

Almonds

by Joani Reese

I pour your espresso as though you are a guest, slide the lemon twist to spread its oil along the rim of the delicate bone cup, use the best china for your requisite yogurt and dates.

“Won't you eat?” you ask me, glancing at the singular place setting.

“I ate before the light,” I say. Your eyebrow climbs your forehead, suggesting my approach to breakfast, along with the hundred other errors I make daily, is an oddity. We are wondrous in our formality these mornings.

Your hand fondles your bare head and rests there for a moment. I almost laugh, then resist the urge. A blind habit, your palm always looks like a nightcap you've forgotten to remove. When you were twenty-five and I fourteen, your sable hair gleamed under the Iranian desert sun and smelled of anise.

I do not laugh; you hate to look absurd.

French doors open to the chill September day. I carry your tray to the balcony. A faint scent of almonds trails from your cup as the breeze ruffles the Belgian lace cloth spread over the table. I set your meal in front of you. A hint of perfume lifts from your skin when I stoop near your cheek; its Asian spice is not mine. I back away, almost knocking over the demitasse, then recover myself.

Your lips pressed into a thin white line, you shake your head and look down as if I am a mongrel dog who has pissed the Tabriz and say, “Your toenail polish is chipped.”

The pages of your paper rustle over your belly as you clear your throat of me. I stand with my back turned and gaze five floors down to the gypsy world of the Saturday market two blocks away, its chatter of women in their rainbow of shawls and sensible shoes floats lightly on the air. They waddle through the colorful tents and stalls poised at the edge of the Black Sea bargaining for turnips and greens in a language I will never understand. An airport taxi pulls into a space just outside the entry doors below.

I know you plan to be gone again tonight when you say, "My tan suit is at the cleaners. Please pick it up before five." I think of brown leather bags, packed with cash and hidden in the extra room.

As you take the first sip, my vision constricts as if I am sighting through a lens this moment, this place. Here on this terrace it is just you and me and the potted date palm we smuggled from Iran so long ago. Its knife-like leaves flutter shadows across the rictus of your astonished face. I turn my back on you, walk through the apartment to collect my bags. My imperfect feet and I have a flight to catch and connections we must not miss.

