The Cigarette

MAE - 16.48

It is Thursday when you arrive, this second time.

We are listening to that show on the radio, that I had grown to find funny and you would sneer at. But I liked it, and Daf liked it, and here we were, older, fatter, laughing at comedy on the radio while we toyed at the seconds of dinner.

We had a good table, chunky, wooden with marks from careless burns of pans placed directly on the surface, and scars from knives with vigorous hackings that should have been on chopping boards but sometimes life is short. It was a table with four matching chairs and when there were more guests for dinner or debates we had to grab more from around the house, and, on occasion, the orange space hopper from the shed that Daf refused to throw out. When we had to bring it in, every time, she’d do a victory dance while I mock scowled.

It was a good kitchen full of cooking smells because often there was me stirring a slow cooked stew or Daf washing mud off potatoes she’d just dug up.

If I’m making it sound like a paradise you ruined, it wasn’t, but you did.

Just before you knock, I’m twirling the corkscrew between my fingers, pondering. Daf hasn’t yet finished her wine and I have mine. She’s always been slower, more considered, Daf takes her time with things; thoughts, feelings, actions. Her patience creates life, she grows things from the soil, flowers and food, beauty and sustenance. It’s a miracle to me each time and she scatters her gifts upon our table for every meal. Today there’s rainbow carrots with their tops still on.

“Sure, but it’s you, Mae” She emphasises “That puts the meat on the table.” She indicates the lamb we’ve just eaten. Charred, dead, delicious.

I’m full of that meat and potatoes and carrots and contentedness. I want more wine. I wish for something to happen, for a phone to buzz telling of the death of an unknown aunt or someone irrelevant. Or a new contract offered. An excuse to open another one. Anything. I’ve never been content with content.

I don’t wish for you specifically but you arrive anyway.

On a Thursday.

DAF 19.04

When you ring the doorbell Mae jumps up like she is expecting it and I jump like I wasn’t. It is the last thing I want, it’s hard to get her to sit still and just chat sometimes and I have an issue I’ve been wanting to raise for a couple of months, a little issue where I finally say yes to having kids. With some conditions. I am ready to cleave our lives together for good. I feel like I have the moment, perfectly, she is a little sloshed but not too much, peaceable, well fed, relaxed. Mae can take a deep conversation this night and she can’t always. When I bring something up that needs to be brought up I can see the fear in her, and she shuts it down as quick as she can with one of her fast quips, a crafty throwaway witticism, even when it’s something like this where she’s dying for me to say yes.

I don’t know why I’m telling you this, you of all people know Mae.

And maybe you knew that whoever I was, Mae would be up first to answer it, you wouldn’t be faced with a stranger, and maybe you knew that Mae would protect you from the more awkward of the questions. And you do know that she’d let you stay though later you’ll say oh you didn’t for sure, but you just hoped.

From where I am sitting, even with my neck strained, I can't see you. I can just see Mae’s face when she opens the door. I’d left it unlocked again, careless, like a lass raised in the Welsh mountains who forgets about security - which is exactly what I am. I can always read Mae, not because I'm so skilled at reading people but more because she’s got the least pokery face I’ve ever come across.It’s not just her heart on her sleeves it’s her guts and all. And she looks bewildered and intense and like there is a 5 car smash up on the M25 and she is walking away unscathed but not yet sure if anything will ever feel like it did before. And I hear you say “Well, long time no see Chica” and then Mae’s face collapses into shape and she lurches forward to hug you for a very long time.

MAE 19.04

I could not fucking believe it. I’d say you look the same but you only sort of look the same, you look like me still a bit but I’ve got fat and you’re a smoker so your face has lines now, deep grooves, secret passages to escape by, speedy, with your lithe thin body. You are smiling at me expectantly and it must be a coincidence not some crazy manipulation that we are both wearing black vest tops so it makes me glance at the dark blue tattoo on your pale skinny bicep that is exactly the same as mine on my chunkier one. It is definitely you. That fading cheap tattoo reminds me of every promise we made to each other, friends forever, and every time we’ve fallen out, never forgive, and how close and everything and then how distant and nothing we were. And you say so casually, “Well, long time no see Chica” and I just throw myself around you to gobble you up, to sniff your tobaccoed hair and feel your delicate arms inch around me like they are shoplifting again.

“What..what are you doing here?”

“I need a place to stay for a bit. You know how it goes.” You unwind yourself from me but keep your hand on my arm.

“Really? Still?”

“Yep. really”

And then you step right in.

Later Daf will make digs that I’d forgotten she existed, that I look surprised to see her when I draw myself away from you. I shut the door to the outside behind you and put us three inside in our lovely kitchen. But that’s surely what happens in a moment when someone you’ve not seen for a decade makes the first moon landing at your door without warning. What really could Daf expect? Daf says that she is always aware of me, that I have this part of her consciousness at all times even when I’m not about, and she tried to get me to watch a video about love maps to explain it but I never got round to it. She got annoyed about that but I left a note on her side of the bed and had drawn a map on it, complete with sea monsters and various places we loved and hated, and I drew a wiggly line from her to me. Daf cried at that and declared I was both a siren and a kraken, and she put it in her box of cute things I’ve given her.

