

Out of Tune

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The persistent sunlight tickled her tired eyelids, initiating the undeniable realization of a new morning. She hesitantly got up to check the world outside the window beside her bed. The Mediterranean was resting peacefully outside, stretching wide and uniting with the horizon in a natural harmony. She listened carefully as the distant music of Soli¹ filled the atmosphere with random lyrics; “*Il mondo dietro ai vetri sembra un film senza sonoro*”.²

Passing by the dusty mandolin behind the door, she poured herself a cup of hot espresso. It used to make things better, she thought to herself, but not anymore. She checked her phone only to find the numbers of her digital clock staring back at her. No messages, emails or exciting missed calls. In that moment, there were only the smell of strong coffee and the salty breeze of August.

She could feel herself slipping into the empty space between her own thoughts. The silence was intolerable. *Soli* came to an end and left her alone with her mind. She has been avoiding this silence for a while now. Her isolation was magnifying the heaviness in her heart. The monster of sadness was sitting there, waiting for any opportunity to take over. In her mind, she was looking for someone or something to blame, only to be faced with nothing but clear facts.

She recalled the memory of her mother occasionally coughing and telling her “It’s just a cold”. She witnessed her deteriorating every day until she was unable to take a single breath. After a short and exhausting fight, her mother finally surrendered. Leaving her behind, alone and terrified. A wave of unpleasant goosebumps ran over her body as the flashbacks disappeared. The scars of loss are yet to be healed, and no one truly understood how it felt. She was allowed to feel numb. These days, she was destined to exist on the margin of life, waiting for time to pass.

A reckless gust of wind blew a blue ticket off the coffee table. She grabbed it quietly, reading the words aloud in her head with a desperate try to overcome the deafening silence. There was an exhibition in town. She vaguely remembered buying the blue ticket solely for its color. It was that specific shade of blue, the one in her mother’s eyes. The blue ticket served as the perfect bookmark for her version of *The Prophet*. She wasn’t planning to go anywhere, not anymore at least.

Checking the empty capsules of her antidepressants, she realized she had to leave the house today, a simple mission that became rather impossible. The world right outside her house seemed as far away as the sun. Everything required a massive amount of

1. Alone; an Italian song by Toto Cutugno.

2. The world outside of the window seems like a silent film.

energy that she didn't have. Getting out of bed, drinking water, sometimes even blinking was too much of an effort to handle. She was in a continuous state of absolute exhaustion, forgotten and alone. Warmth and happiness turned into a distant memory that calmly, yet surely, dissolved in her heart.

An hour later, she put on her floral sundress, grabbed her book, and headed out to catch a bus.

I. She did not belong

The streets were crowded with children and their parents since it was the summer break. Happy screams and loud laughs filled the air and distracted her from the music in her ears. The sun was rising majestically over this town near the sea as the breeze tickled her dress and demanded to be acknowledged. She paused the music and listened to random conversations between middle aged women, who were picking their mandarin oranges with impressive delicacy. Everyone around her belonged to someone or something around. Children to their parents, pets to their owners, the sun to the sky. Their loud laughs declared their joy. Still, the world in her eyes seemed like a silent film.

After getting her prescription, she headed back to the bus stop where she grabbed her book to read on.

"That's one impressive bookmark you got there." The voice of a stranger caught her off guard. "*The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.*" He recited one of her favorite quotes of The Prophet. "An impressive book as well."

Unable to process his words, she looked around to make sure he was talking to her. The guy with curly brown hair smiled generously, as if he was expecting her to start singing his favorite song.

The stranger looked like her somehow, she thought, they could braid their hair to-

gether and no one will know which is which. He was using his right hand to fix his glasses, while the slim fingers of his left hand rested on the brown mandolin case beside him. His yellow T-shirt and green shorts merged him with the trees and the sun surrounding the street. She glanced at her floral dress. It was black, and just like her, it did not fit the scene either.

For a brief second, she envied him. It must feel good to be the guy in the yellow T-shirt. He looked like he belonged to that specific moment, to that place, to that small town near the sea.

"I'm opening for the exhibition on your bookmark." He smiled as he patted his mandolin tenderly. "My mother is one of the artists."

Her envy grew stronger as she grasped all the privileges the guy in the yellow T-shirt was enjoying. How does it feel to easily belong to people and places? she wondered; how does it feel to be okay? Shyly smiling, she nodded in silence. She was not ready for random conversations with lucky strangers. She secretly sighed in relief as the bus showed up with its usual noise. Finally, she's going back home.

