

Open Window

Freshmen! They are an insecure, annoying, constantly confused bunch, without exception. Of course, that description included me. Fresher's Week got to me as it did to anybody else. Between boring talks from various old but apparently important people and almost tear-wrenching hunts all across the campus to find room F-something in Llanbadarn building, between missing old friends and making new acquaintances; all my senses were on overload.

Probably that wasn't the best moment to see the kid again that I'd been obsessing over since I was a little child. I'd last seen that boy when I had been in Fourth Grade, and was left with the certainty that I was never going to see him again, since dad had gotten a new job in that year. We had moved out of town, and I didn't even know his name. As a matter of fact I knew almost nothing about him, but I thought what little I did know, was really all that mattered.

I saw him again, as I was making my way to the elusive Llanbadarn building, for my first lecture. He was leaving the building just as I got there and we passed each other as he held the door open for me. His eyes met mine for a few moments and broke the seal I had carefully put over my memories. Then I was in the building and he was gone. I hesitated for a few heartbeats. My first lecture or the boy which the child in me stubbornly kept calling my first love? A sheepish grin spread over my face and I followed the boy.

As I trotted to catch up with him I thought that I would really have to stop referring to him as 'the boy' though. In fact – careful to keep a safe distance – I was following a young man, who manoeuvred the campus back-

alleys and short-cuts with all that self-confidence that screamed second-year student. Obviously, I thought. He was, after all, a year older than me.

As far as I could tell, we were headed for the main courtyard, in front of the Arts Centre, when suddenly he stopped to talk to a group of students headed the other way. I froze for a second and my throat tightened. What was I going to do? I couldn't just stop and wait – that would be awfully suspicious. Seeing no other possibility I kept walking. As I passed them, I could not help but crane my neck to get another glimpse of him. Scanning his face for an echo of the past, I was quite sure that I wasn't mistaken. The eyes, the mouth... Yes, it just had to be him.

But then, he gave me a glance accompanied by a scowl. I felt like the temperature had dropped considerably in a matter of half a second and hurried past the group on numb legs, until I had reached the bell tower. I took a look around and eventually decided that the steps in front of the union would probably make a good vantage point. As I struggled to sit down on the stairs with some dignity I cursed my early-morning self who foolishly had picked a skirt and blouse for today. Why not just frigging blue jeans?

While waiting for him to take leave from his friends, I tried to calm down. I really was behaving like a schoolgirl who had her first crush!

After what seemed like an eternity, he came up the stairs, cut across the courtyard to the bell tower, climbed the first few steps and sat down. I observed him as he produced a book out of his shoulder bag and started to read.

Fiddling with the plaits on my skirt I debated the issue. Would, could, should, I finally decided to cut it all short. I got up as clumsily as I had sat down.

"I was shocked when it happened, you know."

He started out of his world which was organized neatly in the Tolkien between his hands. His fingers pushed his glasses up on his nose and he studied me for a moment. I had to admit, this look of perplexed curiosity was not the reaction I'd counted on. Eventually I sighed. Had I been gathering up my courage for this? Wasn't the young man before me the boy from back then after all? "I'm sorry," I told him. "I must've mistaken you, I guess." Okay, it had been years, but I had been so sure. This was bad; I was really going to make a fool out of myself. *Oh, stop it, will you!*

I lingered, running my sweaty palms down the sides of my skirt. "Mind if I sit?"

After a moment of confusion, he followed the implication of my pointing finger and the words stumbled out of him, "Oh, I'm sorry. I was, I mean, my book..." He made an effort to shut up and I couldn't help but smile.

"Go ahead," he finally mumbled, and by the time I had, he valiantly tried to shield a blush with his novel.

I leaned back on the steps, enjoying the afternoon sun, and stole glances at him while pretending to lazily follow other students with my eyes. They were passing us, as they travelled to and from the arts centre and student union. None of them seemed to care for our idle, elevated island; they all looked like they had things to do and places to be. "A pity really," I said and he looked up from his book again with a short puffy exhale. His face, however,

belied this show of discontent. His slightly arched eyebrows and intensely brown eyes looked curious, rather than angry, to me. In fact, the faint hint of a smile played around lips which had a natural pout. I imagined them as two clementine petals, wandering silkily over my skin. A warm shudder danced down my spine and I sucked in a deep lungful of crisp air. *Now.* And let it out again. *Or never.*

“Do you mind if I tell you a story?”

He put a finger between the pages, as if he had expected something like this. “Sure,” he said, and patted the cover of his book. “I like good stories.”

A giggle snuck out of my mouth. “Fantasy and good stories, isn’t that quite a paradox? Most of them are crap.” I winked and added, “But of course that would be a rude thing to say, right?” I waited for a smile that didn’t appear and berated myself for being such a ditz. My hands wouldn’t keep still in my lap. He watched them, with his serious face, as they writhed on my jeans skirt, like vicious entangled spiders. I could feel his eyes on me, and they burned. I had to leave.

“You are right, you know.” His voice touched me like soothing cream. Again his hand rose to push up his glasses, hiding his face. When it retreated, I was surprised to see a grin had spread all over his face. “Most fantasy stories *are* crap,” he said. “But they’re *fantastic* crap!”

