

Passages

Claire Hampton

Editor's note: content warning, suicide/suicide ideation, loss/grief, alcohol/drug abuse

I

Jess stood at the painted yellow edge of the platform, a fine metallic dust gathering in the creases of her neck. So many days she had spent here, anaesthetised, waiting for the future to arrive, each week rushing past like these train carriages, so fast, and each week before it, disturbed only by the flicker of grief that wills them to drag her under as the pull of their slipstream draws her closer to the edge, knowing that when the time comes, and the doors release, she'll be forced to make a choice, for her journey to go on, she must find the courage to step aboard.

Amsterdam, Holland, 2000.

The long, cool nights passed slowly, seated on metal chairs outside the coffee shop adjacent to the Oud Kerk, where we first met. You presented me with this journal after a poetry reading, along with the suggestion that I use it to write about our time together. You were so presumptuous, but I accepted your gifts regardless, both the journal and the warmth of your smile.

That year, we spent our evenings laughing and discussing Dadaism with international strangers, thick smoke clinging to our lips, filling our bellies with strong coffee and stroopwafels. We attended late-night parties where we would stare intently into each other's eyes as we fucked beautiful, brilliant men, or women, or both, intoxicated by their philosophies and absinthe, sugar cube tongues on salt skin, never knowing their names, thinking only of each other, thinking only of the moment.

II

Train carriages are a naked space, dressed only with the remnants of transient encounters. Jess watched the nameless/faceless alight in the city, leaving behind clues to their experience of this tiny ephemeral world, a newspaper, a coffee cup, a stirring stick gilded with brown foam, and sometimes, the illuminating minutiae they'd rather stayed buried.

The train ground to a halt and a balding middle-aged man with a flushed face and crooked tie grabbed his laptop and suit jacket, a tightly rolled up bank note falling from his pocket and onto the floor by her feet. He looked up at her with quick eyes as he stooped to collect it, scraping it into his reach with the toe of his polished brogue and stuffing it into his breast pocket. As he hurried off the train, she thought it a pity that he will never know the warmth of her understanding—of why we keep the echoes of our shame so close to our hearts. She stared blankly at her own detritus, the leftover crust of

a curled sandwich, an elastic band, and her Moleskine journal, bookmarked with a strip of photo booth pictures of her husband and son.

She slid the bookmark down into the pages and gazed out of the window, watching the pulsating crowd swarm the platform while contemplating the abject hollowness of life between commutes.

Paris, France, 2000

We ate like kings in Paris, all from a single ring butane stove, while living amongst the “Young Delinquents of the Petit Bourgeois,” an art collective practicing inside an abandoned building. We spent our time writing poetry and music and creating important visual work that we hoped would change the world. Each evening we would gather around a fire pit drinking wine from plastic beakers as we tore down class structure and the government, Liberté, égalité, fraternité emblazoned across the walls and our hearts.

Friendship blossomed with a Polish artist with dirty blonde hair who wrapped herself in fake fur which was covered in red paint and smoked a cigarette from the corner of her mouth as she worked. As my heart began to bloom for her, you and I fought like dogs, gnashing our teeth and tearing into each other's soft flesh, until one night, during a red mist, you slipped away.

I knew then that I couldn't live without you, and I managed to track you down some two weeks later in a doorway in Mons, drunk on Belgian beer and in the lascivious embrace of a bear of the same origin. I remember how you laughed as I serenaded you with an enamel peeling, but relentless, rendition of “Lady Marmalade” before we left it all behind.

III

The bathrooms were always the bumpiest part of the journey on account of their location at the junctions between carriages. As the light flashed “engaged” she staggered around the cubicle, tethered at the knees by her underwear, unsteadily swinging herself onto the toilet seat. Jess removed the e-cigarette from her cleavage and filled her lungs with strawberry shortcake. No one would ever know of her misdemeanour, they would at best suspect the aroma was that of perfume or a cheap body spray. They lacked the exhilaration of genuine cigarettes, but at least the ritual was the same, she could make do, besides, they were much cheaper, which was a boon in her current situation.

Her mind turned to the unexpected expenditure of the previous month in terms of hours worked at her minimum wage job and figured out that she had traded a week and a half of her life to fix the boiler and buy a pair of shoes. That's more life than a thousand “real” cigarettes would take.

She was ripped from her thoughts by someone trying the door.

“It's occupied!” she screeched as she sat back and took another long drag.