I introduce you both though Daf already knows who you are from our tattoo and your face and the stories of the old days, of things we got away with and the sad times one of us got caught though I haven’t told her it all, of course, because there’s still warrants out for some of those. And you don’t know who she is because, well, we’ve not been in touch all these years. You graciously go to hug her hello and she stiffens up like you are just a kraken ready to drag her down to the bottom of the ocean. I worry instantly that I’ve not told the best stories about you, maybe because you weren’t always the most loyal, or maybe because I wasn’t, and maybe because good anecdotes need a villain. Daf looks like she is expecting the worst from you as if you’ve come here to derail us rather than you’re here seeking safety. That bit of her that’s always right is right because I am split in two, the now of Daf and the past of you, and the me I am now and the me I used to be.

I do what I always do when in crisis, now and then. I opened that second bottle of wine because that was, after all, why I’d asked the Gods for an intervention on this peaceful night. And you shock me again by saying you’ve given up drinking. Then all you ask, sweetly, politely, if you can smoke in here.

DAF 19:56

You ask if you can smoke in the house, like you’ve time travelled from the 80s, and it is such an outrageous old fashioned ask but delivered so innocently I am silent. And then Mae says “sure” as if this isn’t weird and you offer her one although she doesn’t smoke and she takes it and leans into your flaming lighter.

I’m not letting the tears in. I cry easily and it’s not always just sorrow that brings the tears, sometimes it’s joy, like after sex last night when I came and lay there with Mae and we chatted until 1am which for us, now, is very very late. And it sounds daft as anything to say you nearly cried because someone smoked in your house, or your girlfriend said yes to a cigarette and you were sure she wouldn’t but feelings are feelings and right then I was having so many of them about both girls with their matching tattoos and their matching tops and their faces which once nearly matched enough that CCTV would mistake one for the other.

“Oh!” Says Mae, blowing out smoke “I should have asked you, Daf. Is this ok?” and she pauses and takes another drag.

Sometimes you just know don’t you, your head and heart in unison, your guts so full of instinct you want to fart it out, No, nothing was okay, like your arrival had stolen my Mae and replaced her with an old Mae. But I lie and say yes it is fine, and I sense your eyes flicker over me then as if assessing the threat I was to you and how you would render me neutral.

“We should take it outside, it’s not cold.” Mae says and I know she is panicking but then what happens is you both go out and leave me. Alone in the kitchen with the wine you don’t drink for the smokes you both - apparently - do. The radio is still on but it isn’t that show anymore, it is 8pm news and the global crisis is playing loud while the domestic one whispers outside.

MAE 22:36

We will talk later, me and Daf, when assessing the collateral damage, of how that small moment has been one of rupture, one that she will insist, and continue to insist, we can’t come back from, and I will insist, then and now, that it is nothing and we can. Outside you ask if you can stay a short while and I also say yes without asking Daf. But weirdly that doesn’t bother her so much. She understands that it is not negotiable because you are in trouble, though she doesn’t quite understand so much that neither of us can enquire as to what trouble that is.

“It’s a need to know basis, Daf, and neither of us need to know”. I will explain.

“We surely need to know what we’re harbouring.” Sullen, unconvincing and unconvinced.

I laugh at her for being dramatic and she is so hurt by me still that my amusement makes her wince.

“It must be quite serious if she needs to lie low. And why,” Daf asks again, “Why come to you?”

“Because she knows I can’t say no” I reply, with cynicism.

“You can say that again” She replies, with even more.

I will repeat that I am sorry I smoked in the house, but with every apology Daf will feel more misunderstood, and I will feel more cornered. And confused. Because Daf has never been prudish about anything, like she’s the one who thinks a space hopper instead of a chair is fine, and she’s the one who can leave dishes for days and bins that start to smell. It is a side of Daf I’d not been introduced to before and I don’t warm to this version even while I try to placate her. I will yearn for the old Daf back, the one that would have just had a cigarette too.

I will even start to reassure Daf there is nothing between you and me, but this will make her more furious and incredulous because why would I think she thought otherwise, and a great chasm will open up whereby we are angry strangers, but angry strangers trying to argue in hushed voices in bed because if there is anything left that we share in this moment it is that we don’t want you to hear.

I will hope that we reach a place where we laugh, soon, that of all the trouble with a comrade from a misspent past, hunted by someone dangerous be it a cop, a pimp, or a boyfriend gone wrong, it is one Lucky Strike that is so the problem, one cigarette that will cleave us apart.

 “It was just a cigarette”, I will say again.

DAF 22:37

“It wasn’t.” I will reply. Mae will sigh, deeply, and we lie in bed not touching, as if that one cigarette burnt our whole house down.