Come Away with Me

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Dear diary,
As always, in the light of every great event, I'm not quite sure how to begin my story. Every beginning never seems good enough for the ending I have in store, even though something tells me you already know where I'm going. You know me.

Anyway, I wish that, like every great ending, there could be a great beginning too. But perhaps beginnings feel the weight of our rush to reach the end, and so we lose the pleasure of tasting them, unlike the endings of a story. It should be the same for beginnings too, don't you think?

Like when you're in front of a good plate of Scottish stovies: you stare at it and, even before taking the first bite, you let yourself be overwhelmed by the smell of sausages filling your nose, making you close your eyes and imagine you're somewhere in Paradise — even though I doubt there are such tempting smells in Paradise. And before you ask, no, I'm not saying this to justify my reckless love for food, but simply because I believe it's another reason to appreciate what we have here.

Anyway, let's not wander off… where were we? Oh yes, we hadn't even started yet! It's just that I'm really excited, and maybe

that's the beauty of beginnings: they can't hold all those great hopes inside, so they let them fly away, making your heart feel light and able to go wherever it wants.

I know I should stop and get to the point, but can't you already smell big news? Isn't your mouth watering? Good. Mission accomplished!

Now, wipe away the drool, because what I'm about to tell you deserves composure and solemnity — even if every time I try to sound serious, I end up laughing. But let's pretend we can do it. So, pull yourself together and listen to me.

Today at school I really couldn't concentrate. It was one of those days when your mind floats away like a balloon in the sky. While the teacher was talking about boring things (I think it was history, but I'm not sure), I was staring out of the window.

My thoughts kept drifting, and at a certain point I realised there was a Black boy peeking through the glass. His eyes looked lost and sad, and from what little I could see, I think he was shivering from the cold. Guessing he was afraid of being seen, I pretended not to notice him, wondering why he was standing out there in the cold instead of going somewhere warmer. But inside, it was as if I already knew this was the first sign of a new destiny making its way into existence, so I let my heart start beating faster.

He appeared only when he thought I wasn't looking, but when I finally managed to catch his eye, I winked at him and smiled. At first he looked embarrassed, but after a few seconds he answered

with a shy smile of his own — until the teacher noticed me looking outside and scolded me, frightening the little stranger and making him run away like a small thief caught red-handed by an adult (not that I consider myself an adult, obviously). And just like that, the delicate weaving of my new destiny was broken — at least for the moment. I tried to file the episode away, even though those shy, frightened eyes had pulled my balloon down, leaving it somewhere in a corner of Edinburgh.

After school, I didn't feel like going straight home. Grandpa wouldn't be back until the evening from his trip to the countryside, so I decided to lose myself among the streets of Edinburgh. The city was wrapped in a light mist, and the colours of the buildings blended together like a watercolour painting. Everything here is full of life, even grey — which is always linked to boredom and stillness. I see it differently: I see endless possibilities, a space between white and black where anything can come to life, even the most absurd or the simplest fantasy handed down through time. Think of the legends hidden behind a stone fortress, or the ghost stories that come alive on grey (exactly!) winter days. I could never give all this up. What would we be without imagination? Or without the chance to look beyond what we are taught?

Hours passed as I wandered through the city, lost in my thoughts, until it started to get dark. It wasn't dinner time yet, but I felt like having a chai latte from my friend Jonah. Actually, I don't know his real name — I gave him one so I could call him something — but I think he likes it, even if I have no proof. He's never spoken to

me, so calling him a friend might be a bit too much. Let's say he tolerates me moderately, and that makes me tease him even more, especially when I see the hint of a tiny smile. To be honest, I'm not even sure he understands me. I think he's Romanian and I've never heard him speak English. But every time I walk into his café (which, let's be honest, between the mess and the dirt looks like a theme park for survivors!), he knows I'm there for his chai latte — the one I fell in love with years ago during a school escape (but that's a story for another time… maybe).

