



NOTHING IS STILL

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CHAPTER III. – MOVEMENTS

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“I need a thirty and a twenty-four!” I shout into the steam-draped steel arena of the kitchen. The soles of my feet yawn well clear of the sweet-old-flesh-smelling leather insoles of my work flats, leaving me on tiptoe and my arches aching. I peer over the counter. Nothing.

Our first six weeks here have passed like no time at all, and the city shuffles steadily towards the festive season. It’ll be the first Christmas I get to spend with Dawn since 1957.

That year – it was the first that the Queen’s speech was shown on television, and the first Christmas that Derick spent with us too – I’d been ill. I stayed in bed all morning, then spent an age fixing my hair and painting some colour onto my face before going downstairs, so when I finally saw Dawn in that dress, I almost forgot where it was I’d walked into. There, sat on a pulled-out dining room chair, legs crossed at the knee, elbow daintily resting on the table top, plaited plumes of smoke pouring upwards from her Player’s cigarette, her neck soft, sinewy and delicate, shoulders and arms skinny and bare and beautifully arranged, hair in a dark bob and a

long pair of eyelashes to match, danger and jazz and gold in her pale blue eyes, my big sister. In *that* dress. Wine-coloured crushed velvet, shimmering like a stage curtain, a last word, a show-stopper. The second she and it were put together, neither belonged any longer in a dim, limited corner of little England. She and Tom left in the spring, moved here.

He'd bought it for her the year before, the dress, his first present as husband to his wife. She was sat in the same chair when she opened it, putting on a convincing display of rapture and surprise, throwing her arms around him as he sat next to her smiling. No dress fits that well without being tried on first though, even if it took a year for us to see her wear it. It curled around her like a ripe skin, responding perfectly to her sleek and slender shape, her curves subtler and more beautifully awkward than those of the actresses we were used to seeing at the pictures. She was knock-kneed but graceful and I remember going to bed at the end of the day wondering what she was still doing that side of the sea – those streamlined hips belonged to the Hollywood Hills and her dress to the red carpets on the far side of America – but as the years passed by, and more and more girls who had Dawn's figure but an extra shade of youth on their side began to crop up on the catwalks of London, on Carnaby Street and the King's Road, I began to realise that time and place had conspired against her. Too far away, too late, not once, but twice.

Over the counter, from the kitchen, there's nothing: no answer except for a clattering of pans.

One wall of the restaurant, the wall to my right, is all glass, and the diners here sit watching planes congregate. Like glossy, gossiping birds, they mill about on the tarmac, pondering distances and distant things, although never the past. Never like animals in that way; animals are mournful. But now and then, like the people here, one will come, and now and then one will go. It's nice. It's tidy.

Arnez, six foot tall and stern and black, with an exact, bobby-pinned bouffant and ever-clenched-together rows of teeth, looms over and makes me feel safe and nervous, both at once. Her frown is such a constant that, even from my relatively low vantage point, I get the impression that her cow-like eyelashes and her calligraphic eyebrows have grown into each other. Friendly now, though, she wraps a hand around my shoulder and flashes a smile that looks like headstones on an upside-down hill. "You gotta learn how to *shout*, girl," she tells me, at least halfway kind.

I turn my shoulders towards the floor and hide a knowing smile.

"I need a number thirty and a number twenty-four!" I shout, still looking down, but with some conviction this time, feeling the muscles of my gut contract, knitted knots that push the emboldened words out from my stomach and naked into the world. For some, every word has weight, every utterance is

the too-loud laughter in the library. Coming here has made me realise that I am one of them, made me realise I'm far too shy.

A few moments stretch themselves out before the answer from the kitchen comes: "Uh, yeah . . . got it."

Relief. Arnez rolls her eyes at me, shoulders askew and eyebrows relenting slightly. "Hmmmph," she says, her free hand knuckling at her hip. She lets go of my shoulder. I have no idea how long she's been working here. I've been here a month, my first shift falling when the days started to dwindle down into those short ebbs of light that only punctuate the dark, but she doesn't give much away. For all I know she could've started the week before me. "Getting better, English," she tells me, acting out her role as coach and guardian, slowly winking and oh-so-softly cackling. "Getting better . . ."

I get back to work. With the planes and the customers coming and going, weaving a complex, clockwork fabric with their crossing paths, it's easy for a mind like mine to drift and wander. The early days of this adventure have been surreal and fun, the first few bricks of a lively, thriving settlement being laid, basest elements first – first jobs and early memories are our wells, our farms, our stores and churches – but things are really beginning to take shape in front of us. Our New York story is gathering pace with each passing second, with all of the bellowed food orders, and with every darkening day that counts just a little bit more than the last. Arnez is right, it *is* getting better.

