

I had no idea how they had arrived, or how long they had been there, but they ranged around that icy plain in pairs and small parties, the snow-shrouded mountains rising dramatically on all sides.

Some carried drinks, though I saw no waiters in attendance; some lounged in upholstered wooden chairs of the type normally found in members' clubs, though most stood in the snow amid small, frost-feathered plants. The men wore dark suits and ties, the women black dresses and the occasional hat or veil. No one seemed cold despite the weather: the atmosphere was genial and relaxed, the conversation easy and affable, and those who stood alone did so out of choice, gazing into the distance at the pale disc of a sun setting behind the rugged mountain range.

As I approached I began to recognise faces in the crowd, disconnected characters from my past who appeared not to have aged in the years since I'd last seen them. Mrs Cantley, for example, the old woman who lived next to my grandmother and whose red-faced husband collected miniature gargoyles from the Greek island they visited each summer. I saw Mrs Dale, the primary school headmistress in whose office I was berated for spreading a rumour that a girl absent with chicken pox had in fact been kidnapped, and Mr Jones, the maths teacher who had caught me with one hand in the school payphone, a sock full of silver coins in my pocket.

There were old friends: Richard Hunt, who had laughed at my home-cut hair and cheap plastic shoes and shown me my first pornographic magazine; Leigh Dane, who had lifted his shirt to reveal scars on his arms and back as we'd walked together to school. And there were lovers: Teresa Gersten, whose mouth had tasted of cigarettes and bitter German chewing gum; Anna Morgan, who would lie awake half the night worrying about a ghost in her flat; Sara Najafi, with whom I'd visited a French beach town and danced at midnight to the sound of distant waves, the moon splintering on the black surface of the sea.

As I walked through the crowd I realised that not a single face was entirely unknown to me. I recognised dentists and bus drivers, girlfriends of former flatmates and travelling companions with whom I'd once shared hostel rooms on a smoke-smothered gap year. No one, it seemed, was a complete stranger, though not even my closest friends appeared to register my presence as I passed across the plain: no eyes alighted on mine, no head so much as nodded in my direction.

I threaded my way through the congregation entirely unheeded until I had passed the stragglers standing at its farthest edge, striding out into the shadow of the mountains to the place where my mother and my sister stood waiting for me, as I'd known they would be. By the time I arrived the sky was flushed blue and black, and we greeted each other with smiles and silent embraces before the women turned and began walking toward the hills, my sister's blonde hair slipping in a silken river down her back, my mother's thin curls the colour of crushed snow.

As I walked behind them I became haunted by the feeling that I'd seen the same view of both women only moments earlier: my mother at the wheel of her car, my sister in the passenger seat and me gazing absently out the window from the back. I remembered the song that had been playing on the stereo, and the way the roar of the rain had paused as we'd passed beneath motorway bridges. And I felt I could recall a flash of light, and a noise like thunder, and my mother's cassette boxes seemingly suspended in the air as though strung on invisible threads. But I couldn't be sure.

All I could be sure of was what surrounded me on all sides: the sky and the plains and the pale frozen plants, and the sound of the crowd lost beneath the crunch of snow underfoot as we rose into those darkening hills."

Cyrus Sharad, 2010