease from the steaks is... unappetising." She moved back towards the door to the kitchen. Leaned across to reach her glass and took a sip, hoping to catch one of the floating pomegranate seeds, but it bumped against her lip and swam away before she could catch it.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Your cooking always smells appetising." Meg glanced up from her phone. "Look at your shadow."

Sadie turned and stared at her perfect silhouette cast behind her, slightly larger but holding the coupe

glass gracefully in an open palm away from her body. She took another sip. Got a seed without even trying. It exploded in a rush of unpleasant fruitiness. She coughed and swallowed.

A heavy night had settled into the back garden. She could no longer see the outline of the trees that bordered the roughly cut lawn and reached high up to the sky. Even with the doors wide, she could not hear even one chattering bird, although the foxes would certainly start their screeching soon.

Sadie returned to the kitchen to pull the tray of steaks from the oven and place them on the hob to cool. She stared at their sickly brown flesh.

She later texted Meg from the floor of the bathroom, her legs cramped from being curled between the sink pedestal and tub. Sadie had piled a few damp towels for a makeshift pillow and shivered mightily under a robe she had thrown over her body. Her stomach flip-flopped again.

*I think it was the sandwich.
Carry on without me. Goodnight. xo*

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