

BIX GABRIEL

Once

Once, a woman sat down to eat her lunch.

Josanna, or Josy, as her new friends called her, set the tiered lunch box – a recent purchase to accommodate single portions – on the table abutting the window. She spread the napkin across her lap, smoothing the square that was like a postcard on the billboard of her thighs. Not that she was advertising anything. But her new pants, black stretch velvet, announced herself as herself. Today, she was having the lunch she'd craved for weeks. She had dressed for the occasion.

From the top-most container of the mini-tower, chunks of beef studded with peppercorns glimmered up at her. Fried onions glistened in the ridges. She had cooked the dish that morning, in the kitchenette she shared with Lena, the electric burner as low as it could go so that the onion melted into the meat. Unlike every time she'd made it before, for the children, for Jochim, this time she ground the pepper mill six, seven, eight times, the powder collecting in clumps whose edges darkened in the fat.

Finally, she had the office to herself. After weeks of waiting, her colleagues were away, and her boss, Giulia, was out for lunch. Josanna unfastened the second tier in the tower. The parathas she'd wrapped in foil were still hot. From the small desk that barely contained her, Josanna's view was the basilica of Santa Maria di Collemaggio, its cracked blue dome the colour of the sky, so that the sky itself appeared broken. The Apennine Mountains spread like a watercolour beyond the limits of L'Aquila. If she looked down to the piazza, she'd see the children, six year olds who stomped in the water, teenagers who took pains to keep their bangs dry, couples lolling against the curve of the fountain, leaning into each other for a kiss every now and then. She wondered if A and D would be like that, scarcely looking away from their phones to nuzzle girls in public. Children, when she left them, now two years ago, she couldn't conjure them any differently, A's chubbiness at nine, D, though _a year younger, inching his way toward teenage.

She wiped down her plate, porcelain edged with blue, thirteen years old, as old as her marriage would have been. The plates were the only objects to travel with her – from India on that first and last journey to London, and now to Italy. They were one of the few items she'd chosen for her trousseau – her dowry, if she were being honest, though her Catholic parents liked to believe they were above the Hindu custom.

She felt something move behind her. Instantly, she spun around. Surveyed the room, twice, thrice. Nothing. But she sensed something or someone. She scolded herself, "Don't be a fool."

The day Josanna arrived in L'Aquila, the nuns made fresh pasta, rolling the dough over the wooden frame strung with wires, ribbons of fresh cannarozzetti falling like hair. Lena, obviously-dyed-red ponytail pulled tightly away her plump face, pushed over a plate of egg crepes. "Eat. You missed lunch."

Josanna loved the Italian way of drawing out the sounds of the last letter, "Eattt," misseduh," "lunchuh," "latehh." It made her less self-conscious about her own English, accented with the Malayalam

that all the years of living in Croydon had not chiseled away. She took a cautious bite and snorted at the fieriness of the crepe.

“In L’Aquila, we havvuh, eh, we are famous for la diavolillo pepperoncino,” said Lena. “How you likuhh?”

Josanna nodded, and Lena sat down with her at the table, easily taking up two seats, her girth wider than Josanna’s, though that would change once they both enrolled in the ‘Healthy Living’ program that the shelter introduced the next month, after which the egg crepes were taken off the menu.

At mass that first evening, Josanna noticed Giulia, the only outsider to the shelter’s residents. She saw her again at the monthly Circle of Prayer, nuns and laywomen praying and talking and eating together. Josanna’s diffidence and lack of Italian prevented her from joining the group with the eagerness that gains approval and opens circles. But fat people are not meant to be shy. So everyone took Josanna for standoffish.

When Giulia said she was looking for a junior designer, but “someone who does not talk, talk, talk all day and night,” Josanna submitted her application with the meager portfolio she had assembled during the graphic design classes that the shelter offered.

At the interview, Giulia, who headed the design and print division at the Studi Universitari Santa Maria di L’Aquila, asked, “Why did you come to Italy, to our little town here, Josy?”

Josanna had opened her mouth to say what she was thinking, that she’d seen L’Aquila on television, clips of the hills, the cobbled side streets, captured before the earthquake, and later as the rubble disintegrated, the nuns helping to clear the debris, and the ticker on the screen with the phone number of the convent taking in women and children who had become homeless. Somehow the number had stuck in her mind, though she had no consciousness of memorizing it, and it had come to her months later, after she’d heard from the last shelter she’d contacted in London, all of which were full.