As I stirred the milk foam over and over with my teaspoon, I slipped once again into a kind of self-hypnosis and started thinking about how Christmas holidays were coming soon, and how Grandpa and I would go to Inverness to visit our relatives. I like Inverness, I like Christmas, and I like spending it with Grandpa — but the thought of locking myself in that haunted house with Aunt Gertrude and Aunt Winnifred fills me with dread! I love haunted houses, but with ghosts and mysterious creatures, not with them — creatures that are anything but mysterious, married to mothballs and unaware of the century we live in, as well as completely uninterested in me. All they like to do is pick on me, disguising their little jabs as loving advice.

I already know everything they'll say as soon as they see me. I'll make you a list, and I bet you 50 dollars (yes, I know, we use pounds, but dollars sound more "Wall Street") that they'll say all of this, in this exact order:

"My goodness, look how big you've grown! Heaven forbid you've finally got your head screwed on!"

"Do you have a boyfriend? And why not? It must be you chasing them away, admit it!"

"Still wearing those braids? Why don't you put your hair in a nice bun? You're not five anymore!"

"You'd look so nice in a skirt. Do you even have one, or just combat boots?"

"And those nails? Don't tell me you bite them instead of filing them! A nice French manicure is what you need — I'll take you to my beautician!"

"Careful, dear, if you eat like that you won't make it to next Christmas."

"You're always writing! What can you possibly have so much to say? Why don't you tell us something instead of scribbling?"

All of it served with a nasty little giggle, anything but funny.

I only put up with them for Grandpa's sake. I honestly don't know how he survived that family! And maybe that comforts me when I think about blood ties, which don't always create the sense of belonging we spend our whole lives looking for. If we're open enough, we can find that feeling in places that welcome us, in things, in a certain atmosphere… and in that sense, I feel like a daughter of this city right down to my bones.

Often the fog hugging the castle at the top of Edinburgh, the narrow streets at night, the biting cold, or even a simple chai latte tell me far more than a conversation with someone standing right in front of me but not truly speaking to me. And it's a feeling I have more and more often. Do you know what I mean?

My chai latte was starting to cool, and I kept stirring it, as if at the bottom of that whirl of foam there were answers to all my questions. That was when, behind the glass door of the café, I caught sight of the boy from that morning, watching me while hiding himself.

I motioned for him to come in, but he didn't move — instead, he stepped back. So I stood up and went towards him. He took a few more steps back, as if he were afraid, and that tightened my heart. I tried not to show it, because I believe that when the fear of being hurt meets the fear of hurting, paths split forever. Finding the courage to take that fear by the hand, giving it space and trust, feels like the better road to take. I've always thought so, and I've always acted that way — even at the risk of seeming intrusive. I prefer intrusion to indifference. A thousand times over. So, without asking permission, I started to make contact.

"Hi, I'm Lisa! What's your name?"

"…"

"You can tell me, I don't bite."

"… Prince."

"What a beautiful name! Nice to meet you, Prince!"

I kept showing him my biggest smile to try to put him at ease, but I could tell it would take much more to break the ice.

"Would you like to keep me company?"

He nodded, lowering his eyes.

I started talking non-stop to help him relax. He listened very carefully, and I was struck by that attention. I asked Jonah for another chai latte and handed it to Prince without even asking him. There was a moment of hesitation in his eyes, but then, with some surprise, he accepted the steaming cup. When he tasted it, wonder spread across his face, and I think that mix of spices and milk helped melt the first "iceberg".

"But now tell me about yourself," I said, curious. "I saw you at school today — it was you, wasn't it? What were you doing there?"

"I wanted to listen," he replied.

I was amazed. "Wow, that's powerful stuff! You don't hear that very often!" I said, laughing.

"And why are you around here?" I asked, my interest growing.

"I followed you," Prince admitted, clearly embarrassed. His words surprised me, and his embarrassment made me smile.

"Really? And why me?" I asked.

"Because you smiled at me… and you were the only one who was kind to me. You don't see that very often either…" His words, so honest, touched me deeply.

