

at the royal colonial garden

Had it really been a year since he and Ariel split, and was that how it was going to be from now on, years just flying by like nothing. He's nineteen but at this rate he could wake up tomorrow and be thirty five. Would he still remember the anniversary then...

Isaac had purposefully avoided making any plans for august the thirteenth, though even that, he considered after a while, was some sort of plan. The thought of a beach day did briefly cross his mind, more like a series of flashes, images, than a product of reason, maybe he had been dreaming, that was it. But now, after rubbing his eyes for a minute or two, and then yawning a handful of times, he didn't feel like it at all. He had to take the train, and how

human species, or even simply only those kinds who bring their bluetooth speakers with them. The noise from the imaginary beach goers was already splitting his head in two, so the idea was discarded. Maybe he should do the opposite, take a tram to the city center, and go to a record store or a used bookstore, drink something refreshingly alcoholic, and maybe... no, he had no money for any of that, he suddenly remembered. Should he call someone, but who is there to call. It's august, and all his friends were away. One last stupid idea came to his mind, or two in fact. First, to call Ariel, wherever she was, a sudden pang in his stomach as a reply to that proposition, and then he thought of going through his contacts and calling every potential lover, plausible or implausible, from however long ago, any lead, any female company at all. But he was now awake enough to see that it was ridiculous and insulting to everyone involved. The worst idea by far, however, was to stay home, so he kept thinking. Only after lighting the third cigarette and finishing his second coffee, did it appear in his mind to visit the place once playfully called by Ariel their love nest, just like he had done the year before, when he knew they were meeting to put an end to said love. That's in fact why he insisted on the venue. It was the place where they had spent the most time together, other than his bedroom. The royal colonial garden.

Why that place. It was beautiful and romantic, for one. Strolling through the lined paths of giant palm trees, along the ponds with the ducks and the fields with the peacocks, or in a glasshouse where the greenery was allowed to go wild, or sitting on the gnarly roots and branches of a sprawling ficus, or under a pergola overgrown with exotic vines. To kiss in such places, even better. And with time, with so many alcoves and crannies where a young couple could hide, undisturbed, they did more than kiss. Maybe under such magical conditions, a single kiss could undo the last handful of months, or was it a year, and provide a new start. That was one of the things he considered the last time.

Another reason was they could just walk down the hill from school for fifteen minutes and be there, it was so easy and convenient. And besides, if they got bored with the garden, they could go out and within a few paces encounter a five hundred year old church, or a modern art or natural history museum, or some kind of street food, or just the estuary of the river, where it was so pleasant to sit and do nothing but watch the sailboats and the seagulls, the red suspension bridge in the distance to the east, the deep blue sea to the west. The last reason was more prosaic, but fundamental. Unlike the other two botanical gardens in the area, it was free. Or it used to be. A year before he wandered in like always. But then a guard called to him. First time he had to

buy a ticket, and for what, to hear Ariel say she didn't love him anymore, insult added to injury, or maybe it was fitting.

From his house it wasn't a fifteen minute walk, more like an hour. He didn't want to take the bus, they always smell in the summer, so he put on some music and walked, trying to avoid most of the sun, now as the year before. Despite knowing Ariel had been away with her parents and was back in the city only for a few days, after which she would skip college and go wander through europe for a year, he wondered if she had chosen the unlucky number on purpose. When he accused her of wanting to sever ties so she could have fun, and he leaned on these two words, have fun, without guilt or worries, she asked if he would prefer that she cheated. And then as he cowered, defeated, a sore loser, she added with some venom, Maybe that's your strategy, but not mine.

After that there was not much more to be said, but that didn't stop him, So these two years, they meant nothing to you, Why are you being so stupid, Because I still love you, No you don't, she said, exasperated. What, You don't love me, and I don't love you, not anymore, we are no longer the same people, and even this place is not the same. He felt offended for himself and for the garden. How could Ariel be so cold, so reasonable, at a time like this. Then she said she had to go. She did not suggest they should keep in touch,

or pretend that they would be friends, and he was too lost in thought to utter those last pathetic words. This was a clean break, for good this time, he could feel it. She got up, walked two paces and turned back to say, with no venom, maybe a little resigned sadness or even longing, You should always let your hair grow out a bit, you look so cute. She smiled, waved goodbye and walked away. This was the last time he saw her in the flesh, framed by the pergola and the vines, disappearing behind a blooming jacaranda.