She said, “I saw the news of the earthquake. I wanted to help.” Giulia’s severe glasses slipped down the bridge of her nose. The earthquake of 2009 had brought L’Aquila attention that not every

resident appreciated. Though the church preached charity, pity was unwelcome.

Josanna added, “I needed — need, a home, for me, my children.” It was the first time she’d mentioned the children, the idea of a new home, to anyone outside the shelter. But Giulia probably knew her story. Josanna felt the job slipping away. A moment later, Giulia smiled.

Josanna stole through the main office area, an open-floor plan dominated by a long worktable, where the designers looked at proofs through their loupes. The office was empty, the reason she had chosen today for the lunch she’d been craving. Fabiola, Susanna, and Enrico, the other designers, were at a conference in Rome, giddy at the big city. Ricardo, the art director, was in Paris celebrating some occasion with his boyfriend.

Josanna flipped the switch and the office flooded with light. She scrutinized the vacant desks, absorbing the hum of machines that had replaced silence. No sign of a single living thing.

It was impossible for anyone to enter the office without Josanna noticing. The old lift creaked and groaned and arrived at their floor with a jarring shudder that was unmistakable. She swung open Giulia’s door. Empty.

Josanna returned to her own tiny office at the other end of the floor, telling herself that she was being paranoid, hearing sounds, imagining ghosts. She locked her room and stood just inside the door, seeing and re-seeing the space she had made her own.

The room had been a repository for everything that the University’s design and production office had created until 1997, when the digital era crept in. Fifteen years later, the office still produced printed material but their storage now was a server, and a row of hard drives. When she first saw it, the old storage room was a jumble of placards advertising film screenings and performances of Teatro Di Pietra, magenta brochures with black type yellowed at the edges, a hundred versions of booklets for departments that no longer existed,

and strewn among the paper, blocks of ampersands and typefaces. Josanna had the urge to pocket the most beautiful letters of the Bodoni font: A and D. Running her thumb against the ridges of the typeface, she'd felt the coarse stubble of A's shaven head the day after his first soccer match, a loss he'd borne silently, his body rigid in his bed when she said goodnight. The curve of the d was D's fist against her thigh when the lights went out in the Tube. In the end, she'd cleared out the room, organized the materials, and placed the typefaces in the windowsill, an open secret of her yearning.

Now, from against the door, Josanna's eyes searched shelf, bookcase, cabinet, rug, bin, canvas for an intruder. Another rustle came from the locked cupboard. She tiptoed over. Nothing to be seen. She placed her ear against the wood. She felt the wood beating, the forest's heart within the door. She pulled her chest away, her upper body, her shoulders an animal's: ear cocked, eye sharp, entire body alert. She caught herself re-living what had once been a daily habit, one that she was still unlearning a year after the practice was necessary.

On her second wedding anniversary, Josanna made a special meal. That evening she'd let the meat crisp, char, "just short of burned," the way Chef Sanjay Thomas recommended on TV. From the door, her lip between her teeth, she'd watched Jochim biting into a piece, seeming to savor it until he said, "What is this?"

Before she could explain, he continued, "Why do you have to watch me all the time? You think I'm the idiot in the idiot box?" She'd returned to the kitchen and stayed there until she smelled his after-meal cigarette.

Over the next few days, she found little parcels of masticated beef deposited in nooks around the apartment: in the sleeve of her blouse, under a vase, among her jewelry; reaching for the light switch, her fingers had come away clammy from a fleshy gob tucked at the base of the lamp on her night-stand.

For months she lay awake questioning how she had misjudged Jochim so acutely, berating herself for her cooking, her experiments,

her ineptitude, her expanding waist-line. When she became pregnant, she increased the fervor of her prayers. First out of self-pity, then from fear, then for forbearance. She gave up eating meat as a bargain with the Lord, safety in exchange for sacrifice. Now thirteen years later, the deal was done.

In the room that had been forgotten, that she'd made her own, Josanna's hand rose to her chest, her lungs tight. From a tube of posters, a shadow scurried out and scampered down the shelf. Josanna forced herself to breathe out a big gust of air. The grey-brown shape of a mouse surged up the leg of her desk. She shouted, "Ay, you dirty little rascal thing!"

