

The Light at the End of You

by DJ Young

I'm reading your remains.

The LED is too bright. The words in front of me are washing out, going white and gray. There's dust, too, clinging to the static, lingering, snow-like, ash-like. It's like reading through a haze. My finger leaves a ripple. The filaments are nothing but leftovers — the microscopic 'us' we leave behind.

I don't really know what I'm talking about.

We were talking about you, I suppose, wherever it was we left off. We were always talking about you, what you were doing, what you weren't doing, where you were going, where you had been. We were always talking in generalities. There is no intimate memory of yours that you had ever shared with me. Our chats have no memory. They are not real experiences, are they? You can't just type at someone and expect those words to linger the way a first kiss would or a hand held in the dark on a long walk home would.

There's a siren, you wrote. It's going off somewhere, giving you a headache. There are all these flashes and the room is lit up like a bonfire.

Get some marshmallows, I wrote.

Very funny, you replied. Bring me a stick. Bring yourself.

This is what I saved.

It was December. You'd finished putting up the lights on the tree and posted pictures all over Facebook: blue and red and green — little glass alleles, singing off their branches. American Christmas

trees are so ridiculous, you wrote me once, *so gaudy*. I want to remind you, but I can't. The pictures are so clear when I click on them, when they open - large in the window I want to step through. Open the window. I want to crawl in, sneak up on you and give you a fright.

I was having a late lunch and you were on your way to bed. You couldn't sleep because of the lights and you wanted me to tell you something funny, something to help with your nerves. It was almost Christmas, so I told the one about how Jesus got his name.

Poor Mary, pregnant, heavy, weeks on the back of a donkey, no room, no reservations, up all night in a barn with smelly animals, a strange kid banging a drum and then an angel appears and tells her that God got her with child and she is the most blessed of women. Jesus Christ, she tells him. We're only here to pay our taxes.

You typed that you were amused and glad for the story, that you would remember it; you had to tell your sister. The lights were gone then. My fingers stroked the keys as I read your goodnight.

You signed off as usual:

XX

This could be a referral to our shared homogametic sex — how singularly of you, the geneticist. The conventional wisdom calls this a kiss (one for each cheek, perhaps? You are European), but you type it too often for it to be true. It has no taste.

Historically, or in films at least, 'X' is the letter used by those who cannot otherwise sign their name to a contract or a bill or some other important documentation. We are made to assume that the person in question is illiterate, without any knowledge of any alphabet, nor the ability to write, yet having enough understanding to use a writing instrument and cross two lines over one another. If you've ever watched a two-year old with a crayon, you will know they mostly draw squiggles, without any discernable shape. That a grown adult with no more writing ability than a two-year old can

manage something as sophisticated as an 'X,' seems remarkable - or very phony.

If you've ever watched old cartoons, little Xs would be drawn over the eyes of dead characters.

It might be the simplicity of the X that makes it so easy to sign, to remember to sign. X is a very memorable letter, isn't it? X is always a fill-in-the-blank. X is a smokescreen, anonymous, something to hide behind. X can be anything: the 23rd chromosome or the danger sign. A ten to the Roman. A lazy, lipless osculation. X is the unknown and the end.

When I think of your name, even now, I see the double X and wonder if that's all you meant. I want it to mean something more (X plus X equals X). I'd never ask. Never will.

This is how you make too much of things.

This was the last of you, the not-memories of a not quite life, left like a wisp of smoke. As if you were made of it. Something still hangs in the air, a strong scent of you and a blur of you, curling at the edges, gone black.

My fingers leave ripples. You can't wipe them away.

The char and stain of it — I can imagine your coal-shaped hands. I never got the drift of you, now you've drifted altogether.

What you've left, these smoky traces, glowing, too bright, too many words, none of them 'goodbye'. I'll never know what I know.

Nothing is certain, except the glow and fading glimpse of you, the face I never saw, and the voice I never heard - just the words and the idea of words. The idea of you, my gauzy X-factor: seeking you, crossing you in every crooked, phosphorescent line.

END