They were sixteen when they started dating. Now that he forced himself to think of what he saw in her, all he could come up with was the fact that she was a female of the human species, what more was needed. But perhaps he was being unfair, still munching on sour grapes, after all, it's impossible that their two years together could be reduced to the laws of nature alone. He was sure they used to talk about things, even deep things, but for the life of him, a year later, he already couldn't remember. Was it really only lust, the fact that she, quote unquote, put out. That was the opinion of his friends. Not that they were innocent in the matter. Since he'd made his new music friends, as Ariel scoldingly used to put it, he had started drinking, and smoking, and not just tobacco, but drugs too. Then he would say, It's not drugs, it's just hash, and she would be furious. She almost sounded like his mother on those occasions, and that creeped him out. And that music, she

would say annoyed, perhaps even slightly disgusted. She always had an allergic reaction to jazz and could never forgive him for having learned to play chords with more than three notes, or ditching the guitar for the saxophone. He chuckled to himself remembering all this as the horn player in his ear ended the solo on the most abstract, atonal screeching. Ariel would have hated it with a passion. That may have been the final cleavage, the fact that they didn't like the same music anymore.

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The day was a scorcher, and downtown was unbearable, there were too many tourists, and very little shade. He was about to quicken his step when a familiar face stopped him in his tracks. His old history teacher from highschool, sitting in an outdoor café under the shade of a quirky oak. To say old history teacher is to do her a disservice. Alice was still young, probably in her early forties and looking good for her age. She had an alluring face, with wonderfully large eyes, a shapely figure and beautiful legs, usually covered above the knee, now summer bare in front of him, a piece of spectacular thigh on display. She was also intelligent, and funny, and educated. And she liked jazz, though not the more adventurous stuff. But he admired her all the same, and the fact that she was pleasing to the eye was a bonus. As for her, she probably saw in him a bright

young man with potential and idealism, and she relished the admiration. So they became friends, showing each other music and movies, lending each other books and cds, talking in between periods, before and after and often commandeering whole classes for their discussions on, say, the russian revolution, or the seminal albums of hard bop, while everyone else was happily distracted by their phones or each other or both.

One winter day, on a school trip to the old city center, the class was caught in a rainstorm with nowhere to hide, small groups of two or three, kids and teachers alike, scattering aimlessly through the cobblestone streets. The two of them happened to be talking as usual when the storm appeared without warning, and so together they found, not without difficulty and only after a few minutes, a very short and narrow nook between two buildings, any shorter and the frozen rain would still get to them, any narrower and they would be forced to kiss. As it stood, Isaac couldn't blame the kiss on the rain or the proximity, though the fact that they were soaking wet must bear some of the responsibility. His hands were already straying when she said, Stop. And the storm soon did too. Only then did he remember Ariel existed. They found the rest of the class, and everyone went home. She was his teacher for another half year. They never spoke about the storm, though after that he called her Alice

when nobody else was around. She protested a couple of times, but then let it go.

Ariel, understandably, did not like the teacher one bit, despite she and Isaac being on whatever the opposite of a collision course is, every day growing naturally more estranged, and even without knowing about the rainstorm that came out of nowhere and made people act crazy for a moment or two. Maybe that's why he considered at first turning back, or at least pretend not to see Alice. Maybe she wouldn't even remember him, it had been more than a year since they last saw each other, as friendly teacher and student only. He gave her two parting gifts, a collection of essays on history by her favorite philosopher, and a cd with his own music that so annoyed Ariel. She wished him luck, and said to come by the school sometime, but he never did. He still had books and cds and dvds his teacher had lent him, maybe this would be a good opportunity to arrange their return, or was that only an excuse. On a day like this of all days, and besides, why is she in the city in august, it's never for a good reason. While he was mumbling to himself about whether to talk to her or not, she saw him and waved.