Berlin, Germany, 2005

We touched the craters of the bullet holes that riddled the sandstone at the Grosser Stern and considered their origin. Our conjecture regarding firing squads was promptly corrected by a local rickshaw driver who relayed the story of Soviet troops, drunk on vodka, expending their rounds into the walls in celebration of the announcement that WW2 had finally come to an end. We joked that Berlin had certainly retained the hangover vibe, to which he agreed, and pointed us in the direction of the zoo. We were keen to meet the giant panda, an animal neither of us had seen before, and we fully supported their breeding program. To get there, we cut through the park where civilians had burnt the trees for fuel, and we regarded it a miracle of nature that it had been restored to such magnificent abundance in such a short space of time.

We did find the zoo eventually, but left quickly, shaken by a feeling reminiscent of our experience of the Holocaust museum. Big cats in small cages, their frustration evident by their hair loss and aggressive posturing towards visitors, majestic elephants shackled and lined up like marionettes, heads lowered, spirits broken. It made us sick to our stomachs. We found the giant panda, in a small glass-fronted enclosure, surrounded by lacklustre potted plants, chewing bamboo while it lay prone on a metal slab, not unlike the kind you see in a morgue. We discussed its abnormally engorged testicles and whether this was their natural state or somehow chemically induced for the “breeding programme”—our support forsaken, we presumed the latter.

Afterward, we walked slowly along the Landwehr Canal where we ate ice creams at the spot where they found Rosa Luxemburg's body. There, we talked about the Holocaust, the animals, and the exploitative nature of capitalism before you asked me to marry you, stating that even though your testicles could not compete with those of the Panda, if you must be trapped in a cage for the rest of your life, you'd want it to be with me. I accepted on the condition that we never visited a zoo, or Berlin, again.

IV

Night had fallen and the carriage turned cold. Jess pulled her jacket up around her neck like a blanket and rested her head against the window, her teeth rattling as she watched the black silhouettes of trees slip by. Her focus shifted to her reflection, and the furrows that had been carved into her skin over the years, almost like her face was disintegrating frame by frame like a time-lapse video of rotting fruit.

Her fingertips met the small key that she kept on a leather string around her neck as she breathed onto the glass, drawing a smiley face in the condensation and watching it fade. She reached into her bag and rolled two capsules around in her palm before throwing them to the back of her throat and washing them down with the dregs of cold tea. The woman across the table watched her over the top of a women's magazine which

was folded over on itself. Jess noticed she was reading the horoscopes. Shaking her head, she put in her earbuds, unable to comprehend why anybody would want to know what the future holds.

Prague, Czech Republic, 2011.

Quite unexpectedly, giant multi-coloured baby statues filled the city, crawling up the Zizkov television tower, along the banks of the Vltava, sitting on top of buildings, everywhere, making my already frayed nerves unravel further, and as we walked in the general direction of the Narodni Museum, you demanded I take photographs of you against every one of them.

You dragged me down a small side street, refusing to say where you were taking me, my protests falling silent as we emerged into a colourful square which was dominated with a wall of graffiti daubed with messages of hope and peace from across the world, and I realised it was the Lennon wall, glorious in its transient, dynamic resilience, attempts to paint over it met with new positivity, an undying message of love. I looked at your beaming face and wondered whether we would flourish again if our relationship was washed with white.

We scribed our message and walked hand in hand over the Lovers Bridge where you presented me with a small key and scratched our initials on a red padlock before fastening it to the fence. You counted to three as you cast your key into the water. I mimicked the action, but you did not see me clutching it in my tight fist as I told you I was pregnant.

My heart sank as you leaned against the fence with your head in your hands, face flushed as if I'd told you I was dying. I sneaked the key in my pocket and wondered if you thought the baby like a cancer, a tumour growing inside of me. It was a death in some regards, the death of our life together as we knew it, a whitewash.

We walked in silence past the kowtowing beggars on the Charles Bridge towards the old town, stopping at the astronomical clock where we contemplated the nature of our relationship and discussed the significance of zodiac signs. We figured out that the baby would be a Pisces, and that we would keep him.

V

The squeal of a small boy woke Jess from her sleep. He and his mother must have boarded at the previous station. He was fighting heavy eyes, and his mother, with an iron will. She smiled, he was determined like Luca, and about the same age. She pulled out the photograph bookmark from between the pages of her journal and ran her finger over his beautiful face as her smile faded.

It had been hard to take the news he would never get better from the rare genetic disorder that limited both his cognitive and physical functioning, the same condition

from which his father's cousin had died. Her husband could never accept it, picking up adventure holiday brochures, filling Luca's head, and his own, with impossible dreams until one night she had found him drunk on bourbon, burning those brochures and watching the ashes of burnt paper evaporate into the ether along with his dreams, and his sobriety.

She watched the little boy now asleep in his mother's arms, the woman had nestled her nose in his hair. Jess took a deep breath as if the universe would somehow grant her Luca's precious scent before closing her eyes, the photos clutched to her chest as she slipped back into her medicated dreams.

Sorrento, Italy, 2016.

