

Blank Inside

by J. A. Johnson

The bell on the door of the card shop sounds different to her today. What she remembered as a jingle—gentle as sleigh bells—now sounds brittle and metallic. She lingers at the candles, lingers at the gifts. She moves to the hand-made soaps and pauses to press one after another to her nose. She sees the clerk watching her. She gives the clerk a nod and a mirthless smile and finally makes her way toward the anniversary cards.

She staked her claim to this shop in the early days of their courtship because it was proudly independent and devoid of Hallmark Crowns. He has his own preferred shop across town, equally independent but closer to his office. Their arrangement is unsaid, acknowledged. It ensures that they won't bump into each other on the day before Valentine's Day, and that no occasion will be marred by an embarrassing duplication of cards. It preserves their state of "separate yet together, like the strings of a lute." She recalls the source of the metaphor—a poem—and the time when it meant something to her. She remembers the days when she could have purchased every card in the store and found the words to fill them all.

Now she stands at anniversary cards, each of them sealed in a cellophane envelope. She picks up one after another, admires the hand-stitched beads and the sequins and the beautiful artwork. She flips each one over, no longer self-conscious about seeming to compare prices. She checks the label on the back that tells what's inscribed inside. With every card she hopes to find something she can surround with "Dear Alan" and "All My Love." But all the labels read "Blank Inside." She steps back from the tiered rack, the cards watching and waiting like spectators in a coliseum. Her breath comes sharper, her heart beats faster. She squeezes her eyes shut against the harsh fluorescent lights while the drone of the fixtures bores into her ears like August's cicadas.

She rights herself and goes systematic, starting at the upper left corner of the rack. She takes a card, turns it over to see if there are words inside. When she finds that there are not, she drops the card and moves on. *Pick, twist, drop*. Each blank card demands more of her than she can give. *Pick, twist, drop*. The cards pile around her feet. She moves down to the next row, and the next, until she's resting on her haunches, then kneeling, then sitting cross-legged on the floor amidst a pile of beautifully mute rejects.

The clerk, who has been watching her between ring-ups, finally has a break and comes over, bending down to lay a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Can I help you," she asks. "Is there something I can help you find?"

