

Highly commended Outstanding LGBTIQ Short Story Competition 2017

Lys Mediterranee by Nadia Bailey

Hanna moves into my house in late spring. She has the room on the top floor, with its wooden floors and shifting sunlight. She brings an antique bed and a sad-eyed black dog. She wears lipstick the colour of cut blood oranges. Her tattoos suggest an impulsive streak. She asks questions with such guileless ease that I find myself revealing details of my life that, under normal circumstances, I would hesitate to tell my closest friends. Every Sunday morning, we have coffee together. At the café, we talk, or we don't talk. We sit. We drink our coffee. Time slows, or maybe it quickens. This is the way love happens.

In text messages, she nicknames me "chicken." English is her third language, after Polish and Greek. On the phone, to her brother, her rapid Polish has the lilt and cadence of birdsong. Musical in its oddness. Her manners are formal, foreign. She is generous with her money to the same extent that I am uncomfortable with it: Oh please, she says, if I try to split the bill after dinner. I wouldn't dream of it. And if I persist: Please, you'll embarrass me.

Hanna is mostly estranged from her family, all except her younger brother. The two of them are close in a way that embarrasses me. In place of the family she was born into, she has a family of her own making: her ex-girlfriend, Harriet, with whom she remains close, her brother, Jakub, and her boyfriend, Daniel. Daniel has a long, serious face and long, coltish limbs. He's training to be a carpenter. He is softly spoken, and wry, and I am so jealous of him that sometimes I can't breathe.

When he cheats on her, somewhere in Europe with an older woman, Hanna retreats to her room and I don't see her for days. When she emerges, she's angry. She spits venom at him, halfway around the world. They exchange long emails. She gives me some of them to read, and the thrill of broken privacy makes me weak at the knees. Feel my pulse. See how I radiate. Daniel comes home. They talk. She tells me that they're trying to make it work. It's summer, and the magnolias are dropping armfuls of white petals all over the street, and the air smells like rotting sweetness.

Weeks pass. I feel certain that they will break up. Instead, Hanna calls me and says: Daniel and I are engaged. We're celebrating tonight, will you come? So we go out to dinner to celebrate. We offer congratulations. Hanna wears a dress the colour of the ocean where it's deep enough to drown in. She sits under Jakub's arm, and leans into his shoulder. Harriet says little. I bring lilies, which leave yellow pollen all over the tablecloth. Despite everything, Daniel looks happy.

After dinner, Hanna and I walk back to our house in the mellow, end-of-summer evening. Just the two of us, and all the things we're not saying. When we get home, we linger outside her bedroom. Eventually, she says: It's about committing to the relationship. Committing to each other. She says: Just because we're engaged, it doesn't mean we'll get married. And then she says: I don't want to be alone tonight.

Lying next to Hanna, in her bed, I commit her profile to memory. Black fringe

swooping down to touch her eyelashes. The moue of her lips in the even breath of sleep. A smudge of mascara bruising her inner elbow. I'm as close to her as I've ever been. She's still wearing the dress she wore to dinner, and one strap has slipped from her shoulder and dangles like an open parentheses.

I don't sleep. I don't move. I listen to her breathe.

By dawn, the air is hot and thick and dull. I feel feverish. I slip from bed and step softly from the room. Outside, it's cooler. Grey morning light. I splash my face with water, bent over the sink, and come up feeling sure.

When I open the door to Hanna's room, I see the blankets pushed back into a wild tangle at the foot of the bed. The sheets expose the ghost of where we lay.

Hanna is standing in front of the mirror; eyes rubbed clean of sleep, hair swept up into an efficient topknot. She's changed her clothes. She says: How did you sleep? and her voice is bright, and brisk, and final.