I couldn't help asking, "Are you here on your own? Where are your parents? Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

His gaze dropped, and a shadow of sadness crossed his face. "I never knew my parents. I had a brother, and we came here together from eSwatini. We were very close — he took care of me. But… one day he went out to look for food and never came back."

"I'm so sorry… I can imagine how lonely you must feel in a city you don't know."

"Yes…"

"…Sorry."

"Sorry for what?"

"I hope I didn't make you sad."

I was struck by his humility, and by the fragility shining through his eyes. It's strange how a chance meeting can make you feel so close to someone you don't even know.

"You didn't make me sad," I replied, my eyes filling with tears (curse me!), "on the contrary, I'm glad you trusted me. I think that's something very precious."

"What is precious?"

"Your trust."

Prince smiled gently, and even though I was older than him, I felt something strange — as if my "adult" credibility were hanging by a thread. I felt the responsibility of such a delicate heart being placed in my hands with a smile. His smile felt like a small lantern of approval. Maybe this is what an older sister feels when she takes care of her siblings. I don't know — and yet I've felt it many times during my travels. It must mean something, don't you think?

"So you come from eSwatini. I don't know that land. I'd love to hear more about it."

He smiled again, looked upwards, then closed his eyes, recreating a piece of his homeland among the spicy steam of our chai latte.

"eSwatini is a dream dancing among the hills, like a child playing in the sun. The mountains are green giants embracing the sky, and the rivers flow like silver snakes, singing gentle melodies as they run.

"The people are like blooming flowers, each with their own colours and scents. Smiling faces shine like stars at night, and laughter weaves together like the notes of a song that never ends. They wear bright clothes, woven from ancient stories that tell of adventures and dreams.

"And then there's the food — a real feast for the senses! Traditional dishes are warm like a hug: maize, grilled meat and fresh vegetables dance together on a plate, while the taste of tropical fruits bursts in your mouth like fireworks.

“The colours of eSwatini are a magical palette: green leaves, yellow sunshine, blue skies. When sunset arrives, the world turns orange and red, as if the sky were painting its masterpiece.”

He opened his eyes again and paused. We looked at each other for a moment, as if trying to focus that world floating between us in the cloud of steam. Then a sudden sadness took hold of him — a sadness that had never really left, only waited in a corner for the right moment. He lowered his gaze, and that was the moment: “I miss my home so much.”

We left the café hours later. It was time to go home, but I didn’t want to leave Prince alone in the darkness of the night, so I offered to walk him home — wherever that might be.

We walked in silence, both happy about the bond that had grown between us, yet sad knowing we would soon have to say goodbye.

“I’m here,” he said at last, stopping in front of an old, run-down building, most likely abandoned.

I went inside with him. As we climbed the stairs, I felt a shiver run down my spine. Not a single light was on. The steps were covered with dirt and dry leaves crumbling under our feet. The walls were filthy, covered in unreadable graffiti and stains of paint — or who knows what else.

“What is this place?” I asked, frozen.

“This is where I live,” he said, embarrassed — and after a few seconds I understood why.

The flat looked like something out of a nightmare. As I stepped inside, the wooden floor creaked beneath my feet, as if warning me of something terrible. The carpet, once red, had turned into a patchwork of dark stains and dust, and the smell of damp pushed its way into my head.

The walls were wet and filthy, with paint peeling off like dead skin. The doors, full of cracks, seemed to hide ancient secrets. The windows were broken, letting in an icy wind that made the few remaining panes rattle.

Cobwebs hung in every corner. On the tables there were dirty plates with hardened food and mould. Everything was disturbing and deeply sad. How could a child live alone in a place like that, forgotten by time?

“No,” I said at last. He turned to look at me. I took his hand, smiled at him and continued in a firm voice: “I won’t leave you here.”

“But I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Yes, you do — and you know it very well.”

Prince looked at me in disbelief, but in his eyes a spark of hope began to shine brighter and brighter. In that moment I felt my determination grow and our bond strengthen. It was a familiar sound, as if coming from far away, yet really it was right there, at

heart level. “Very strong, incredibly close.” It was the wonderful awareness of choosing each other — the rare and precious certainty of being met halfway.

