

STARRY NIGHT

BY TASNUVA HAYDEN

Alexander's standing under the streetlamp – nose red, ears tucked into a woolen cap, hands hidden in rayon mittens. He's perfectly still. Eyes fixed in my direction. I realize that he's been there since I left Else's apartment. From that distance, he's blurred at the edges like a rushed charcoal sketch, and by the time his form comes into focus, it's too late to turn back.

Snow floats down from the sky, catches in my lashes, melts with a blink, then drips onto my cheeks. The clouds, backlit by the moon, are impossibly bright. My steps slow considerably, and I wonder if he'll be the one to approach me first. A part of me is feeling defiant. Not brave exactly. Maybe a little tired. Or a little worried that I've overstayed my curfew. I continue on with every intention of walking past him. But it's never that easy.

The air feels thick. Almost solid. As though you could take a bite out of it. A jolt of static rushes over my skin. Surges and collects along my spine. Pressure builds between my ribs, little by little. His eyes are glossy

in the yellow light. He's pressing his lips together. The blood drains from the edges. I want to ask why he's out at this time. It's nearly ten o'clock, and there's no one else around. We might as well be the only two people in the entire world.

It's been months since we've run into each other. Thankfully, the last time I'd been accompanied by ammu, and he'd been with Mrs. Olsen. They'd been idling in front of the mail boxes for some generic chit chat about the weather, while Alexander and I kept looking at our shoes, at the flaking paint on the door, at our dirty fingernails, at anything but each other, speaking only if spoken to. You could say we were nearly strangers already – having managed to avoid each other over the last couple of years, with the exception of the occasional scuffle on our way home from school. A handful of pulled hair. A couple of thrown rocks. But then, he'd be absent long enough for me to forget that he posed any sort of threat. And now that he was ready to move onto *ungdomskole*, he wouldn't be caught dead associating with *barneskole* babies. No one would.

FICTION

When I'm only a few metres away, he steps into the middle of the street. I tug on my mittens and brush at the moisture collecting on my cheeks. Breath steams from our mouths, but neither of us speak. My feet stop moving altogether, and I can't help but think how we might be trapped inside a snow globe – every flake frozen in that same sparkle forever.

"You on your way home?" His voice sounds strange. Like he's been screaming for hours.

I'm unable to answer. It's as if the words have frozen in my mouth. He shifts forward to yank my beanie off. Dangles it above my head as I stretch out my arms. I jump up to snatch it from his grip. He just laughs and continues to wave it above me. Then, a little bolt of light flickers across his eyes and his laughter stiffens into a sneer. Foamy spit collects at the corners of his mouth. He drops the beanie into the murky puddle by the edge of the flower beds. With the heel of his boot, he grinds mud into the fabric. And all I can think about is how I'll explain this to *ammu*. I'm expected to know better. And I do know better – I'd never dare such a stunt on my own. She'll definitely give me an earful. It's this, more than Alexander's puffed chest and smug face that brings the slow simmer of tears.

He lifts up his foot and we both watch my beanie soaking in the puddle. I take off my mittens. Stuff them into the pockets of my parka. Bend down to pluck the beanie from the muddy water. His boot comes crashing down. A shrill scream rings into the night.

"Did you think I'd let you have it?"

"No." I'm clutching at my wrist as I squeeze the tears back. I choke out the words despite the treble in my voice "No. I didn't think that." When I look up at him, I'm taken by the pastel colored clouds, by the tinted light – the whimsy of the rosy snow. He knocks me back into the

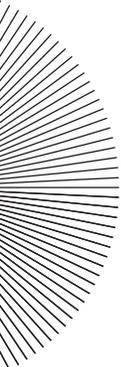
ground. Then, he's on top of me, shaking me by the collar. Pressing my shoulders into the pavement. I can see his lips moving. But as I'm falling, I only catch the slug-like shape of his tongue. That bulb of flesh dangling at the back of his throat. The glint of a crooked canine. On his breath, the smell of spaghetti sauce. It's nothing I haven't heard before. Words he's repeated a thousand times already – words that pour from his mouth into my own. Words that turn my spit metallic. Rings against my teeth and jaw. Ugly. Paki. Fucking. *Utlandinger*. My eyes roll back into their sockets. Then, everything stills.

He's panting on top of me. "I hate you. I fucking hate you."

Tears roll down the sides of my face. "Yeah, I know."

His body, all bone, pierces against my own. "You fucking piss me off. Quit crying already." I rub my eyes and gulp back some air to control the tremors in my chest. He relaxes his grip a little. The snow begins to pile onto his back. Begins to blanket us. At this rate, we'll be found in the morning, buried and frozen together. He tries to maintain a threatening scowl, but it doesn't last. The creases on his forehead vanish. His mouth settles into an uneven line, dipping at the corners and at his cupid's bow. As our breathing slows, we find each other's eyes.

I'm sure he doesn't mean to do it. I'm sure he's not even fully aware of himself when he grazes my cheek with an icy mitt. There's a nauseating lurch in my stomach that won't go away. The snow cools the back of my neck. Freezes to my scalp. I wonder what he's thinking about. Why he's got me pinned down. Why he's no longer moving. No longer speaking. Why his unsettling stare drills into my pupils. Reflects the brilliance of the falling snow – a kind of phantom starlight. 



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