

FICTION

ALLAN GARDENS

Mike Farley

“Do you remember the last time we were here?”

She stares at the broad-leafed palm, the air heavy with humidity, sweet and earthy.

“Do you remember?” I ask again, surprised and embarrassed by the pleading note in my voice. Silence still, as she slowly walks along the flagstone path, looking up at the opaque roof; drops of condensation gathering together and running down the inside of the curved glass ceiling.

“I do, Charles, but nostalgia can’t prevent the future.”

I wish she had said nothing, at least I would’ve had a chance.

She reaches out to touch a green, wax-like leaf of a nameless tropical fern, a pink bud, wrapped tight, protruding up from the stem.

“It was your choice to leave, Charles.” The detachment in her voice is definite. “You bought the ticket without even asking me. Where do we go from there? You couldn’t even have a conversation with me?”

“It’s just a trip.” I gain no ground with my rebuttal yet press on, “You can come visit.”

“A trip? I’d love to come visit my ex-boyfriend while he skateboards and smokes fucking hash in Spain, over the what? The next year? Two?”

“Come on. I’ll have a place. You can stay as long as you want.”

With ice in her veins, she says, “It’s probably going to be worse than that closet you convinced me to stay in, at the place you rented with twelve other dudes in Whistler. I should have turned around and left then. Bye, Charles.”

With the chime of the sliding doors, I realize I’ve been walking right to the exit as she had planned. Numb with regret, I watch as she turns and I’m left reaching hopelessly, with a word, towards the back of her long gray coat.

“Sadie!”

Ping-bong, the doors slide closed and the bright reds and yellows of the fast-paced world outside blend together in a misty undulating smudge.

Overhead, the curved metal ribs between the soggy panes of glass bear down. I’m motionless, trapped. Trapped from experiencing a world we might have shared. Now it rushes around outside, oblivious to my existence.

Inside this giant beast of rusted wrought iron, I thought I would be protected from a reality I threw away. Pleading and stuttering, I tried to make what I knew was a final visit to Allan Gardens last as long as I could. A weak attempt to avoid the rudderless sensation of being alone in this giant city while I wait for the departure of a plane months away from now.

The crush of humanity that isolates and oppresses throbs outside the misty sliding door. Ping-bong, a rush of cool air and a frontal assault of sound as the door opens. Ping-bong, it closes on my half-step. I take a full step back.

From behind, “Are you coming or going sir?” The soft voice of a volunteer, “We can’t have you standing in the doorway.”

“Me? Oh, ya. I’m...” I turn around and see his opaque watery eyes. A pageboy hat sits atop his wiry dark hair, coarse with greys. Clean-shaven with large gaps between each of his tiny teeth, he gives me a gentle smile.

“I’m going,” I say, only just louder than a whisper.

“Thank you, sir.”

As the door slides closed he says something, lost under the din of traffic. An attempt at encouragement, I’d like to think.

I walk down Carlton Street, having left the warm confines of the tropical cupola. Two sharp notes from the bell of a streetcar rise above the vivid sounds of external life as steel wheels slowly grind against the outside edge of their tracks, sunken and smooth with age.

I search for something to satiate the internal torment caused by the abandonment of my future with Sadie, a woman I loved, for an impulsive tryst. A last gasp at extending my youth.

My stomach pulls at itself. Too nervous to eat this morning and sick with rejection, I need to get something in me, soon. My knees ache; they're weak and my insides feel as though they've dropped below where they're supposed to be. Pangs of regret and the gnaw of hunger are indistinguishable as I run across the street behind the passing streetcar.

Gaining the curb, a pockmarked sidewalk leads me to an oasis of sweet, garlicky spices.

As I enter New Shawarma, I'm greeted by Al Jazeera, showing what appears to be the beginning of some new political upheaval on the grainy TV hanging from the ceiling and the piercing glare of a surly man behind the counter. With hairy, questionably large forearms and a thin gold chain hanging outside the collar of his off-white cook's shirt, stained with years of labour, he stares in silence as I step to the counter.

"Chicken shawarma sandwich please," drops awkwardly from my mouth.

"You like spicy, my friend?" More of a threat than a question.

"Ya, sure. A bit." The remnants of the recent rejection answers for me. I hate spicy food but lack the courage to contradict this surly man.

He turns and fires a pita onto the grill, grabs a long, curved knife, and starts slicing thin greasy pieces of chicken off the turning spit. The counter between us

does poor work to hold back his disdain for my amateur order. I swallow hard and step back, starting to salivate, plunging my hands into my pockets. My arms feel as though they've been sewn onto my body, reanimated by some nefarious soul determined to have me make a fool of myself. The smell of garlic, fresh onions, and roasted chicken fills the air.

Three faded green tables occupy the wall adjacent to the counter. A girl with impossibly smooth chestnut skin sits in a plastic lawn chair at one of them. She can sense my recent rejection. It stinks and seeps from my pores like foul body odour and she tries her hardest to ignore my presence. I look back towards the counter and see the shawarma man, his back to me, watching the hanging TV, holding his long, curved knife at his side as his free hand rests on the handle of a fryer basket. I take another step back to separate myself further from his disdain and bump into the stand-up fridge rattling the Cokes and Fantas within. The girl's head twitches towards me. I look at her quickly, my eyes pleading an apology, but she doesn't make eye contact. Her cavernous dark eyes widen at the sound but can't break the hold of the curated algorithm whirling past on her phone.

I suck my teeth and exhale, "Pfft," I'm not interested either.

"My friend!" The man behind the counter demands as he bangs his tongs against an insert holding chopped parsley and sliced onions. "You like green?"

Ducking slightly at the piercing twang, I pull my insolent hands out from my pockets and agree to the ingredients as I reach for my wallet.

Stepping up to the counter once again, I present my card to tip and tap. I receive a thin plastic bag which contains a weighty wrap and a woefully insufficient amount of napkins.

Shawarma in hand, my feet read the uneven sidewalk like braille, unconsciously pulling me in a direction I pretend to myself I do not know. A touch of tahini on my chin, I walk further east down Carlton towards the bedlam of my mind.