Sliding a china-plated hamburger and a plastic basket of chips – *must remember to call them French fries* – onto a small, square, Formica-topped table, I make as much eye contact as I can manage with the man sat there. His bushy eyebrows crease down as he looks up, his chest puffed under a brown-wool suit jacket, checked, double-breasted and loose. He glances at his watch, then leans back in his chair like an errant schoolboy in the corner of a classroom. “About time, miss,” he says, curt, with solemn Southern vowels. A taut mouth gives little away beneath his pinched nose and high, stubbled cheekbones. “Thank you,” he mutters, almost as an afterthought. Automatic. Politeness is something for which the British are renowned, I know, but it’s not in short supply here, even in the committedly surly. I tell him he’s welcome but I decide to ask Arnez if she’ll bring him the bill when he’s done, instead of me. Over my shoulder I catch him whispering a rough grace to himself before he eats. I hear the word *British* – the *t* a double *d* – and see him look up again with his almost-invisible lips pushed even harder against each other. I think, from the safety of the counter, that it may be Texan for a smile.

New chapters so often start in the autumn, more so even than in spring. Strange really, that when all around us the trees are descending into their annual temporary deaths, our doors are opening. Here, the autumn’s *fall*. Something so pretty and profound about that: childlike but poetic.

The leaves fade and curl and come back to the earth, their work towards the great continuance finished, done. The birds unwrap their wings and find somewhere else to be. I've heard Vermont is just about the most beautiful place in the fall. There's a town there that's meant to be particularly picturesque. Stowe or Stone, or Slope or similar, I can't remember. Places in the States have been named by people that lived life so recently, it's wonderful. In a way, it makes it seem a much more malleable world, a new world.

Our new world.

Dawn helped me to land the job. She works at Idlewild too, her calves thicker now from years of waitressing, her shoulders ropier, a heaviness about her eyes no spring is ever likely to shake again. She and Tom have tried for children but the ship seems to have sailed, drifting gently out of port as she ages herself one food order at a time. The long, long days keep ticking over in the meanwhile, turning into blink-and-you'll-miss-'em years. What else is there for days to do?

I watch people and planes go about their coming and their going every day, both on the latest legs of their long journeys, both with more places in which to be. You begin to more properly understand the pace of life when you stay static somewhere that never stands still, the stone over which the stream washes, the sign by the side of the road. The sunburst clock that chases its tail on the wall above the entrance tells

me it's nearly time to wrap up and head home to Dawn's.

We stood in her garden the day after we arrived, eating barbecued sausages and giant hamburgers. My appetite had finally resurfaced and the sunshine had lasted. Tom, with his wistful, woody face and his narrow but expressive eyes, came into the room in the morning to wake us up, grinning as he prised the cork from a bottle of champagne. "Come on outside when you're ready," he said, sweeping a long arm in our direction and then towards the door.

Outside, I could hardly help but stand at the back fence and watch the cars on the expressway – finding it impossible not to admire the way their paths braided with each other, in and out and in and out, surging through the afternoon. They looked so impressive, serious, deadly, like prehistoric creatures of the sea. I couldn't get over the size of them. Everything here is so big: the cars, the roads, the shops, the food. This entire country seems to hinge on big ideas, on swollen fantasies.

The cars went by in their hordes, all travelling with an imposing level of purpose. I stood there watching, just watching, until Tom, suddenly looking like a cowboy sad at the sight of a young girl lost in the wilderness, took me by the crook of my elbow. My arm was limp, wasted by the ordeal of the boat, but through the strength in his I felt a little bit of fear and apprehension evaporate before he turned me to face the others. In a split second he had returned to his normal variety-hall act, but he held me steady even so. "To

the immigrants,” he said, laughing and toasting us with his other arm aloft, making the rest of us laugh too. “I’m so glad that you’re both here. What a t’rific day – it’s just you, us, and fourteen lanes of traffic.”

Fourteen lanes of traffic. Couldn’t help but think Dawn in her Christmas Day dress could’ve – would’ve – stopped it all. Without properly realising, I think I’d expected her to be wearing it. I asked her later where it was. She laughed coyly. Still the same laugh that stretched your soul, that quietly caught a room like a spark makes fire. “That thing? Oh no, dear, I couldn’t *dream* of fitting into *that* anymore.” The cars shuttled on by, shimmering in the sun, and Tom kept us all laughing until there were only red and white lights racing under the stretching rows of streetlamps. The smell of chargrilled meat and hot rubber hung lazily in the air well after darkness had blanketed our celebrations and we’d taken ourselves indoors.