The empty bus stopped with a much-anticipated heaviness. As they got on board, they sat opposite each other. Thankfully, he understood she did not want to be bothered. She opened her book again and stared at the blue ticket. What day was it anyway? She was about to start reading when the guy in the yellow T-shirt played a tune she knew. He was good, she thought, but he failed to notice his mandolin was out of tune.

"Your E string is out of tune." She found herself pronouncing these words across the empty bus.

"No way, I used an app to tune it just now."

"Half a note lower than it's supposed to," ignored his claim completely.

He took his phone out of his pocket to check the tuning. Strumming the double E string, he turned the screen to face her with his eyes in genuine shock. E was half a note lower than it's supposed to be.

The conversation that followed felt like a dream of some kind. She found herself tuning the mandolin while advising him to check it again before his big performance. She only found herself answering his questions without having the time to ask him anything, not even his name or where he's from. He kept smiling and greeting every new passenger with his confident *Buongiorno!* There was something about this stranger who got life figured out. Such a lucky stranger, she thought to herself.

Reaching the third station, he packed his instrument and declared. "Give me a thumbs-up in case tuning is on point. I'm counting on you." She was puzzled as she looked down to find the blue ticket still in her hand. It's today, she realized, the exhibition in the national park on third station was about to start.

II

There was a laidback charm to the park that slept in the middle of her town. The great oak tree stretched skywards as the roots were unapologetically making their way between scattered groups of people. She looked around to find sunshine turning into chatter and greetings while everyone spoke a different language. Still, they looked like her somehow. If one would braid everyone's hair together, no one would know which is which.

A number of artists from different ages stood beside their paintings with a sense of pride that was almost materialized into a painting on its own. Walking beside her, the guy in the yellow T-shirt made his way to the humble stage in the middle of the park. People gathered

around cheering for the band and went silent after a while. The lucky stranger, who looked like he belonged to every oak tree in her town by the sea, plucked each of the strings of his mandolin. Instantly looking at her, he gently raised his eyebrows and tilted his head on the side asking for her confirmation.

Life stood still for a second. What was she doing here? she asked herself, a rush of guilt and uneasiness took over her veins. She felt the weight of the medications in her bag as she remembered her mother walking underneath the great oak tree. Soli started playing again in her mind, but this time it was out of tune. She was alone, descending into a deep ocean of sorrow and grief. She closed her eyes and wished she did not exist anymore, nothing meant anything anymore. There was nothing but silence.

Plucking his strings with renewed determination, the familiar progression of notes forced her to open her eyes again. He snatched her out of her despair, his strum felt like a life jacket of some kind. He was still there, smiling with raised eyebrows and a tilted head. She raised her right hand in front of her nose in secret, and gave him a thumbs-up. The band started playing a cheerful collection of songs and the crowds were happily applauding whenever they got the chance. Ending the show with a song in a strange language, the band greeted the audience and quickly found their way off stage.

The guy in the yellow T-shirt was heading towards her mouthing the words "thank you", when a distant voice seemed to call his name. "That's my mother!" he said as he reached her side. "You have to check her painting. It's our story." Unable to shake off her persistent envy, she followed his footsteps in silence. They passed by the big sign at the entrance that said, *Crossing the Mediterranean: An Exhibition*, and reached the woman with brown hair by the tree. Behind her, a large oil painting was on display.

The painting was horizontally divided into two parts. The lower section portrayed a mess of confusing shades of grey. As she looked closer, she understood it was a scene of ultimate destruction. Bombed buildings, gigantic tanks, scattered tombstones, deadly rockets, and monstrous clouds. This was war. This was death. The terrifying prospect of this scene being real sent a shiver down her spine. Her eyes looked for the upper section in a desperate try to find consolation, and they finally did. It was that shade of blue, the one on her ticket, and the one in her mother's eyes.

It was the sea. It was the Mediterranean that laid by the horizon outside her room. A small orange boat was painted on the blue background of the upper half. A woman

and her child stood on board, turning their backs to the destruction behind and looking straight ahead.

"We were the only ones left. My father and sister were killed in an airstrike."

He said as he wrapped his arm around his mother: "Everyone here has lost someone, but they're all survivors." When she looked around at the paintings hanging on old oak trees, the artists from across the sea looked more like her than ever before. She was not alone, she realized, and their pain was the same as hers. The woman interrupted her track of thoughts, murmuring a sentence in that strange language. The guy in the yellow T-shirt smiled and said "She said you look like a survivor too."

In that specific moment, she almost felt like she belonged somewhere.