Pomegranate

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I'm doing my makeup before work, holding a hand mirror up to the bedroom window to catch the best of the morning light, when a taxi pulls up two doors down. That house has been empty for months. I pause and watch as a dark-skinned man and teenage boy step out onto the pavement. A moment later, a woman gets out the other side—also dark-skinned, wearing a long dress and a headscarf. A sudden gust of wind loosens the scarf, threatening to whip it away, but she calmly tucks the ends back in. As she straightens, her gaze lifts to the row of flags across the street, Red Hands waving bloodied greeting.

The man moves to the car boot, and the woman joins him, helping to heave two battered suitcases and a threadbare rucksack onto the pavement beside the boy. A pink-faced man in a rumpled white shirt and blue lanyard climbs out of the front passenger seat, leaning back in to say something to the driver before shutting the door. The taxi idles as he heads up the cracked concrete path towards the house. He gestures for the family to follow, mouthing something I can't make out, and they fall in behind him, dragging their bags. At the doorstep he fumbles with the lock, finally pushes the door open, and ushers them inside.

I turn back to getting ready for work. The three-lettered group who control the estate are doing a roaring trade in loans these days—dirty money that keeps a roof over your head and your kids fed but soon has you crippled in debt. I've told myself I'll never take money from them, but even working all the hours I can, it's been getting harder and harder to cover the basics.

I've all but forgotten about the newcomers when, several weeks after their arrival on the estate, the woman in the headscarf comes into the shop. I watch her on the CCTV behind my till, drifting from square to square until

she slips out of view. Then she's standing in front of me. She has brown eyes, a straight nose, full lips. 'Excuse me?' she asks, 'You have…'—she pulls out a phone and types something in. A robotic voice pronounces, 'Pom-e-gran-ate'.

The word stirs a memory: a family holiday when I was a teenager, my first and only time out of the country. All of us overwhelmed by strange sights and sounds and smells. Sunburnt shoulders, a green plastic table, a fruit salad scattered with burgundy gems—those best avoided, being unknown. But one slipping past all the same, hiding behind a tooth, discovered hours later by a curious tongue. A surprising burst of sweetness.

I look up sharply. 'You won't get those here'.

I'm not sure she's understood me, but she nods and murmurs, 'Ok, thank you'. A queue has formed behind her and a man near the front is sighing loudly, tapping his foot. She turns to leave, and I watch her pass him, then the row of newspapers. I wonder if she's noticed his hard stare or the newspaper headlines. MIGRANT INVASION.

'Next'.

Two weeks later I'm waiting for my bus home, wrecked after a long day of stocktaking, standing on the till, Stevie melting my head about the new car he's just bought on finance. It starts pissing it down, and those of us at the stop huddle under the bus shelter, staring through the rain at the sign outside the church across the road: PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD. Cheery. A boy is standing on his own a little way from the shelter, hood up. I realise it's the kid from the house down the street—younger than I thought, twelve, maybe thirteen. Onboard he sits at the front near the driver, well away from the messers at the back. It's warm and stuffy, and I start to drift off, almost missing my stop. Stumbling onto the pavement, I spot the woman in the headscarf standing under the bus shelter, waiting for the boy. She catches my eye and her mouth starts to open as if to speak. I turn away quickly.

It's still raining the next day and the shop is quiet. Half-starved, I decide to chance a few bites of my lunch while no-one's about. I've just taken a mouthful of my sandwich when she appears again, standing at the counter with milk and a bar of chocolate. I hadn't even heard her come in. She gestures towards the chocolate—'My son, Ali, he love it'.

I nod, chew my white bread as fast as I can.

'Please,' she says, smiling gently, 'Enjoy your food. Or "sahtain", in my language'.

Scundered, I gulp it down, pretending I haven't heard her, but during my break I find myself whispering the word in the toilet mirror. *Sahtain*.

I'd always liked languages, doing well in them at A-Level, getting into university to do French and Spanish. First in my family to go. Neither of my parents had been interested in school, Ma a cleaner, Da a welder at the shipyard. He'd come home and eat his dinner every night in silence, head down, silent, never really with us. But he was proud as punch that his wee girl was going to university, bragging about it to anyone who'd listen. Raised all our expectations so high that when the inevitable crash came, it came hard.

A night out a few months into second year. The after-party, a drunken fumble, a missed period. Two blue lines confirming the worst six weeks later. I spent most of my student grant getting over to England to deal with it and dropped out of uni soon after.

Twelve years ago.

I think of Ali—about twelve. Tell myself to wise up and get back to work.

Weeks go by without seeing any of them. I find myself wondering what Ali's parents do all day, why they aren't out working. Not much work in them, if my newsfeed is anything to go by. Then, one Friday in late October, I spot her sitting a few seats ahead of me on the bus. When we get off, I

keep my distance. She's carrying two plastic bags full of shopping, and as she turns onto the estate a lemon tumbles from one of them without her noticing. It rolls down the slope towards me. Without thinking, I pick it up, jog after her, and tap her on the shoulder. She turns, and I'm shocked by the fear in her eyes. The fear quickly turns to relief when she sees it's only me. I suddenly feel like an eejit, standing there with the single lemon in my hand.

'You … dropped this'.