Hello Alice, Hello Isaac, Stuck in the city huh, No... I wouldn't say that, What would you say, That I like the city in the summer, at least our little western corner of it, Didn't

you always go south with your family... I think you told me, Yes, but not this year, Why not, Because my husband and I... we are separated, Oh... I see... I'm sorry, Don't be, it was amicable, and Isabel is not a little kid anymore, she's fourteen now, she understands, So she's spending august with her father, That's right, And you were left behind, That makes it sound ominous... you are always so negative. She had said those exact words a hundred times, and then usually followed them with some diatribe about his youth, and how much life he had ahead of him, and other things that mean nothing to a teenager. This time, however, she said, Why are you..., and she put an emphasis on the you, ...here, are you stuck or left behind or what, Kind of, Where were you going, To the colonial garden, Are you meeting someone, No, Do you want some company, Of course, but don't you want to finish your coffee first, It's finished. She proceeded to drink the remaining of her espresso, mostly foam, spread over her tongue and the roof of her mouth, and the lips, which she licked before getting up.

So, how come you're stuck, Oh, it's just I have no money, It's part of being young, being broke, Yeah I guess so, he said as he rolled a cigarette. Do you want one, You know what... I really do, Did you quit, Yeah, almost six months ago, That's a shame, Why would you say that Isaac, don't you know these things are bad for you. A smirk as she

accepted the cigarette. He lit hers and then his, and she said, Do you go there often, Where, The garden, Not so much anymore, Why did you stop, For one, the university is on the opposite side of town, What are you studying, History, Oh my word, you did it... how is that going, Bad, Can't say I'm surprised, You know I chose history in part because of you, Yes, and I told you not to, didn't I, Yes, you did, you said I should go to jazz school, But you didn't, No, it was too expensive, and history was safer, or so I thought, Why don't you go now, you can get a part time job, it's just a year behind..., Yes, I thought of it, but I'll just end up hating music the way I now hate history, Pfff... I'm offended on behalf of both of us, and on behalf of history and music too. He didn't notice the lightness of her tone, I'm sorry... I'm just a little lost in life at the moment...

In life, yes, but now also in thought, found again by Alice's voice, You and Ariel, you broke up, didn't you, Yes, how did you know, The teachers were gossiping about it, you know her sister still goes there, So they're still talking about us... that's probably a bad sign, No, it's not, trust me, most of our students, even entire classes, we would rather forget about. They stopped talking as they came upon a busy intersection, the sidewalks were full of tourists, and there was again no shade to hide from the scorching sun. A couple more blocks to reach the garden, they powered through. When was the last time you were there, A year ago today,

Anything special about this day, That's when Ariel and I broke up, Don't tell me it was there, too. An embarrassed shoulder shrug was all Isaac could do. Approaching the entrance, both of them noticed at the same time and commented on the fact that the original dark blue plaque with Royal Colonial Garden written in gold outline had been changed to one with a black and white scheme, safety signs, national and international logos, disclaimers and warnings, and atop it all the words, Tropical Botanical Garden. The price, incidentally, had gone up. She paid for both of them. It's quite expensive now, And I still remember it being free, No, it was never free, Fine, but no one ever asked us for money, That I can believe.

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The old name was much more adequate, since the garden does not feature only tropical plants, but also subtropicals and even a few temperates. It has plants from almost every part of the known world in fact, but they are gathered there together only because their native territories were at one point or another administrated by the crown, and thus part of the colonial empire. Some were in africa, some in the americas, a few in australasia. Or that used to be the case, of course. The last overseas territory to gain independence had done so years before, and most colonies were gone long before that. But the plants remained. The garden was built

during a resurgence of the monarchist cause, and a renewed interest in the potential of the overseas empire, in the early twenty first century. And the monarchists succeeded in building a large, beautiful garden, full of strange plants that, at the time, could not fail to capture the imagination of the inhabitants of the metropolis, but they failed to secure a position in the political order of their day. The year the garden was completed, a few short days before its inauguration, the king was assassinated by republican radicals, and the monarchy crumbled swiftly. The revolutionaries, however, didn't think to change the name. Until now, of course.

