

IF THIS IS THE END – STORIES OF PERPETUAL ECHOES IN A CORRIDOR

By Bebe Backhouse

ONE | MY FORMER LOVER

I walked through your front door, and I was immediately greeted by the stale air, clouded in hazes of freshly brewed shame and delicate raindrops of pain. Passing your bedroom, I could smell the remnants of the carnivals that had been happening between its walls. For a second, I wondered of the men who had come to satisfy your desperate urges that only appeared when the silence became unbearable, and your loneliness woke up from its daytime slumber.

I thought of how they would never know you as more than a face and a body, and they wouldn't learn your brother's name, or hear of your grandmother's rooftop terrace in El Carmen. They'd never know that what they were giving you was more than anonymous physicality. They handed you another reason to turn your back to the world, point your face to the wardrobe across from your bed, and cry.

Empty takeaway containers and the paper bags they came in, hid the kitchen benches from the sight of anyone who might've walked through that door before me. In the corner, behind the framed photograph of your last family dinner in Bogota, were the tall and dried remains of the flowers I bought you for your birthday, three months before. I would've thought this to be a sweet thing if it wasn't for the fact that they were only there because they'd been neglected, like everything else in that house, like you.

We sat on the sofa, which was unsurprisingly clean, because you always liked to be comfortable when you watched Netflix. You asked me, "Can you hear the people talking? The mirror is moving." When I told you I couldn't see or hear the things that you could, that they weren't real, you accepted it as the truth, and we began to talk. We spoke about the small and insignificant details of life to pass the time and keep you distracted. I needed to be distracted too, from the heartbreak of sitting across from someone who was lost but didn't deserve to be; someone I knew to be strong and fierce but faced me as a forgotten man. You, my sweet, baby blue, were someone I used to share kisses with; then, you only shared with me your brokenness.

I walked quiet circles around your shaky frame, I disinfected all the surfaces I could see, and I picked up the broken frames that must have had enough of trying to stick to the dusty walls. I asked you, "How did it get to

this?" You told me you didn't want to talk about it, and it reminded me of the man you were when we first met. Someone who was always hiding the things that might make you vulnerable to judgment. I would never judge you, because we'd been through too much, and I knew you too well. I knew who you were, and I knew as much as this, who you weren't. I loved you for all those reasons, and you knew this.

I read your diplomas on the wall behind your study desk – the ones you earned back in Colombia – and you tested my Spanish by asking me to translate them to English. (I did a pretty good job of it). As I read them, all six in their black, wooden frames and mounted on white card, they reminded me of your commitment to always be, and do, better.

My eyes were drawn to the one-thousand-piece jigsaw that sat unfinished on the desk. It hadn't been touched since November, and it was March. I realised that everything I saw in that home, and everything I sensed through your mind and your body, was a life-sized version of the puzzle. They were small pieces of delicate detail and colours and shapes that fit together to make something big and beautiful. Yet they were scattered, separate and desperate to find their place; longing to be what they were meant to be.

I wanted to help you get back on track because you deserved to be put together. You deserved to be whole. You deserved to be loved, to feel home, to be free; and I didn't want you to die.

I put you in the shower, and I picked out clean and comfortable clothes for you to wear. While you washed yourself with French soap and ran vanilla shampoo through your hair, I opened the blinds to let some light in. I cleaned the windows to remove the spots and the marks, because I wanted you to remember how beautiful the city was in the sunshine. I took out all the rubbish, rearranged your books and I put your favourite, 'The Little Prince' by Antoine de Saint-Exupery, at the top of the stack in your study, then I switched on the air conditioning, because it was hot outside.

On the sofa, I reached for your hand, and you took it and squeezed it tightly. Within the softness of that moment, I was taken back to the unknowing time we'd shared before – lying on the grass outside the Footscray Arts Centre, staring at the city skyline with your head on my stomach; weekly races to find the best coffee in Melbourne; walking through Queens Park until the sun disappeared.

