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ROMA

Her husband who is going to betray her is standing inside the city of Roma. She is talking to him over the wall because she is not invited inside. She says, 'You've broken my heart,' in the way an actress might say it. Standing by the fountain in the centre of Roma is the woman who admires her husband. She walks past him in jeans and trainers. Her neck and cheeks are flushed.

When she wakes up from this dream about her husband betraying her, the traitor is lying by her side. A radio in the room next door announces that the Federal Reserve has dropped interest rates in the USA and European markets are expected to follow suit. She puts her hand here and there on her husband's warm body and tells him nothing about her dream. In five hours they will be out of the British weather. They will spend four days in Portugal and then return to the UK for Christmas.

Their bags are packed. A cab will call for them. The lodger in the room next door, Mr Patel, the man who listens to the radio all day long, has bought her a present for the trip. A slab of Ayurvedic soap made from eighteen herbs.

It has been raining in Portugal for three days and nights. She walks down to the sea with her husband. The drenched succulents and rotting fishing boats have the same atmosphere of betrayal she experienced in her dream. She stares into the shallows of the salt lagoon. A stork stands in the mud.

And another.

Her husband takes a photograph of the two storks. When she holds his bag for him he comments on how pleasant her hands smell. She tells him it's the Ayurvedic soap that Mr Patel gave her and that he should try it too. That night they eat in the Cafe Emigrante. A shack restaurant in the poorer part of the village. Varnished bamboo poles line the crumbling walls inside. The cook throws bloody fish onto smouldering charcoal. They break bread, scoop up white cheese and shrivelled, sour olives. Outside it is raining again. Their hotel room is not a place that invites intimacy. The cold marble floor. The thin blankets that are not warm enough for December in the Algarve. Two single beds pushed

together. She finds Roma once again in her dreams and it is a warmer place to be.

The river is full of stars in Roma. Baroque water flows over rocks and stones. Her husband who is going to betray her sits at a table with his admirer eating almond Easter cakes, iced white in the shape of small bells. His admirer is strong. Desire has made her strong. Her skin is tanned. Her eyes and hair are black. She shakes the three green bracelets on her wrists and says, 'I have thought about what you have to say and it's interesting.' His wife watches from the other side of the wall. 'He is in love,' she thinks. She knows he is trying not to be in love.

In the morning they dip sweet sponge cakes into milky coffee in the Cafe Emigrante. The siren from the factory on the other side of the river calls people to work. Women run out of houses clutching carrier bags and sandwiches wrapped in wax paper. This reminds her of the paper the Ayurvedic soap was wrapped in. The letters carved into the green soap told her it was called M-e-d-i-m-i-x and it was made in a factory in Chennai.

Returning to London. The same old bus routes. The dirty old roads. The Christmas trees glimpsed through windows of London houses. Blue lights glowing through the pine needles. She looks down at a

scrap of paper in her hand. It tells her to buy a turkey. She invites Mr Patel to join them for Christmas lunch. Again he tells her how much he is enjoying his stay in the United Kingdom. There are no mosquitoes, no humidity, less pollution.

It is snowing.

It never snows in Roma. It is August in her dream. Romans leave their stifling city. They pack their bags and make off to the coast and mountains to swim in lakes and recover from the knocks and disappointments of the year. She sees her husband waiting for his admirer at a cafe that is closed for summer. The shutters are down. The tables and chairs stacked up. His wife knows what she must say to her husband from the other side of the wall. She says, 'You totally enriched my life.' His face is impassive but he cries. Tears fall from his eyes and arrange themselves on his cheek like Man Ray tears.

On Christmas Day she kisses her sleeping husband and opens the window. The radio in the next room describes the current peace talks, an American initiative in the Middle East. As they open their presents in bed, her husband wishes her a happy Christmas but she interrupts him. She says she knows he wants to leave her. She says she has noticed he has not unpacked his bags from Portugal.

She says she understands he is in love with someone else but does he think there is a chance they might make it through the coming year? He tells her this is true and he doesn't know what to do and he was waiting to tell her but he could not find the words. She does not tell him that she has been standing outside the city of Roma, watching and talking to him over the wall.