How come you didn't know any of this, didn't you come here all the time, have you never even read one of the brochures, they're free you know... it's embarrassing, a student of history like you, never bothering to know about the place. It was the teacher speaking, and he could only mumble embarrassed, I knew the plants came from the colonies... that they weren't just random plants... that's something, Anyone could guess that, it's in the name, Not anymore..., You were always like this, Like what, At school, you never studied, if you had simply read the chapters, even once, you would have aced every test, but you never did, you coasted on your gifts, but never actually used them. He had no retort, so she changed the subject. I bet you don't know I worked here, a long time ago, Before you were a

teacher, Yep, not much older than you are now. At that point he started making calculations, but stopped once he remembered women hate nothing more than men even thinking about their age, that may very well be the point at which a girl becomes a woman. So instead he asked, Did you like it, Working here... of course... I loved it, What did you do, Oh I was just a secretary, making calls, helping out with the exhibits and the programs and the fairs, that sort of thing, mostly it consisted in the arrangement and ordering of various papers, That doesn't sound very exciting, Well it wasn't, but the place is very beautiful, just imagine, coming to work here every day.

The location had been chosen on purpose. A seven acre strip carved into the hill facing south created a microclimate, perpetually tempered by the air from the river's estuary, allowing tropical plants to survive the mild but rainy winter, and the hot but very dry summer. Still, as they could see now, additional irrigation was necessary. They relished the few sprinkles of water that were sent their way by the imperceptible breeze. Giant palm trees framed a handful of forks on the path, and in between them, exotic chickens and pigeons and pheasants roamed under the shade of mimosas or rubber figs. Those paths could lead to one of the two enormous glasshouses, plus a handful of

smaller ones, all of them filled to the brim with green, and butterflies. Or to fountains with statues of naked dryads, or ponds with colorful fish, and duckweed, and lotus flowers, and dragonflies buzzing about all the time.

But the garden wasn't simply built for beauty, it had originally a more practical purpose. To study the strange plants that the crown's expeditions were constantly finding and sending back to the metropolis. The new world was an exciting and largely untamed horizon, and who knew what miraculous treasures it still had to offer. Once the colonies were given up, however, so was the study. What remained was a beautiful garden, open to the public for free, or at least free for the kids from the area. They were heading towards the far western corner, ironically chosen to house the plants and artifacts from the far east, and had just walked below the typical red arch when Alice asked, So... if I had come here on my own I would have found you moping in some corner, maybe over there by the bonsai display, feeling as small as the trees..., Stupid as that sounds, I think so.

Was college really that bad... I thought you were joking, It was a joke with truth in it... I guess, What happened, Nothing happened, You don't like your teachers or your colleagues, It's more that I don't like college itself, the atmosphere, the system, but no... I didn't like the teachers

or the students either, they make me worry about the state of the world, most of the people in my class haven't even read a single book, they were only taking history because they had failed to get in for something else or as an easy enough credit, and the ones who take it seriously are not much better, in fact, they are worse, like a retarded coven of witches, a secret society of effeminate nerds, trying to secure a healthy fiefdom by sucking up to the representatives of the gods of history on earth, Boy do you get eloquent when you're complaining, That's the measure of my disappointment, And melodramatic... but I warned you didn't I... I told you that's what you would find, but you were in love with a romantic fantasy of discussing the meaning of the universe at four in the morning in the university bar with intellectual equals, and being mentored by a wise old gentleman in tweed who smokes a pipe, and who would guide you in your studies, critique your output, and counsel you in your love life, And instead I found careerists and dullards, or sad old folks aching to retire, Come on, not even a single decent professor, really... a young one perhaps... I'm not talking about wisdom, just basic competence, Not really, no, Somehow I don't believe you..., Maybe a couple were ok, but the young ones were always the worst... I think they read as many books as the students... an old history of religion professor always complained to me, or rather to the void around both of us, that he couldn't believe so many of those kids hadn't ever,

in their entire lives, read a book from cover to cover, not a single one, can you believe it, he would say to me, and I would say, yeah I can, whenever I spoke to him he always complained about this, and then talked about his retirement, and how excited he was that it would come soon.