The mouse sped up, racing faster than her eye could make out. "My lunch, oh, oh, oh!" She leapt towards her desk.

The day of her departure she'd invited Smiley, Jochim's cousin, for tea. Smiley lived in West Croydon, only twenty minutes away and for a while, the two families had made a tradition of Sunday lunch together. But since Smiley's husband Anthony had hurt his back working at the distillery, Smiley worked weekend shifts at Tesco's. Now, on a weekday, she'd been delighted to get away from Anthony and her own fifteen-year old, a boy-man who ordered his mother about like everyone else did.

Four o'clock, Josanna had said, and had kept her phone on until ten past, when she received the first confused message from Smiley, saying, "I'm outside your flat, chechi, where are you? I'm waiting." It was only after that voicemail that she'd destroyed the SIM card, knowing that Smiley would be at the door when D arrived from school in a few minutes, demanding food. She'd left them a feast: homemade pastries, bakery-bought cream puffs, cake, an assortment of biscuits. It was her one give-away, but one that everyone would assume was for Smiley's benefit. D would devour the mince curry puffs he loved but

would A recognize his favorite, the round sweet-salt biscuits, three tiny holes marking each one?

Poor Smiley. She'd have become the broker of Jochim's rage for those first twenty-four hours when he might break the cardinal rule of no harm to the children.

Before she she left, Josanna had spent countless hours thinking through every scenario. All futile. The day she renounced her home, she refused to think about what the children would do, what they would think. Even now, a year later, her only memory of that day: turning off the electric kettle, a second later switching it back on, and worrying that the apartment could burn down. She'd almost unpacked her small bag, taken off the jeans she'd never worn before, and let her hair out from under the woolen hat. She'd stayed in the kitchen, picking at the snacks, crumbs littering the counters and her leather jacket, unable to move. Finally, she remembered D's face a few nights before, pinched in the glow of his night lamp, and her passing by, caressing his hair, him flinching, unconsciously, and in that moment, seeing him outgrown her.

One afternoon, walking with Lena past the salumeria, Josanna, unable to stop herself, had mumbled, "At least some mortadella." It was five pm. She'd been hungry since the watery soup that passed for lunch. Lena stopped in the street and raised a finger at Josanna, "Little choices add up to big ones." Josanna's eyes had widened but when she saw that Lena was serious, she said nothing. They kept walking. In the nine months since they'd enrolled in the weight-loss Lena had lost twenty-two kilos, Josanna seventeen. Together, they counted calories, and sweated at the gym, and shared cold water late at night when hunger woke them.

They avoided talking about the past. Their social worker, Maia, did enough of that, parsing what had happened, what they'd done, what they hadn't. It was her phrase, "Little choices add up to big ones," that Lena was echoing.

Josanna found the talk about choices – big and little ones – unending, the preoccupation of every woman there. "Why?" she

wondered. So that they could dissect the results? Determine where their choices placed them in the spectrum from victim to survivor? Or as one of the shelter's monthly guest speakers had said, "Thrivers."

In the shelter, she was known as the woman who had left her children behind by choice. Her choices bewildered them, bewildered her. She didn't fool herself that the children would be unscathed. Yet, there were things about Jochim that made her certain he wouldn't willfully hurt the children. His habit of tearing up at touching scenes in movies, laughing or coughing or shouting at the screen to cover up his emotion. His love for surprises, the spontaneous burst into song accompanied by wild hip shakes and flowering hands in the middle of the street, charming strangers and her. His self-pity the nights he lay his head on her arm, sending flares of pain all the way to her fingertips.

Her decision to leave, twelve years in, had no triggering incident, no final straw, no match lit, no break point. One night, as they watched television, A on the couch, legs folded over the arm of the sofa, controlling the remote, D absently plucking at his lip, Josanna standing at the door, a dawning that had been tucked away unfolded: soon, this would end, it would never end. The children would grow up, leave, she'd age, he'd age, they might even leave England, return to India, and they'd be the same story.

What story?

Once, a woman, waiting for a bus, was dazzled by how effortlessly a man asked her for directions. They boarded the bus, and he followed her home. Day after day, he stood at the bus stop, carrying an umbrella for her when it rained.

Once, the woman's hair loosened from the bun she wore. She shook it out in the street and twisted it back into a roll, the lift of her arms causing her breasts to rise. She did it to provoke him, he said, to entice other men. She started to wear her hair in braids.