Once, I'd wanted those moments to never end, but they did. I used to think you were the one, but you weren't. Or maybe you still were? Maybe you only embodied a different idea of what it usually means to be the person you grow old with.

Atop the grey fabric of your sofa, I fell into the once forgotten, but familiar, feeling of safety and rest within your restlessness. I was happy to still be able to lay with you and share that space together. My head on your chest; forgiveness and trust between our bodies; four hands holding onto each other; a fragile moment made of porcelain that would last forever.

You broke my thoughts with a sudden gasp for air, and you squeezed my hands so tightly that I could feel the individual bones inside your own. Then, you let go of me and cried into the grey hoodie you had left there the night before. I told you the only thing I knew, “You’ll be okay. It’ll be alright.”

When your tears left and you couldn’t find anymore, you closed your eyes and reached out, fumbling through the cushions for my hand. As you opened them again, they scanned the sofa to find me, and when they did, I saw the words you wanted to say as silent and colourless waves leaping across the living room to pound on my chest.

Your eyes were always the most piercing blue I’d ever known, but they were flooded with red blood vessels from the strain of crying and having not slept for three days. The middles of your eyebrows above your nose had shaped themselves into an arch and, without saying a word, you told me you were terrified of the place you were in and the person you had become. You screamed at me, in silence, that you desperately wanted to be rescued and to know you were safe. It was more than that, because you needed to feel it, and to live another day.

Then, suddenly, there were two people in the room who were hurting.

I promised you, I would stay there by your side for as long as you needed me to, and I would do everything I could to help heal you from a broken human, back into the warm home your body was meant to be.

“When you ever feel like someone other than yourself, I’ll paint your teeth with my best version of Van Gogh’s Cafe Terrace at Night using your electric toothbrush, and I’ll do it every morning when you open your eyes. I’ll trim your hair into the shape of the Sacre Coeur on Montmartre in Paris, and every night while you sleep, I’ll climb into bed and worship at your side, begging the sunrise to spare what I’ve created. So, then I would know, that if we were to ever go our separate ways, your teeth would glow, and your head would sparkle with art and stories from the life we’ve lived together.”

As I wiped the last tear from your cheek with my thumb, I thought to myself –

‘What state will I be ins when I get back to me?’

TWO | MY HOME

Melbourne, I need you to hear me. I fell in love with him all over again, and it was frustrating because I didn't want to. It'd been so long since I was last in his arms. I grew used to the world as I could see it, without him, but I let him come back, and I should've known better.

He had to ask if he could kiss me only one time, for me to remember who he was at 84 Leveson Street, and for me to forget how hard it was to leave him in the first place. I took a chance, and I know you think it was a bad idea, yet not trying would've been worse than being hurt again.

Melbourne, I need you to hear me. I know you still recall the first time I walked on your basalt floor. I was twelve years old and insecure, but my eyes were wide, and I saw a future with you. I told you I'd come back, and it took me ten years, but I did it. You see, I always try to keep my promises, especially when they're made in a place of love; and I have so much of it within me.

I came to you again at twenty-one with a gentle hope and an ache in the sway of my arms I couldn't shake off. I wanted to find myself in your mountains and valleys – from Werribee Gorge and Ironbark Basin to the Mornington sand – but in finding me, I wanted to feel love, too. I did this so many times, but each loss hurt more than the one before.

Melbourne, I need you to hear me. It felt so right with him, and we weren't perfect, but I dare you to show me two people who are. If it seems like I'm defending him, this isn't my intention. We could've worked it out if he'd shown me more of his soul, but he didn't, and I could only promise it would be the last time he'd hurt me, because I'll never let him back in.

You know every decision I've made, and you let me choose them, because you know exactly who I am – a child of Mars with the sun in Aries and the moon in Scorpio; a little worn out, but not at all weak or broken. I'm wild and free with no patience for the rules or limitations, and although I'll never belong to anyone, I can still belong to you.