When we came here for our honeymoon we stopped in a small café and noticed that across the narrow street there was a tiny and stunningly beautiful old church that was covered in exotic flowers. It was called the Chiesa di Sant'Anna. There were so many along the Amalfi coast. We came to conclusion that Italy was very religious unlike us, we were true atheists and got married in a registry office, but we both agreed that if we had married in any church in the world, it would have been this one. You tasted like peach gelato as you kissed me under its climbing orchids at twilight and told me it was "heaven on earth."

I visited once again after you took your life, or the drink took it, either way you were gone. This time Luca came with me. I tried to find faith in *something* after your death and prayed hard for a divine power to grant me the ability to forgive you. I simply could not accept that nothing of you remained, not even a note, and I wanted answers. I hated you for leaving us. We needed you. I needed you.

A specific memory of you had haunted me since your funeral, it was from our visit to Pompeii. We gasped at the unfortunate souls preserved in volcanic ash who had been displayed behind a glass case and you had said, "*what a horrifying fate it must be for your remains be held in stasis for eternity.*" I thought about that comment each time I looked at the mahogany box sat on the sideboard next to your photograph. You were an adventurer and explorer, it wasn't right, so Lucas and I brought you here and scattered your ashes into the Mediterranean Sea so that you could always be in motion. I think you'd have liked that. Little did I know that I would be the one to remain in stasis.

VI

Jess was jolted into consciousness from a nightmare in which she looked into a glass case, her body rendered in fragile ash that was crumbling to nothing before her eyes, she slammed her clenched fists on the glass but was powerless to stop it. The lady with the little boy looked at her strangely as she ushered him from the train. They had stopped. A voice crackled through the speaker; they had already reached Naples. She grabbed her belongings and vacated the train, her senses immediately seduced with the rich smell of

coffee, the savoury tang of tomato sauce, and fresh-baked herb bread. She felt her stomach gripe and found the first pizza cart she could, stifling a delighted groan as she bit into a large slice of pizza salsiccia e friarielli, in her opinion, the best meal the world has to offer, before embarking on the Circumvesuviana line to Sorrento.

She had forgotten that this train was more like an old bus, and practically empty until it reached Pompeii when it became heavy with a colourful array of American pensioners dressed in summer colours like confetti, with the jarring exception of a monochrome duo of catholic nuns.

Her destination was close now. She pulled out her journal and penned the final passage. Her decision had been made.

VII

The train terminated at Sorrento, and the warm air was filled with citrus and flowers. Jess carried her husband in her heart as she walked the cobbles, watching the easy bustle of the Marina Grande while enjoying a much-needed espresso. As the afternoon moved on, the streets grew quiet, and she made her way to the Chiesa di Sant 'Anna. It was empty, as she'd hoped. She kneeled at the steps of the altar and said a small prayer for him before dropping some euros in the donation box and lighting a candle. Taking a final look around, she realised that no matter how beautiful they were, churches always creeped her out. She made her way outside and up to a viewing point at the top of the cliffs overlooking the Bay of Naples. Heading east, she would find an isolated spot further along the coast. The place she had scattered his ashes.

She dropped her bag and kicked off her shoes, clutching her journal as she ebbed barefoot towards the precipice, her toes curling around the jagged ledge. Arms outstretched, she closed her eyes and leaned ever so slightly into the cool breeze that swept in from the sea, the waves crashing against the rocks below.

God, it would be so easy.

She was sure she could hear her husband's voice in the waves and opened her eyes. She looked down, drawing in a sharp breath and stepping away. Trembling, she took a moment to collect herself then sat amongst the coarse grass, lowering her legs over the edge and carefully tearing out pages of her journal one by one, reading each entry aloud before allowing them to gently unfurl in the air current and drift into the water, waiting for them to be swallowed before starting the next.

When the time came to let go of the last passage, she stood.

"For the first time since you passed, I've found myself considering the future, I had a dream about it. In this future, we are reunited in heaven where I pluck ripe oranges from

the trees in the street and feed you plump segments as we walk and we talk and laugh and drink limoncello and swim naked in the sea, the Grotto Azzura reflecting in your eyes as we make love, and I fall asleep in your arms as we sit high on the mountains and watch the sunset late across the olive grove valleys of Campania, and were full, full to bursting with life and love and passion.

It's a dream I wish to dream again."

She didn't wait for the final page to submerge. Instead, she made her way through the silent streets and back to the station. Her son, and her future, were waiting.

Claire Hampton is a neurodivergent fiction writer from Teesside. Her work has been published/is upcoming in *Versification*, *Crow & Cross Keys*, *The Daily Drunk*, *Sledgehammer*, *Full House Literary Magazine*, *Selcouth Station Press*, and others.