

Immersion / The Sink

Do you know how it feels to live underwater?

The voice was as faint as a trickle, but it seemed to be coming from the bathroom of Scott's apartment. And I thought I'd heard something else in the background, too: a barely perceptible *clonk*, like a small metal object - one of the fittings on the mirror, maybe - falling into the sink. I looked around the room, but it was clear nobody else had noticed. Most of us were still in a post-balloon haze, Anna on the bed leaning against Scott's shoulder. He'd never have let her up there if he was sober. At the desk was his new friend Loïc, bent forward and squinting at the YouTube search bar.

They'd met while standing in line at a bar: Loïc had recently moved from Belgium to work in customer finance for a phone company whose name nobody could pronounce, but he had a sideline as a weekend electro DJ and had immediately endeared himself to Scott by teaching him how to make playlists on Traktor. Everything seemed to happen very fast in these early days of the assistantship, and within two weeks, the pair of them had gone halves on a job lot of whipped cream canisters on eBay, which is how I found myself in the accommodation complex of a French high school in Rezé, at the far end of the number 3 tram line, huffing nitrous oxide on a weeknight and hearing things that weren't really there.

This was surprising, though, because I was pretty sure the trip, such as it was, was already over. After he'd asked how many of us would like a go, and four people raised their hands - Anna, Loïc, myself and Gwilym, the other half of the room not wanting any part of it - Scott had told us to expect hallucinations. But ten minutes ago, when I'd taken the nozzle, squirted it into the raspberry pink balloon, pressed the tacky rubber between my lips and gulped the whole thing down, I'd felt precisely nothing. I blacked out for about thirty seconds, then came back to the room with a ringing in my ears and no transcendence for the privilege.

What do you know about transcendence?

This was quieter still, and somehow hoarse, as if the voice - wherever it came from - was exhausting the last ragged reserves of its effort just to make itself heard. I'd only been a teacher for less than a month, thrown into the job after a laughably cursory half-day of training, but there was a strategy here I already recognised: asking the same question for a second time in a slightly different

way, and hoping for a fuller response. Few of my students seemed to feel the same way, but the way I'd been raised, it was only polite to try to give an answer. I pushed myself up, legs a little rubbery, and stumbled to the bathroom. Behind me, Scott muttered something I wasn't interested in hearing.

There was nothing in the sink. I don't know what I'd expected, but to be honest, if you'd asked me a month ago to describe the kinds of things I'd be doing, the kinds of people I'd meet, on my year abroad as an English language assistant in a city in the west of France I'd never been to, had essentially picked as a name off a list - it could have been Nancy as easily as Nantes - then I wouldn't have mentioned any of this. So instead I looked at myself in the mirror - the thick-framed glasses; the nerdy T-shirt no one else found funny; a hometown barber's bad excuse for an undercut already tufting out above my ears - and thought about the questions she'd asked me. (It sounded like a woman's voice, but I tried not to read too much into that.)

I was the only person at this party wearing a blazer. I had friends, all right - they were outside now, speculating about why I was taking so long - but I'd had friends at school, too, and at a house party like this one of them handed me vinegar while I was pass-out drunk and told me it was water. The person I knew best here was probably Anna - we both lived on the same floor of the *foyer de jeunes travailleurs* in Place Ste Elisabeth; we arrived on the same day, issued with the same scratchy orange blanket and the same set of abstruse house rules. She'd taught me something she called the 'bottom of the glass technique' for downing drinks without violently retching, a simple case of mind over matter, and demonstrated it multiple times in our first month in the city in the streets around Commerce with a bottle of *alimentation* rosé. I had to respect that. Anna had done the balloons as well, but seemed more blasé about the whole experience - her first two years of university in Newcastle with Scott had been fairly different from mine.

Our token induction, in a draughty lecture theatre on the university campus, was too rushed and crowded for much conversation. Some people there were audibly furious about having to get the coach in from the Vendée for *this*; others already seemed to have written lesson plans. But I'd met most of the rest of the assistants in my social group a few days later at a gathering in the Jardin des Plantes, organised on Facebook by somebody who'd come in from out of town for the day and who I'd never seen since. About a dozen people came: some of them arrived together, forced into alliance by their schools or their allotted towns two hours from the city, and greeted

other English-speakers with the wide-eyed look of people waking from an apocalyptic dream pleased to find the world is still outside the door.

Anna and I had gone in on the tram. There were goats there in a small enclosure by the entrance, which delighted her, and fat ducks roaming between an array of little lakes and ponds. We weren't quite sure where the group was meeting, until eventually we stumbled on a semi-circle of heads - one of which I recognised as my lycée colleague Kirsten's from her throaty laugh - peeping out above a conifer hedge which came up to my shoulders, like a secret garden within the garden. Entering through the only gap, we saw a blonde guy with a receding hairline, his face slightly ruddy in the autumn sunlight, sitting at the central point of a curved stone bench and holding forth to the gathered crowd, King Arthur in an FCUK T-shirt. I was looking down at the strange paving beneath our feet - thin slivers of slate which all converged on the circle's centre - when Anna said 'I know that guy from uni,' and Scott clocked her in turn before she could tell me whether or not she liked him.

I was glad to have met these people, and in some ways we had a lot in common: we were all here in our early twenties, at the start of a new decade, on a cushion of student loans and a low-income state housing benefit I never felt certain we were technically entitled to claim, despite all the bureaucratic hoops we had to jump through to obtain it. The basic salary was €800 a month to teach no more than ten hours a week. The Americans were mostly a couple of years older, bumming around Europe for a year or two after college, but me and most of my fellow Brits had never had this much disposable income, this much freedom, in our lives to date.