Melbourne, I need you to hear me. I don't know when, but one day I'll meet someone remarkable. He'll give me the answers to all the questions I've ever asked, and I'll understand why I had to lose everyone else. I could give up on waiting, but it's not in me to quit, and I don't want to think the love I deserve is one I'll never find.

If you asked me to look back on my life now, it wouldn't hurt to do it. My stomach would tighten a little, but that's because I'll think of all the times that I mistook anxiety and imbalanced pain for a misrepresented idea of

good love. If you let me make myself heard again, I'll be able to consider the moments I dried and withered to water his emotional weakness.

Melbourne! I need you to hear me! I'm agitated because I feel you don't believe me. I will fall in love with a man you'll think is wonderful, and everything with him will flow so easily, like prophecy, or scripture. He'll be thankful to have found me. He'll fall to his knees on your forgiving ground, but you won't let him bruise, because you're better than that.

I'm not pure, and I'll write until there's nothing left of me, but you can't leave me here to bleed this ink. Tell me your shoulders remember my insecurity and wide eyes. Say your spring tides and blooms of yellow gum still want me. Show me you're still looking out for me, and you're on my side. Let me believe my patience is leading me to something beautiful.

THREE | MY BROTHER

I wanted to call you today, as I sat at the edge of my bed. It was 9am and 18 degrees; los dias raros. I knew if I'd placed my fingers onto the keypad, I'd need to search your name in the contact list. I've never called you close to enough times to know even the first four numbers: 0-4-something-something.

Yours was the voice I wanted to hear, when I'd tell you, without fear (but maybe a little tremble) that my big heart was shrinking, and the pointer on my compass was broken. For the first time, you'd hear my truth, at 31 years old, on the 15th of September, from Brighton to Warnbro.

I didn't call you, because I thought of not being able to speak, and I wondered what you'd say if you'd heard me cry. So, I wrote it down, and sent you a text instead. You responded in your typically masculine way; with a bad joke no one would find funny. It wasn't your intention when, for the hours that followed, I wished I'd stayed in bed and left my phone plugged into the charger on `Do Not Disturb.

Though you can be cold and withdrawn, I looked for you to help me – a broken Aries, a distant Aquarius, un cri de coeur.

We're two good brothers; apples sprouted from the same tree. Despite the distance between our bodies, there's nothing which separates us more than the difference between our spirits – lavender and burr, a break in my bones, and a blink of your eyes.

FOUR | MY GRANDMOTHER

It always happened at night. The sentimental words we'd exchange with each other, that no one was lucky enough to hear fall from your lips. No one, but me. This night was no different to any other, except for the fact that you – glowing in your Bardi Jawi glory, and still draped in your gold necklaces and Argyle diamonds and Paspaley pearls – were dying. You knew it, and I knew it, but of all the things we spoke about, we never let those words leave the confines of our minds and into the cold darkness of the room; while the moon hung itself in full ceremonial dress in the sky and peeped through the cracks of the curtains on your bedroom window.

In the silent intervals of our words, I would think of all the things you taught me and all the treasures you buried in my chest, on our once-in-a-lifetime journey together. A voyage written for the history books and the movie screens, for everyone to comprehend, but only for us to live.

I stared at your soft hair, with its burgundy and auburn tints. Your stripey nightgown framed you in the body of a prisoner; sentenced to cancer with no eligibility for parole, but certain death row.

I remembered a night where I'd seen the same moon in the same sky, only shining on you through a different window, as impatient people in souped-up cars sped up and down Russell Street; and we sat, side by side, heart to heart, Nan and Golden Child.

“Your hands are different now,” you said to me as you fumbled around in your black leather handbag, and balanced a Winfield Gold between the bounty of your lips. “Your hands are different now. You must use them to survive, not sweeten.”

