

## Julianne

A pale winter's morning light streamed in the attic window. Julianne sat, back straight, on a wooden stool at her dresser. She rapidly combed long blonde locks with a pearl covered brush. She paused while one painted finger nail reached to scratch her jutting, prominent nose.

Her white bed covers lay tossed back hanging down to one side beyond a wooden wardrobe spilled clothes out onto the floor. The floorboards creaked as she rocked back and forwards on her stool. Every so often she glanced slyly in the mirror. Now to make herself beautiful. Her only addition was mascara.

She arose standing tall in her five foot ten inches. From the wardrobe she chose a sequined pair of jeans and cashmere sweater. She needed to get a move on. She swung open the door and raced down the corridor, bounding gazelle-like down two flights of stairs to the kitchen.

“Mama I must leave soon.”

A greying, skinny woman raised sunken eyes, face creased into a smile. Dressed in black she sat hunched over a newspaper at the kitchen table.

“Another boy Julianne? When will you attend to your studies?” She poured herself a glass from the bottle, hand shaking, slightly.

“But you like this boy” she turned to face her.

“He is charming. I will admit. And much better looking than that Irish boy.”

“Mama“ she cried. She tried to snatch the bag. “Not smoking too at this hour.”

#

The Brandpunt was heaving – college night. Drunken conversation reverberated off the yellowed ceilings and walls, cigarette smoke lingered in wispy clouds above the heads of students. Ceiling fans fought to cool the air.

It was a big room. Steps led up to a raised seating area with tables and chairs – on the left at the bar they queued three deep. She first saw him across the bar. He was dark with black hair and big eyes, dressed in jeans and a shirt with a scruffy denim jacket. He was talking and smiling at with some girl. She scowled as saw him move onto another girl

Later she was on her way to the toilets she passed him by. Closer she could see he was tall and skinny with rough skin.

“You look bored with everything.” he said in English as she passed.

“You are English” she stopped leaning one hand on the banister beside him.

“No Irish. I’m James.”

Somehow from there they moved to a free table nearby. Furrowed bushy eye brows danced as he spoke. His structure was broad but not muscular with large sad green eyes, prominent nose and sandpaper stubble.

Their conversation was fast and wide ranging.

“My family are very religious. But so is my country” he said. “You are secular here in Holland.”

“I am not a Christian” she said. “I believe in karma and reincarnation.

“Everything is catholic with me. There are five children in my family.”

“I had a Filipino nanny” she leaned two elbows on the table. “That’s how I learned English”. She smiled a baby smile. “I look like a frog when I smile. You have a nice smile.”

“I am not really a student you know” he confessed. He stared into the bottom of his glass swirling his beer.

She froze and stared. “What are you then?”

“I worked in the glass factory in Dongen all summer And I am leaving in a week to go back to Ireland.”

The music interrupted their flagging conversation.

“But why did you tell me your brother had died?” She reached forward across the table looking closely at him having busily dissected her beer mat.

His hands remained out of sight. “I don’t know. It’s a long time ago. I am over it.”

His face contorted for a moment. He looked down at the table,. Then he looked up smiling.

“Some things have happened to me too. But I don’t talk about them to just any one in the Brandpunt.” She banged the table suddenly with her fist making the glasses jump.

“You could tell me. I would listen” he said gently. He leaned forward for her hand but she pulled back.

“What do you know about me?” Her eyes narrowed, lips pursed together. The music came flooding in. They sat in silence again.

“You say everything is okay. That you are over it. You are lying.” She shook her head, flushed, heart pumping.

She looked at her watch and glanced at the door. But instead after a few minutes her heart rate slowed, color faded from her cheeks but she spoke softly.

“You don’t understand. My mother she had problems. My parents were divorced. She remarried. I never liked my stepfather and he never liked me. But what could I do. I was just a child. He used to beat me and lock me in the closet. Maybe I was abused. I don’t really remember. “

She pinched her large nose and furrowed her brow.

“They don’t like me, the other girls in college.” She waved her hand in the air. “They say I am a bitch or a lesbian.”

“I don’t care what they say. I care what you say. Is there a chance for us?”

She looked away but the glimmer of an artful smile played across her lips.

He persisted. “There is a dream - a very nice dream.”

“What dream is that?” she snapped.

“It is the romantic dream – boy meets girl. Everything comes right. You just haven’t met the right guy yet. ”

“Ah you are hopeless. Men are just ass-holes.” She twisted her lips.

“All men?” he smiled.

“I saw you talking to all the girls. You are just talking to me now and soon you will lose interest in that. That’s what happened to Mama.”

“But it’s true for me too. I haven’t met the right person. That’s why I am here tonight. I was hoping too. I want to meet my soulmate. Don’t you?” Wide green eyes steadily fixed themselves on her. She said nothing.

“Don’t you want to break the chains of the past? Be different. We are not our parents.” He leaned forward hands seeking hers eyes locked with hers.

“I suppose. You have me half-believing. Things are not right. They cannot so easily be put right. Ah you are a romantic, a dreamer – a believer in fairy tales.”

“And so what if I am. It has led me this far.”

“My father loved my mother. At least once he did and now he lives in a big house on his own.” Her face momentarily contorted. She gripped tightly onto her beer glass.

“He must be a lonely man then.”

“He has a girl-friend and money. But he is not a happy man. People are not meant to be happy.”

“Ah that is because they have no faith.”

“I suppose your God makes you happy.” She creased her brow. “I don’t believe it.”

“You don’t have to fix other people. You have to fix things for yourself.”

“Mama needs me. I can’t abandon her. She is older now and she won’t get a man. My stepfather wants to repossess the house. And then where will we go?”

“What about your father?”

“He says my mother is very irresponsible. He won’t help her again.”

#

When she returned her face was flushed and she trembled.