Her face breaks into a smile. 'Oh, thank you very much!'

She looks so grateful that I can't help but feel pleased. 'No bother'.

She's starting to respond when I see a curtain move in the front window of the house behind her. Mumbling an excuse, I cut her off, gesture vaguely up the street. Hurry home.

It's not often I have the weekend off. I want to enjoy it, but there's a loneliness in it that's hard to shake. I'm sitting in the living room on Saturday afternoon, scrolling through Instagram, when the doorbell rings.

I stiffen. Wait.

When it rings again, I walk out to the hallway. Open the front door slowly. I relax when I see it's herself. She's carrying a white bowl of something, which she presses into my unwilling hands.

'This … for you. I am Afnan. And you …?'

I hesitate, settle for my full name—one which I hate and rarely use, but which feels suitably formal. 'Rosemary'.

She smiles. 'Rose'.

I go to correct her but decide not to drag this out any longer than necessary, pointing to the bowl instead. ‘Thanks for this, but really there’s no need…’

She shakes her head. ‘Please, you try. It is *makdous*. We make with…’ She produces her phone and types something in. The same disembodied voice floats out—‘Egg-plant’.

A laugh escapes me before I can stop it. ‘Aubergine, you mean!’

She asks me to say it again, and we repeat it a few times until I catch myself on. This isn’t a bloody English lesson. ‘Better be getting back to…’ I gesture inside. ‘And thank you’.

‘My pleasure’.

I step back and close the door. Watch the shape of her get smaller through the frosted glass.

Against my better judgement, I find that the *makdous* is delicious—baby aubergines with crunchy walnuts, sweet red peppers, tangy garlic, and red-hot chilli. I wonder where on earth she found baby aubergines in Belfast. It’s near the end of the month and I’ve very little fresh food in, so stretch them as far as I can, eating them first with rice, then with bread. The empty bowl sits on my kitchen counter for weeks. Every time I go to return it, something stops me.

It’s almost the end of November, and I’m on my way home from work when I see that someone’s spray-painted something on Afnan’s house: LOCALS ONLY. Before I know it, I’ve gone inside, grabbed the bowl off the kitchen counter, and marched round there. Afnan comes to the door, adjusting her headscarf as she opens it. Her skin is sickly pale, and there are dark circles beneath her eyes. She invites me in, but I tell her I should be getting on, offer over the bowl. She asks what I thought of the *makdous*. ‘Delicious,’ I say, glimpsing a sparse room—a single sofa, a bookcase with no books, a damp stain spreading across one corner of the ceiling. I ask where her husband is. A shadow passes over her face.

‘He is out,’ she says, and offers no explanation.

Christmas is coming. I’ve gone into town to do a few messages, regretting it the minute I step off the bus. The place is heaving. The fella on the corner with the loudspeaker is especially fired up today, shouting louder than usual something about Bethlehem and, bizarrely, the end of the world.

I’m in the fruit and veg aisle at the supermarket when I notice a young couple ahead. The woman is pregnant and wearing a headscarf, her bearded partner in a black leather jacket. An older white man and woman are standing nearby, glancing at them with disapproval, shaking their heads as if offended by their presence. The man mutters something and the woman responds, loudly, ‘Aye, right enough. You never know what he could have under that jacket.’ They move off towards the dairy section. Stomach twisting, I shuffle towards the oranges, carefully avoiding eye contact with the young couple.

And then I see them, packaged in small plastic cartons: pomegranate seeds. An extravagance I can’t afford. But I know immediately I’m going to buy two cartons. The second I get home, I open one and use my fingers to eat each seed individually, savouring their clear, sharp sweetness. The other I bring to Afnan.

She’s delighted, invites me in again. This time, I accept. She serves me black tea and small syrupy pastries stuffed with nuts, saying she got them from a Turkish shop a few streets away. I admit I had no idea we even had one of those.

I ask what brought her family here. In broken English, with the help of a translation app on her phone, she explains why they left their country. This house, she says, is the third they’ve lived in since arriving five years ago. So far, it’s the best—a bit of graffiti preferable to the rats in the first place, fireworks shoved through the letterbox of the second.

We see each other again. And again. In time, she tells me that she had a good job in her country. That not working feels a bit like dying—endless days without colour. That her husband, Hisham, goes out for hours on end, anything to avoid thinking about what he's left behind. Comes home like a zombie. Angry sometimes. I think of my Da and tell her about him. She talks about Ali, says she worries about him, wishes she'd been able to give him a better childhood.

She discovers the English classes run by a charity in a church hall down the road. Eventually, she convinces me to get involved, help with the teaching. I go along, reluctantly at first, but get into the swing of things surprisingly quickly. I meet people who've exchanged one beautiful, fucked-up place—Syria, Palestine, Iran, Eritrea, Yemen, Sudan, Ukraine, Somalia—for another.

The charity organises an international food festival. A few locals rip down the sign for it, gather outside the hall to protest.

The following summer, we take a coach trip to Strangford Lough. Dip our feet in puddles of rain and seawater, watch the sun sink over the grey, unbroken sweep of the Mourne Mountains. Lilac and lavender, pink, blue, cream, gold and amber—a dazzling cliché needing no translation. We feel joy. See it reflected in each other's faces, suddenly familiar.