Once, the woman asked the man to leave her alone. He said no, for ten days, a thousand times no, while her alarm swelled like a water balloon. On day eleven, he was waiting at the bus stop, doused in kerosene, ready to light a match. If she wanted him gone, he'd be out of her life forever, he said.

Once, the woman asked the man if he loved her. Too much, he said, didn't he prove his love daily?

The mouse was no longer on the desk, no longer anywhere in sight, but Josanna's hand trembled against her thigh. The invader! Determined to disrupt her one meal alone, away from Lena's friendship, the women at the shelter, Giulia's kindness.

Josanna contemplated the food in the carrier: the beef coagulating, the parathas half-wrapped in their foil winking in the sun. How much time had passed? Her stomach roiled at the thought of Giulia walking in on her. But the door to her little room was locked; even if she somehow missed the clang of the lift, she'd hear Giulia's steps tapping down the far end of the corridor.

She smoothed the foil and the crackle was loud, far louder than a square of aluminum could make. Could there be more than one critter? She spun the chair around, scraping the floor. "Jesus, please, no." Somehow the idea of one mouse was tolerable. Barely. But more than one multiplied instantly into an army.

She scanned the room again: vitrine clear, shelves intact, bookcases empty of anything but books. She opened the lid of the printer, a tabletop unlike the consumer models that occupied the middle of the main office. Blank white sheets glared up at her through the gaps in the cartridges and the paper roller. A rumble ran through Josanna, the floor. The entire building vibrated. Josanna gripped the printer. The mouse darted across the room. The rumbling stopped.

She and Lena were on the treadmill when Maia came in with the news. She was already sweating in the eight minutes since Lena had increased the incline on the walk-belt, and her mouth was so dry she couldn't feel her tongue.

Maia waved a piece of paper, her mouth wide and excited. Josanna switched off the treadmill and almost fell forward, grasping the arms of the machine to steady herself.

She panted, “Ennuh?” reverting to the Malayalam sound that replaced the question.

“He has agreeduh!” Maia handed Josanna the paper. “You are freeuh. Josy.”

Lena hugged her. Josanna read the notice. Legal jargon, but the meaning was clear. She had been granted the divorce. But, “The children. It says, the children, they remain---” Her voice broke.

Maia bobbed her head. “Si, si. I have told you...”

Lena dragged Josanna to the seats. The three of them sat heavily, the chairs protesting. Josanna turned the paper over and over. When she sought divorce she’d petitioned for custody of the children. Maia, and the lawyer, a nice man called Guillermo, had warned her that she could lose. L’Aquila, so appealing on the television, and an actual refuge, had been an abysmal choice. Leaving her barely ten and eleven-year old sons was one thing, but crossing the border from England into Italy, had given Jochim the ammunition to label her departure as willful desertion. Guillermo shook his craggy head, “It’s very hard to fight to bring them to you when you came so far away.” And she had no evidence to submit in her defense, no bruises, no scars, none of the signs of trauma that someone like Lena had.

Somehow, she’d fed herself hope. It was what had kept her returning to the gym every day after she staggered out and swore to Lena that she was done with it all. It was what had replaced every pat of butter, every second helping. Now, Maia was picking the paper off the floor, where, somehow, it had dropped.

One morning, days later, Josanna awoke, her mouth wet with longing for her pepper-fried beef.

The sun shifted. Josanna breathed in, out. A breeze from the window lifted her hair. She wiped her brow, patted the sweat off her upper lip. She heaped bitter gourd and two scoops of the pepper beef

on to her plate. The desk suddenly reverberated under her fingers. From somewhere far away, she heard a crash, or thunder, or a building's collapse. She closed her eyes. The roar stopped. She opened her eyes. The mouse sat on the windowsill. It was a baby, the color and size of a dust ball. Its ears were pink and its nose was a flesh-colored crayon tip. Josanna stared.

“What a fool you are, Josanna,” she thought.

From the piazza she heard shouts, and somewhere in the distance, another boom. The mouse stopped sunning itself. The building quaked. The mouse's tiny head danced in the light, and Joanna considered how it would feel to stretch her hand out, and between her forefinger and thumb crush the mouse's skull. She wondered if she could do it, if she had it within her to flatten its body against the glass. Her food cooled against her wrist.

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