“Come away with me. I’ll take you home, to eSwatini.”

And so, dear diary, I find myself once again writing to you at the dawn of another great adventure.

When Grandpa came home, he nearly had a heart attack! He found us both with our suitcases ready, completely unaware of what I wanted to do or who Prince was. I explained everything, but before I could get lost in one of my talkative spirals (a bit like I do with you), he stopped me and said, “I already understand everything — and we’re not even discussing it!” I barely had time to organise a counterattack before he added, “You wouldn’t leave me alone with Aunt Gertrude and Aunt Winnifred, would you? I’m coming with you. This Christmas, we’re spending it in eSwatini!”

What more is there to say? My grandpa is a superhero, and I don’t need a family tree to know that my family is right here.

It’s true — some days it’s harder to trust and rely on our anchors. But I think that, just as the Earth keeps spinning and never stands still, creating day and night, we too — living in a constant flow of change — are meant to evolve (except for Aunt Gertrude and Aunt Winnifred, proud exhibits of the wax museum!).

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we all let ourselves be carried by the wind of change? And maybe learned to truly listen… How many lives could we save?

Sometimes I feel that, despite all the talking, we don't really communicate. It's as if we were all on a stage, miming what's inside us without being able to make ourselves understood — or shouting so loudly that we lose the ability to listen, to stay silent. Why don't people understand that silence is a language too? Why do we think it must always be filled at any cost? Some silences seem far more talkative to me than the thousands of words passing through my ears every day (despite the permanent camps of earwax). Has that ever happened to you? (I mean the silence — not the earwax!)

Many say it's the fear of not being understood, but I think it's more about the anxiety of keeping a pedestal or a place in someone's heart. Yet forcing attention has never guaranteed anyone a place — only a terrible headache!

Maybe that's why I can't imagine living anywhere other than Edinburgh. This small and wonderfully grey city reflects my moods, cradles my nostalgia, fuels my imagination, lights up my inner city and warms my heart with its history and music at every corner. Everyone should be able to live in a place they have such a special dialogue with — and above all, everyone should be able to return to the place where they once felt welcomed. Perhaps, even if we don't have a family to come from, we can still belong to a place that accepts us and in which we recognise ourselves.

Since I discovered the truth about my parents, I sometimes think about this, finding myself searching for connections everywhere. In those moments, I think of Namid, of what she did for me — a stranger — on a magical summer night in the Philippines, when she mended my heart with the wisdom and tenderness of a mother or grandmother. I think of Liezel's unconditional affection, choosing me as a sister without wondering if I deserved it; of the loving embrace of the woman who sang *The Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond*; of the laughter of that boy from Ghana that still echoes in my head when smiling feels harder. And then I think of Prince — of what it meant for me to help him, and what it might have meant for him to be able to rely on someone who showed him just a little kindness. And I must confess, this moves me deeply. The extraordinary power of the smallest kind gesture, able to make up for light-years of loneliness in a single moment.

That's when I realise that belonging is far more complex than they want us to believe.

I'm convinced that every step forward we take is a piece of the mosaic that completes us. And even when we feel very far from seeing the whole picture clearly, I believe the answer lies in the single fragments we place carefully — breadcrumbs we keep in our worn pockets to find ourselves again, recognised either by the place that welcomes us or by the hand that walks with us for a while.

Only now, as I search for the right words to end this story, do I realise that I've woven the threads of a great and exciting beginning. And if the ending of this chapter of my life can hold all

the balloons eager to be released into the air, I truly don't think I need to add anything else… don't you agree?

Dear Aunts,
keep the pudding warm for me — I'm popping over to Africa and I'll be right back. I'll bring you some spices to brighten up your stew; I'm sure your delicate palates will appreciate them…!

*Nollaig Chridheil!**
Lisa

** "Merry Christmas" in Scottish Gaelic*