From where we sat on your apartment balcony, I could see the terracotta mask of the world was cracking open. The slow pace of the Birrarung was quickening in its silence, and it was widening between the building that perched us high above the people on the street, and all the other homecomings of fear.

I'm everything without you, but when I was with you, I was more than this. You were a foreign land I first remember exploring in the Amazonian gardens of your estate at 375 Loch Street. You were wonderful, funny, short-tempered, demanding, and elegant; everything a grandmother should be.

I never once wondered why it was me you gently poured your soft love into. Mum would say it was because I look exactly like my grandfather before he was taken from you; before you were ready to say goodbye. It's funny how the design of fate works in repetitive sequencing, because then, it was me who wasn't ready to say goodbye to you.

You gifted me with more than your blood and your genes. You gave me a reason to believe in a higher purpose; you held a seat for me at the table in your heart, and you were there for me. You were always there for me. Even when I didn't know I needed you, I guess, you simply knew.

That night, as the people went crazy ordering Chinese takeaway and watching mindless television, we sat side by side, heart to heart, Nan and Golden Child.

When my heart thumped in its exposed chamber, I leaned into the movements your hands were making. You sipped your cup of coffee, puffed on your cigarette, and flicked the ash onto the tiled terrace. You combed your hair in the dread of the little hours of that midnight confessional, and you weaved into the air, the message I'd take with me through the streets of every city I'd visit. The trees, grasslands and beaches of the land we know as home. The horseshoe drive-through of my apprehension. Those words – *use every part of you to carry yourself*.

This is – that was – how my whole twenty-seven-year-old self, became no more solid than a blade of grass in front of your two brown hands. You, the woman who once wrestled me, screaming, into the world of a showery calm, and into my mother's waiting arms.

Yet who, at 7:15pm on the 23rd of March 2018, would wrestle me – still screaming – from your lifeless arms, and into safety? Where would my safety be then when it was always and only with you? Your two brown hands had held me up more times and more firmly than my own two white feet. I remember every part of you, and how you moved when you spoke to me on top of the world; when you told me my hands were different, and I'd need to use them to survive, not sweeten.

Nan, I haven't sweetened. I've cured in the brine of my experiences, and I've become not sour but mature and strong. I have a taste that leaves a residue long after I've left the tongue of anyone who bites my spirit; and I have survived.

It's been four years, and I'm still afraid to be distant from you. What would you say if I told you I'm ready for death? I don't want to die, but if this is the end, then I'm ready for it, because I've lived every day as if they were small existences, and I haven't wasted a single one. When I go to sleep at night, I close my eyes knowing I've embraced being perfectly imperfect. I let others do as they wish, but I keep breathing the breaths I began thirty-two years ago. I know that through loving you and being loved by you, I'm strong, I'm light, and I'm moving boldly through the labyrinth of life.

Nan, I'm eternal. I learned this through the intimate interludes between our footsteps, when we shared our heartaches and vulnerabilities. You gave me reasons to remember and be remembered. You helped me realise those very human moments were what made my life so rich – then, and now.

Nan, I hope. I hope you're as proud of me as I am of you. I feel so grateful to have known you so deeply and have your hands – those soft, brown baskets of hope – hold me up and push me through the darkest of nights. I hope, when you took your last breath, you thought of how full your life had been, and in your one final second, you died feeling like the luckiest woman on earth.

Nan, the world is crazy and sometimes, people are toxic. I don't want to be a part of this mess, but I hold my head upright. My head, a crown of thick, brown wires, and at the end of each strand there's a pain of seeing my home without you in it. Yet, greater than this, there's a love so big, and so loud, it declares you essential to me.

I love you. I need you. I remember you. I remember where we sat, side by side, heart to heart, Nan and Golden Child. I lift my hands, which are so different now, and I take all that you'd made of me into the ache of this world. I carry inside me your blood, your fight, and your memory.

Then, your name, Roseleen Maxine – one sure surviving thing, and a part of me I use to carry myself.