Speaking of books, I still have some that you lent me and I never got to return, also cds and dvds, you can come by the house to get them, Don't worry about it, those are my gifts to you, Ok, then what about lunch, it's past midday... I don't have any money but I have food at home... I can cook... I'm good at it..., Hmm... what about this... I'll get us lunch around here, and then we head straight back. The man at the gate confirmed that their tickets would still be valid until the end of the day, and that they could come in or out at any time, so there they went, down to the water. They agreed to choose whatever food establishment had shorter lines, since there was none without some sort of crowd. It didn't use to be like this, Alice said, looking around at the strange mix of tourists, panhandlers, street food vendors, circus artists, circus freaks, and hobos, before biting into her israeli kebab. This place changed a lot in the last couple of years, Yeah it did... I spent new year's eve right here when I was eleven, since my grandma lived just up there, at midnight we all came down and there was no one, we heard fireworks very far, and also saw them over the southern

bank, but where we were, there was no one, not a single person..., That would be impossible now, Unfortunately... but at least the garden is still a well kept secret, Maybe that's why they raised the price. And with that, having rushed through the average middle eastern sandwiches and then two espressos, they made their way back to the colonial garden, sharing a cigarette.

Do you keep in touch with anyone from school, No one from class, Just your music friends, then, Yeah, What about the band, We mostly stopped playing, we just hang out, Why, They became interested in other things, a couple are studying cinema, another journalism, one is doing engineering, So you're drifting apart from your friends, No... I wouldn't say that... well, maybe a little, but it's not that, Then what..., They have plans, prospects, girlfriends, and I have nothing, What about Ariel, We never spoke again... I have no idea what she's doing, But you wanted to, Not sure..., No point in asking about a job, but even if you had a job it wouldn't cure your malaise, that's not what jobs are for... unless maybe if you were to work here. Alice was lost in thought, Isaac did not want to interrupt her, she was looking around for something. Out of nowhere she said, Let's go here. She took his hand and led him to one of the smaller greenhouses. No one was there. The air inside was

wet, and warmer. Perhaps he mistook the perspiration for rain, and thus imagined this move was an invitation to kiss Alice again. When he tried, she was slightly offended, or was it just annoyed.

No, Isaac, stop it. I'm sorry Alice, Apology accepted... I wanted to see the carnivore plants, they're super weird and fun. So they went towards the back where the strange creatures were planted, and stayed there until they saw them in action. The poor fly never had a chance. Can you imagine, encountering those things for the first time, as a european, not to mention all the other never heard of plants..., Like tobacco... do you want another cigarette, he asked as they were leaving the greenhouse. Alice said yes, and began the lecture, You know... tobacco was one of the first things europeans consumed from the new world, the natives gave them these dried leaves as a peace offering and a pipe to smoke it, both things the we were unfamiliar with of course... after a round of misunderstandings Columbus and the crew finally smoked it, they all reacted badly, with coughs and rushed breathing... but then after a week or so they were hooked, and as soon as they were able to, they sent some home... all of this is in Columbus' letters, if I recall correctly. Isaac was distracted looking at the pergola with overgrown vines where Ariel had broken up with him a year before.

They used to have tobacco plants here too, but maybe that's no longer the case, it's a miracle they still let you smoke outside, Well, when they don't, they will lose a customer, So tobacco is more important than Ariel, If you put it like that... I guess maybe it is... smoking has been my only love this past year..., What about the other stuff, do you still do it, Yes..., Then maybe that's what's sapping your energy, Maybe, but maybe not, it's not sapping it now, Ah, so you're high. A sprinkle of scandal in her words. Well... I was when I ran into you, not anymore, So you have some... I thought you didn't have any money, Well, you know how it is..., You're an addict. He tried to be aloof, If it was only hash it wouldn't be a problem, of course, but I'm also addicted to tobacco, and coffee, and alcohol, and jazz, and above all my depressing life, And don't forget self pity..., Sorry..., Were you going to smoke more and I interrupted your party, Yes... I was... but it was a welcome interruption, Do you still want to, Want, yes, but I don't need to smoke it right now, Where would you go, just hide out in some corner, No need to hide, we could do it here.