I call another order into the kitchen, but if there’s any response at all, it’s drowned by Arnez. “Shout, shout, shout. *Shout,*” she says, nudging me with her elbow. She’s being playful. We’re both off until Monday and clocking off at the same time. *Getting out of here and leaving the white world for a few days, English. Means I can quit being Arnez for a while and start being Ar-nez again.* Last week, similarly giddy, she asked me to go to a jazz club in Harlem with her, offered to buy me a drink. The proposition made me straightaway nervous. I felt

bad, but I made my excuses. I don't think it's the done thing around here – seems an easy way to land either or both of us in trouble. That's the world we live in.

I close my eyes and I yell the order again. Two sixty-ones. Key lime pies. The last thing on the menu. The Florida Keys look beautiful in the brochures you see around the airport. I'd sit on the snowy sands and read while Derick fished in the crystal-clear water, with slanting palms and crisp white parasols for shade. It's California I'd really like to see, though, to sink my feet into the beckoning edge of the Pacific Ocean, to run a car the lengths of Route 1 and Route 101, to become one of the leaner, fitter people out there on the west coast, so healthy you can't imagine them ever to decay, soften or die, those for whom the sun shines eternally, rays of gold at the end of a rainbow. Tens of thousands of years of human migration. Destination California.

The couple whose pies I set down are chatting idly about diets. Small and pretty and blonde with an upturned nose, the girl, no older than twenty-one, makes ripped-paper noises through her nostrils as she giggles at her boyfriend's joke. She snorts, even. There is what looks like a sailing club badge on the breast pocket of his cream sports jacket. The sleeve rides up where his elbow rests on the back of the empty chair to his left. The light from outside strikes a warm, golden chord with the fine hairs on his forearms. A deep tan makes his hands look both well-kept and strong and the smile at the corners

of his mouth an even brighter white. With one hand, he plays with the leather seat-back, and with the other, her skinny fingers. She has rings on two of them, but not the third.

I can't help but allow a small amount of pride to rise in my chest when I think of myself and Derick amongst these people. Look at us. Look at what we've done: *we live in America*. I whisper the phrase to myself, I relay the fact internally, and I let the silent words ring and whistle about my ears. Moments like these, sudden realisations, often leave me searching for signs and signals that a dream is about to end. Only this one is just beginning.

We're going exploring again tomorrow and I'm excited. The dream goes deeper. The mornings are mystic. We woke up showered in sunshine the day after the barbecue – no curtains in the spare room yet – and made our way to the station so we could ride the subway to Manhattan, where Derick had arranged to meet his Polish friend from the boat. By the time we took the stairs back up to the street, the weather had turned and a solid grey sky reflected down from the steel and glass walls stretching above us. Steam from the drain grates in the road followed us into the wind and yellow taxis streamed in between, countless cabs, even with the second rush hour of the day still hours away. The Poles greeted us with a calm *hyello* in amongst the chorus of horns.

There were two of them: Derick's friend, Boleslaw, and his young friend Jan. Fairly short, with salt-scarred and wrinkled

lips and icy eyes, Boleslaw had been on the *Orzel*, and so his English was good, but even so he seemed to put more stock in a considered nod or a slowly formed smile than in the words of either of our languages. He wore a tired grey cap and the pea coat Derick had borrowed on the boat. Crude tattoos of swallows crept cautiously out of the cuffs. "One is flying away, one is flying home," he told me, softly. "Me, I fly away. Stalin, Churchill, one take our home, other gives away. There is no flying home. Only hope-less-ness."

We watched the birds circling around the distant tops of the gargantuan buildings. "Life springs surprises," he told me, through pipe-stained teeth, his hands held behind his back, his eyes still cast upwards. "Few centuries ago, these birds fly around trees. Stephanie, you must look forward. Always forward. Soon, we will not be here. But, a different path in life and we are not here at all."

Jan, six or seven inches taller than the senior Pole and all neck, no hat on his head and hands fidgeting around his pockets, barely made a sound. His mouth fell open into undulating ovals and his Adam's apple formed a sharp pivot between his starch-stiff shirt collar and his ungainly jaw as he craned his neck up to take in the buildings and the birds.

We made an odd spectacle, the four of us. We spent the rest of the afternoon riding subway rails without aim, and the evening watching musicals at Radio City. The violet night-time oozed with neon and promise and, other than

ahead, there really was nowhere else to look.

A glance at the unremitting, unrelenting, incontestable clock tells me that my shift is over and Christmas is another day closer. I can't wait to see what becomes of tomorrow. Of course, there are moments I miss my old life, and I never stop missing my family, but I haven't looked backwards for a single second since moving here. Moving to *New York*. This is us now. We've coalesced with destiny – left, flown the nest, looked ahead, met with no regrets.