

White feathers

By Jane Dougherty

She walked along, her hands stuffed in her pockets, eyes unfocused but cast in the direction of the pavement. She wasn't looking where she was going because she didn't care. Didn't care about anything. Not anymore.

Behind her eyes, the same scene played over and over: the café counter, the coffee she couldn't swallow, his hand on the zinc counter next to her hand. But his fingers were not curled round hers, they curled defensively round a cigarette, brandishing it like a weapon between them. The smoke too had curled, up into her eyes. Smoke drifted over the scene making her eyes water. Perhaps it was tears.

It was over; he'd said so, in the dim morning light, the light too pale to show the details of his face, even if she had dared to look.

She wanted to take away no last memory of his blank face, the cold lips saying the terrible word: over. The echo rang in her head like a tolling bell.

Coffee steamed, the smell of other people's breakfast. A sticky spill, a small dark pool. The greasy sleeve of the customer next to her. The strong, sweet smell of deodorant. She had felt sick, wanted to scream. Instead, she had picked up her bag and turned away, still not looking, leaving without a word, hoping her refusal to break down, to say goodbye tearfully, beg for a word of hope, hurt him just a fraction of the way it hurt her.

She couldn't tell if she had wounded him, had not looked at his face, just the hand clutching the smoking cigarette.

He hadn't had the nerve to tell her at home, had waited until they were on one of their romantic weekends. He hadn't wanted the bitterness of the situation to spoil fond memories. He was probably thinking of his fond memories not hers. Memories, not happiness: that was crushed out of existence now; just memories that wouldn't go away,

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buzzing and stinging like horse flies.

She had no idea where she was, had never been in this town before. She walked, kept to the same pavement, following where it led, round corners, past shops. Just walked. There was no point trying to work out what would happen about 'home'. She didn't have one anymore. He had smashed it to tiny, unmendable pieces.

Her bag hung heavy, full of objects that had lost all their meaning. They belonged to her life when they were a couple. There was a before and after now, even for a stick of chewing gum or an old bus ticket. Her eyes blurred. She tried to concentrate on now, tomorrow, the rest of her life. But there was nothing. She retreated into the watery blur and cried inside.

The pavement widened, brought her to another corner. People passed. She kept her gaze retracted like a snail's horns. Crowds. She wanted solitude, looked about in a daze for an exit, as if she expected a door to open in front of her, and beyond for there to be peace. Cars roared irritably along a busy road. At the other

side stretched the railings of a park, trees, grass, perhaps calm.

Before, she would have found a little peace beneath the trees. She would have listened to the birds until the painful beating of her heart calmed. That was before the goodbye. Goodbye destroyed hope, took the light from the sky and the warmth from the sun. It took the beauty from the day, and the blackbird's song was no sweeter than the croaking of a crow. She stared at the park, and the trees beyond the railings stood like ghosts, silent and otherworldly.

She hesitated, poised on the edge of the curb, suddenly unable to bear the idea that people might be looking at her and reading the pain in her face. A man, staring at his phone jostled her. Nothing beckoned, nothing called to her, just the desire to make it all stop. She stepped down from the kerb.

A flurry of wings before her face startled her, making her step back onto the pavement. Car brakes screeched. White feathers drifted past her eyes from a vibrant blue sky, a slowly drifting veil of glittering whiteness. A face lunged, grimacing, from a car window. Feathers drifted and lay like petals at her feet. A voice, from the thrusting red face, roared at her in a fury. She didn't listen, just gazed in wonder at the soft rain of white feather petals, drifting, drifting.

Someone took her arm.

"Are you okay?"

The voice was deep and rich and full of concern. She looked at the hand, her sleeve, and the scattering of white petals, or were they feathers? She raised her face. Eyes, blue as a rain-washed sky looked into hers. Dark hair framed the face, fine features. The corners of the eyes crinkled as the mouth curled into a smile. She found herself smiling back.

"I think so."

In the distance, she heard the first notes of a blackbird's song. **WW**

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