They were just a few steps away from the path, next to the busts of an australasian couple, but Alice was no longer paying attention to the exotic facial features on the statues, she was amazed that her former student, or anyone for that matter, would do illegal drugs just out in the open. He could see all this in her eyes as she said, Well... I'm pretty sure

when I was your age, no one did it. A trap, quick, deflect, So... you never tried it, Not really, You either did or you didn't, Once, at a party in college... it did nothing in the moment, but the next day I felt weird about the whole night so I never did it again, Hmm... I see..., he was pondering, would she be offended if he offered it. No, why would she, worst case scenario she says no. Do you want to try it with me. And without any pause, indecision or doubt, she said, Sure, why not.

When I tried to kiss you before... I'm sorry... I don't know what got into me, You're just feeling lonely, but I'm too old for you. He didn't reply, and instead led her to the shade of a wild plum, the overripe fruit on the ground fermenting with the heat made the air slightly acidic, perhaps even alcoholic, and mildly intoxicating. Do you have a boyfriend, No, Do you still love your husband, then, In a way... we have Isabel, Why did you split... I'm sorry, I don't mean to pry, No, it's ok... he cheated on me, with someone closer to your age than mine... and he decided he liked her better. I'm sorry Alice..., It's ok..., Did you ever tell him about the storm, No, of course not, why would I, it was a mistake, and most of it not mine. She smiled as she said it, and Isaac said, I would never cheat on you.

Let's talk about better things... how's the school, how was the year, Oh, terrible, Why, Because every generation is

worse than the one before, you know this... I remember when I first had your class, that was what, three years ago, I thought that was the most insolent, noisy, dumb, incurious or otherwise unpleasant group of kids that could ever be... not you of course... but my word, this last year I had ten times worse than anything your class put me through, Do the other teachers agree, Yes, it's not just in my head, even you would understand it if you went there for a day... it's different, Does your daughter go there, No, she goes to private school, Does she get good grades, What do you care..., It was just something to ask... I mean what does she like, or what is she like, She is smart, but loses interest in things... she likes to swim and read books, and now, unfortunately, she likes boys, and worse, boys like her..., So what are you going to do, About puberty, No, about teaching, What can I do..., You can quit, No... I can't quit, to do what, You could work here, isn't that what you said before, So we'd both work here, Yeah..., That's a thought..., Alright, so are you ready... I'm going to light it. And he did, ceremoniously.

A couple of puffs and it's the history teacher's turn to smoke the tobacco and hashish mixture, it is a bit surreal for him to hand her the joint, she examined it for potential threats, then took a few drags, got smoke in her eyes and coughed, when she was recomposed she took another drag, passed it back to him and got quiet, contemplative. Isaac didn't want

her to drift off alone, Did you have any other students you liked, that you were friends with... like you are with me, Yeah, sure, she said half distracted, looking in the distance, asking only with her hand to smoke a little more, and after another drag, gaze still fixed on an invisible point, she said, It's different from the other time I think... I definitely feel something, What do you feel, Hmm... I feel very aware of myself, of my own thoughts and feelings, Good ones... I hope, Not just good ones, no, but I also feel very in charge, like I can reason things, see them with objectivity, a little detached, maybe... it's strange... I thought it would be like alcohol, but it isn't at all, it doesn't make you dumb, or even necessarily more relaxed or uninhibited... I always assumed so...

Isaac was having fun listening to his teacher's first experience of the drug, but before he could add anything, she said, It also makes you chatty, obviously, Not everyone, not all the time, in fact, it varies a lot from person to person, what you are feeling, it only happens if you're smart, and if you're dumb, it will definitely make you dumber, or just make you sleep, That makes sense... I can definitely see how it would... but I swear, this would be great for studying... I would get so much done... I think. She got lost in thought for a moment, but snapped out of it to ask, looking straight through Isaac, he could barely concentrate looking into her large, beautiful eyes, You were high a lot in class weren't

you, Maybe the last half of senior year... I can't really place things in time anymore..., Well... I remember you were embarrassed, or uncomfortable, talking about it..., That's because I was afraid you'd think less of me... did you, Maybe a little, but not too much, not like the other kids I knew did drugs, Because I was mature for my age. Isaac asked, and Alice replied by bursting out in laughter, and then coughing from her lungs, just as a couple of old folks walked by and made slightly censorious grimaces towards them. She was still laughing when she said, You were not mature for your age, are you crazy, you are still so immature, you just had more mature interests, and you were eloquent for your age, but that's something else entirely. There was no malice. How else would she see him but as a kid, her own daughter was almost his age.