I laughed again, and this time he was laughing with me. He put the book onto the step – forgetting about his place-holding finger, I noticed – and seated himself more comfortably, his sneakers raking the concrete underneath. His back on Tolkien, he now turned to me. “You’ve been following me around, haven’t you?”

I froze. What should I say? He was looking at me and it made my skin tingle.

"Aw, never mind," he said, "You promised me a story, right?"

I felt doted upon. Clasp my hands on my knees, I wondered briefly where to begin. "I've recently been back to my school. Primary school. Have you ever noticed how big you feel, when you do that? Almost like a monster?" My hands were moving again, the treacherous little spiders!

He noticed and gave them an appeasing nod. "Yeah." It came out a drawl, as if he wasn't quite convinced but didn't want to hurt me by saying so.

"Well, it's triggered some memories. You see, when I was in Fourth Grade, I used to be terrified of the Fifth Grade teacher."

"Really?" He sounded excited. "That's cool."

I frowned, remembering all the times we'd heard him through the walls as he shouted at his pupils. I remembered how terrified I'd been that there was a chance he would shout at *me* next year. "Why is that cool?" I asked him, and his fingers jerked to his specs in that meanwhile familiar movement. I noticed his nails, very clean, and carefully trimmed. Not bitten like yours, that little voice of guilt piped up in me.

"Well," he said, waving his hand in a vague circle, and the moment was gone, "I mean – every story needs a good villain, right?"

There it was again, the sound of our intermingled laughter. If I told him now, that this sound seemed familiar to me already, would he call me a weirdo? There was that way in which he looked me up and down, eyes lingering here or there... My hair maybe? Or my breasts? It had better be my face! Yes, my face,

which incidentally was lighting up then with a hot rush of blood. But that unnerving calm in his eyes!

"Yeah, well, he was very loud," I said quickly. "We'd hear him through the walls. His classroom and ours were next to one another, you see, and our windows went out into the courtyard." I giggled, remembering. "We often jumped out of them, when our teacher wasn't there to pay attention." His fingers lightly touched my shoulder.

"Hold on," he said, and I did, or tried to, reached out with my shoulder, tried to grasp his fingers, seized them with all of my will.

"You guys jumped out of the window?" He looked sceptic, but there was also something else in his eyes. I hoped it was the shadow of a memory. I didn't really fancy making a fool of myself.

"Of course," I continued, after a brief silence. "Oh, the windows were on the ground floor. It was really quite safe." I smiled, enjoying the moment. Then his fingers were gone and I heard him clear his throat – the sound of embarrassment. I stopped smiling and turned to look at him. That elusive something I'd noticed earlier had turned into a frown and the spiders in my lap twitched. With an effort of will I restrained them and he rewarded me with a warm smile.

"So what happened next? That teacher caught you, right?" he asked.

I shook my head, then watched my hands.

"By that look in your eyes it must've made you quite sad, whatever did happen," he observed.

Surprised, I looked up at him, tried to look into him. "Yes, it made quite an impression on me," I said. "Well, we were writing a paper one day, when we

heard that teacher yell again, through the walls. I really didn't like him at all. He just had such a bad temper."

He offered comfort with a nod. Had he come closer? I suddenly noticed I could pick up his aftershave. Nothing fancy, but a light musky smell which struck me as oddly sexy. "Anyway," I went on, "That day, I remembered looking up when I heard him, and I took a moment to look around, and out into the courtyard. And there he was, standing in his classroom, and he ripped open the window." I noticed that his eyes were literally following every movement of my lips. I couldn't say that it disturbed me either.

"He *ripped* the window open?" he asked slowly. I nodded.

"And then?"

"Well, the bastard turned, grabbed a chair, and threw it out into the courtyard; then scattered an armful of books, and loose leaflets out of the window." The face behind the glasses was suddenly very pale and there was the hand again, on my leg this time. It felt weird and heavy there, on my naked knee, but I went on without objecting to it. "After that, he reached one last time, and before I knew he heaved a desk out. It made an awful lot of noise, I remember." I wondered what was boring into me harder: his fingers or his eyes. I withstood both. It was now my turn to be calm.

"After the desk, a boy scrambled out of the window, chased by the teacher's yelling, and after him, the window slammed shut."

"What —" He ran his tongue over his lips, and I saw his Adam's Apple jump as he swallowed. He tried again, "And what did the boy do?"

I put my hand on his, and nimbly, his fingers encircled mine. They were cold as ice, and I rubbed them slightly with my own. "Well, he retrieved his

chair and his books. He put the desk upright. And then he just sat there, all alone in the courtyard." I took a deep breath. "He looked like the loneliest person in the world – utterly forlorn. He may have been crying, but I don't know. He had his back turned to me. I know I was crying at any rate."

"Yeah, I was crying," he said, and looked at me with sparkling wet eyes.

"You were in the same school as I?" he asked.

"Karen," I said.

"Karen," he echoed, with wonder in his voice, then, "Ryan."

I got what I wanted. I knew his name. I held his hand.