“It’s okay. I spoke to Mama. Come on James” she nearly lifted him out of his seat. “No time for that” as he picked up his glass.

“Where are we going?” His jet black eyebrows furrowed.

“You will see. We must hurry to catch the last train.

They made their way out through the bar. The crowd was thinning. They walked the narrow cobbled, rain drenched streets. A heavy rain soaked mist hung in the air. Even the passerby’s in the Heuvel heads bowed, hands dug deep in their pockets. She chattered away at a breathless pace. Somehow her chilly hand sought and found his.

On the platform at the railway station they kissed for the first time. She grabbed him around the waist in a powerful embrace. He tasted of beer and cigarettes. Waves of delight washed over her at this strange boy.

They boarded the train still holding hands. She pulled him up the steps and found them a seat. It was packed and the smoke and heat lingered in the aisles.

“How far to your place?” he asked.

“Don’t worry Mama will love you. ” she squeezed his hand.

From the train to a rainy damp platform they caught a bus and soon it was ploughing deep into the rural hinterland lights cutting into the foggy night, windows steamed up. Villages flashed past and his grip on her hand tightened.

“Don’t be alarmed James. We are not going to kill you, my mother and me.”

It was dark when they got off the bus. They stood at a cross roads. She led him across the road and down a quiet tree lined street to a majestic house. A leafy passage way led around the back, gravel crunched underfoot, and from there was a doorway into the kitchen. She immediately took off her shoes.

“You must do the same.”

He followed up the flights of stairs. “That is mama’s room. We must be quiet.”

The floorboards creaked as they went back.

“You can put your clothes on the chair” she said. Already she was undressing.

He started to undress slowly.

She stripped down to her under garments as if it was the most normal thing and jumped into the bed. “Hop in its freezing” she said.

He climbed in beside her and they kissed some more.

Suddenly she rolled over and announced “I am going to sleep with Mama now.”

#

The next night she came in the bedroom and threw two condoms on the bed.

“You will need to wear one of these tonight” she instructed.

He put it on and she climbed on top. First he went slowly and then he went fast. She couldn't understand but worked it out that he was nervous. When he was all over she sighed and rolled her eyes. She tied the condom in a knot and left it on the window ledge.

"You won't have much of that left," she said pointing at its contents, "when you are finished here."

She didn't go to him again and stayed down with Mama the next few nights. When it came to bed time he asked her why.

"I don't have to explain" she said. "I don't feel like it." She stood in the doorway of the bedroom whilst he undressed sitting on the bed.

"Perhaps I should go?" he said quietly.

She froze, trembling. "Where? Back to Ireland?"

"I don't want to leave. I thought we had something."

That night she crawled into their attic bed again. Somehow he scaled the dizzy mountain peak of her indifference.

Days he spent sleeping late and reading his Bible.

One evening they took the bicycles to Den Bosch, their breath forming great plumes as they cycled the darkened road.

Her heart was in arctic thaw at this gentle giant. They sat in a café and she told him many things,, things she had never told anyone before.

#

A week later he hung up the phone and came into the kitchen.

“I have to go back to Dublin” he said. “My mother has booked me into a course in October.”

“You can stay here as long as you want” said Mama.

Later they walked in the meadow behind the house.

“How long will you be gone” she asked. “I thought you would stay with us.”

“Your mother has been very good to me. I will be back. There is no question about that.”

“You don’t really love me.”

“I am not like you. It takes me time to love.”

“You know what I mean.

They stopped under a large oak tree. He turned to face her and held her hands.

“You have to trust me. I can’t live here the whole time with you and your mum. I have to finish my studies. Then we can plan our future.”

“When will you come back?”

“You could come over to Dublin.”

The news that he was going was a punch in her stomach.

#

He left the following week leaving only a dirty tee-shirt under the bed and the dreadful Bible. Soon letters started arriving from Dublin. There was a present in a shoe box – full of toys and sweets , a copy of Wuthering Heights. Initially she replied with enthusiasm writing many passionate letters in her intricate scrawl.

They would be together forever. It was written in the stars.

But then one day something happened and she rang him and his mother answered.

“Can I speak to James?” She drummed her fingers on the sideboard .

Eventually he came on the line. “Can I call you back later?”

She beat the wall with her fist. “Don’t make me beg you” she cried down the phone.

“Look I will call you later.” His voice was edged.

She slammed down the phone and shouted for Mama.

She found her watering plants in the conservatory. She hugged her tightly.

“Sit down and take your breath.” She guided her to the couch. Julianne started to cry hot heavy tears.

“I love him Mama. I can’t be without him.” She wrung her hands wiping her eyes with a tissue.

“You have to step out of the emotion Julianne. This is not good for you or James.”

Mama started guiding the process. They worked together locating and discreating each of the many emotions she had for him. At the end she slumped back in the couch, rubbed her eyes, and yawned.

Mama brought her some tea.

“You’ll be fine now Julianne.” Mama smiled a knowing smile.

And she was fine. She forgot the romance, the love and how he was the one. From then on she thought of him less and less. She started to notice other boys on the train. There was a boy in college who kept following her around offering to carry her books. She wasn’t really interested. He was amusing though.

She avoided his phone calls and his letters went unanswered.. Finally weeks later he caught her on the phone.

“Why have you not returned my calls?” he sighed. There was anger in his voice.

“I have been meaning too.” She crossed her legs.

“I was thinking of coming over but since you clearly do not want me too....” Gone was the gentle lover.

“What do you mean? You know I will always love you.”

“You say you do but you’ve changed.”

“Don’t speak to me like that.”

“Julianne, I can’t hang on forever for you.”

“Well go to hell then. Stay in your own world.”

“Is this how it ends then, like this?”

She slammed down the phone into the receiver so hard the handset cracked.