I need to get up, stretch my legs, walk a bit, Oh, good, you're a walking stoner too, perfect. Unprompted, but also without any ulterior motives, Isaac took Alice by her arm. She accepted, and so they strolled. Up ahead several forks on the path. At first they were going to choose the one that led to the central manor, and see what exhibit they had, but then they saw a line of ducks, a mother, a father and a couple of handfuls of ducklings right behind, and so followed them instead, headed for a pond. They stopped under the shade and watched the ducklings jump clumsily onto the pool, one by one, or two by two, they hit the water and

immediately start frantically flapping their little webbed feet, a three or four second burst of speed, after which they will remember how to swim at a leisurely pace. Once all the ducklings were in the pond, they walked across the small and mossy stone bridge to the other side, and continued their stroll.

So what are you going to do next year, No idea, That's it, Yes, You said before no music school either, No... I don't think so... maybe film school... but I don't know, What about a job, at least it will give you something to do other than this. She meant the drugs. Yes... I suppose, that may be the best idea actually, at least I'll get some money out of it. Isaac had stopped and was looking in the distance, if he really focused, he could get past various levels of greenery and see a tiled wall, with a depiction of the first royal ships leaving the docks of the capital, not that far from where they were, sailing into the unknown. Then he said, pointing at the tiles, What I need is something like that, What, Sorry... I guess if you don't know what it is you won't be able to really see it from this far..., No... I know what it is... the ships, from the age of discovery, Yeah..., So you need an adventure, Something like that, There are still plenty to be had, the world is very big, you could volunteer somewhere, for example... and then maybe you would come back and see things differently, What things, Probably everything, but I meant like college, jobs, what you want out of life, you

are smart, it would be a shame to waste your future, What future.

She didn't understand, Isaac thought. She belonged to a generation that had some hope, one that grew up in a world that could still be expected to get better, a world where being intelligent and following the rules paid off. Twenty years before he could have been a reasonably bored but content highschool teacher like her, and even if he didn't follow all the rules, he would probably have done ok or maybe even had some success as a jazz musician. But now, what was there to do. Jazz was dead. And following the rules, especially in university, required him to become incredibly corrupt, could he really stomach it, to wear brown lipstick for the rest of his life. And as for jobs... Alice interrupted his thoughts to say, I don't know, maybe it wouldn't be right... I never saw you as an adventurer type, Then what type am I, The solitary type, So I'll be alone for the rest of my life, Not necessarily, you can be lucky and find a girl that will follow you into your solitude, Does that exist, Yes, Are you one of them, Not anymore.

Turning the corner on one of the main greenhouses, closed, they found a patch full of overgrown topiaries of various, incongruous shapes, and in between them dozens of peacocks roamed, a male one stops and tries to impress a

female by displaying his beautiful tail, contemporary dance has nothing on this kind of exuberance. While Isaac was watching the nature documentary, Alice strayed, and before he could look around to see where she had gone, she called to him. So strange, What, Look at this. It was one of those plaques that shows where the visitor is within the garden. It's profound, look what it says, it says, you're here, What's so profound about it, That we're here, on the earth, more than that, in this specific spot, right now, how many times do you really feel like you are present, all of you, Wow you are really high, Don't mock me..., No, no... I know what you mean, it's like jazz..., Like jazz..., Yeah, when you're playing a solo, improvising, you're really there, in the moment..., You have to be... for it to be any good..., Yeah, in the zone... but most of the time we're not really anywhere, we're scattered between a thousand thoughts at once, That's right, but now, at least for a while, we really are here.