Sure, the loans would have to be paid back one day - and had recently been tripled by the outgoing Labour government - but for now they were just abstract numbers leaching silently from one institution to another. What I saw in my mind was something like how I imagined a blood bank: liquid flowing back and forth between two huge vessels shrouded in icy mist, an experiment in perpetual motion. But for now, living in France felt like a dream, and one with a reliable alarm clock: a fluffy simulacrum of independence with the comfort of normality - final year, dissertations, exams - waiting at the end of it. We were all just here to make the most of it, and if that meant getting fucked up on inhalants on a Thursday in the half-term holiday I didn't even know we had, I'd made my choices and could hardly complain.

But so far I'd only made friends with a single native speaker of the language - another new teacher at my school - and I wasn't sure yet about Loïc. Sometimes, when I walked around at night and saw groups of young French people sitting around their outdoor tables on the Rue Scribe, laughing and smoking and drinking out of tulip glasses, discussing the film they just saw at the Katorza, I'd feel a palpable and faintly pathetic sadness. I couldn't figure out how to join them, how to make their circle open for me. As hard as I tried to master the language, the social world I was observing seemed impossibly distant, like I'd never be invited to find out what the joke was at the after-party in the upstairs window. And when I thought about friendship, I thought about the drinks I'd poured myself before the canisters came out: three ice cubes, Diet Coke to mask the taste, and as much as I could stand of the vodka with the wolf on the bottle. The mixture was a means to an end, which was a feeling I couldn't access otherwise: dissolution, the loss of edges. In social situations, what I wanted more than anything was to melt like the ice in the sparkling liquid, to lose the sense of rigid separateness from others which I often felt; to dilute myself in company.

Last year I'd studied Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* for the first time, and had heavily underlined in blue biro, without knowing at all what I wanted to say about it, a speech given by one of the play's interchangeable twins. Separated at birth from his brother, Antipholus seeks out similarity even if it brings the risk - which he might in fact desire - of subsuming his identity into an undifferentiated flood:

I to the world am like a drop of water
That in the ocean seeks another drop,
Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,
Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself.

I looked vaguely at the mirror, with no clearer sense of where the voice had come from, and said, under my breath: 'Does that answer your question?'

Nothing - so for the sake of appearances, I ran the tap. It was freezing, so cold I gasped, and the water pressure was unbearably high. Neither of these were issues which Scott, who got his onsite accommodation free on top of the basic salary, was likely to complain about, but they did at first distract me from something else that happened: another *clonk*, louder this time, as a rusty green key which looked like a neglected antique shot out of the pipe where it had previously been lodged, and the water came after it, surging and sucking, like the fingers of a grasping hand. All this

movement had the opposite effect, however: the key clattered off the rim of the basin onto the bathroom floor. I had no idea how something like that could get in there, but without knowing what else to do, I picked it up and slipped it into my pocket, reasoning vaguely that it probably belonged to somebody who might want it back some day. The water swirled around the plughole, slurping and gargling in the absence of an object to cling onto, and I frantically rotated the tap until it stopped running and started to drain away with a sound like a frustrated sigh.

At which point, Scott hammered on the door outside saying ‘Mate, what the fuck are you doing in there?’ and it all felt like quite a lot to explain. It didn’t matter, anyway: it probably wasn’t real, and it was just like me to get the effects of a drug a little bit too late and in a less fun way than anybody else did. So I went back to the party, looking down at my hands just in case.

‘Never known anybody piss as much as you,’ Scott carried on as the door closed behind him. ‘Anna thinks there’s something wrong with your dick.’

‘Should get Alyssa to find out for us,’ Gwilym added, backing him up as usual.

I was powerfully relieved that she wasn’t there to hear this: like Kirsten, she’d made it clear on the Facebook event page that nothing about the balloon idea really appealed. But a part of me wondered what Riley made of it, sitting on a floor cushion in the corner, sober by comparison with the rest of us, her eyes giving nothing away.

Outside, underneath the window, I could hear the tram going past, heading all the way back from Espace Diderot to our foyer in Jean-Jaurès. The sound of its bell was like a pulse ping-ponging back and forth across the city, and sometimes when we travelled together, we’d count off the names of the last few stops, muttering to each other in the sing-song voice of the pre-recorded announcement. Commerce, followed by Bretagne - which took its name from the Tour de Bretagne, the city’s tallest building, looming over it, although we weren’t in Brittany as far I knew. ‘It looks like a giant USB stick,’ Anna observed one day, and now the image came to my mind every time I saw the exposed white top of the blocky black tower pointing up into the sky. After that, our place was just around the corner.

Right now I dearly wanted to ask her if we could just go home. But apparently it was my turn to choose a song on YouTube. As usual, I panicked and picked something someone else liked, something I’d put on last week which Scott had put on the week before that. ‘Two Dots’ by

Lusine: a slow, pulsing, almost ambient number with an unintelligible but beguiling vocal hook. The looping, trancelike melody filled the room, and I turned it up, closed my eyes, and hoped it meant I wouldn't have to talk to anybody.

When I opened them a few minutes later, Gwilym was still in the corner awkwardly chatting up the German assistant who taught at my school on Wednesdays, and Anna was proving to Scott that actually she *did* know how to open a beer on a countertop, and Riley met my eye with a kind of ironic acknowledgement: I'm not sure this is how I want to spend all my evenings either. Though honestly, maybe I did — I didn't know what I wanted. The room spun gently, and Lena shamed us with her perfect French grammar, and Riley's silence could have meant anything. I got up, mixed myself another drink. Squeezing the sad air out of the closing Coke bottle, I wondered as usual if I'd got the proportions right. Bottom of the glass, at any rate, Edward; bottom of the glass.