This is the kind of comment that, after a bit of silence has allowed it to settle, makes one notice the day is at an end, At what time does the garden close, Eight, I think, That late, In the summer at least, and it's almost half past seven, maybe we should be heading back, Wait, before we go... I want to show you something. They came upon the main colonial house at the very center of the garden, now itself an historical curiosity, both for its architecture and because it was here that the most infamous fact about the garden's

existence took place, the establishment of a human zoo. Several subsaharian africans had once been brought from their native lands and paraded as part of an exhibit in the backyard, after which they were taken all over europe, on a sort of tour. All this was explained inside the manor with panels and a pre recorded lecture informing the visitors of when and why it happened, and also explaining, should anyone need it, that this was a shameful practice. But this was not where Isaac was leading Alice.

He led her further to the east side of the garden, mostly unkempt, to a fenced off area, almost all ruins, nature having taken over. We had lunch here sometimes, Who's we, Me and other people who worked here, because there were never any visitors..., but it was in much better shape, probably no one has been here in decades, You're wrong... I used to come here all the time, With Ariel, No, not with anyone, What did you want to show me, We have to go inside. The fence could be opened easily. Behind a couple of walls still standing, painted with a fairly broad brush in what was once for sure bright red, the words, I love you Alice. She was a bit confused. Did you do this, What, no..., Then who, No idea, but I bet you were just as beautiful and as interesting back then... so..., So... what, So there probably was a young man here who was into you, and you probably frustrated the hell out of him, so he put this here in case you saw it and got the hint, that's my theory, You have quite the

imagination, So you're saying there was no young gentleman of noble origins and good intentions who wanted your hand in marriage, Are you trying to say that I lived in the nineteenth century, is this your way of calling me old, No... I was just trying to be poetic... but you haven't answered the question, About the young gentleman..., Yes, was there one..., There may have been.

The decades old declaration of love overlooked a statue of a dryad in the middle of what was once a fountain, the water used to come out of her nipples. They both stood there contemplating that and the rest of the ruins, all of it overgrown with ferns and elephant ears and moss, the light already waning. Do you think we have time to smoke one more. Alice checked her watch, We should probably get going, Let's do this, let me roll one, and we'll smoke on the way, Is this one of your ploys..., No... I swear, Then what..., It's just... I want you to be in it still after you get home, Why, Hmm... I don't know... I think you will remember it better, Really... I'll remember it better if I'm high, Well... I think you will if you're still high when you get home, then you can sit and think about it, Is that how it works for you, Kind of, So it's one for the road, Yeah, Ok. They barely spoke and smoked instead, each taking slow drags and contemplating the exotic beauties of the colonial garden

under the fading pinkish orange light. The smoke came to an end, the pink was turning purple in the sky, they could already see people crowding around the gate, and in a minute or so they were back in the real world.

There were still plenty of tourists, but mostly down the street. Around the entrance to the garden it was pleasant, the air still warm, so they sat on a bench smoking one last cigarette, before going their separate ways. Thank you Isaac... I had fun today, Me too, but I should be the one thanking you, you saved me from a miserable day..., You're welcome, It would be great if we could do it again... I'm in the city, you're in the city... we could come to the garden again, or somewhere else, lots of beautiful and interesting places in our backyard, Yes, but that would be unseemly, wouldn't it, What, why, Because I'm old enough to be your mother, So what, can't we be friends, In theory, yes, in practice you tried to kiss me, But it wouldn't happen again... I swear, You can't promise those things, but that's not the problem... this day was already a bit strange... to make it a habit, a routine... it would be unseemly, as I said, Yes, well... I understand..., But Isaac... I had a really good time... and it will be a beautiful memory.

They sat and smoked in silence looking at the crowds and the traffic down below, streetlamps and neon signs and cellphone screens coming on, day turning to night. And

then twilight was over, and after one last look at the garden through the gate, Alice said, I should probably go home..., No, stay a little longer, or we can go somewhere else, smoke some more and talk, No, let's leave it here, it's poetic like this, it stays in the garden, safe, Can I at least walk you home. She took her time to reply, so he added, It's getting dark, might be dangerous. And she said wistfully, Yes, it might be.





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