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## *Bitter Plums*

The first thing I notice is the cold. I blink into awareness slowly, the world around me gradually coming into focus again. Dark wood, a ceiling, a closet, seven pictures on the wall. Our bedroom. I turn and look, the room is empty. Your side of the bed is unmade, the sheets cool when I touch them. I roll over again, look at the clock on my bedside table; it is half past nine and Sunday.

I stretch, get up, leave the warmth of my blankets, exchanging it for cool air and the feeling of wooden floors beneath my feet. I shiver as I make my way to the bathroom to grab my robe, opening the curtains as I walk past the window. My steps are quiet as I leave the bedroom and go downstairs. The kitchen is as empty as the bedroom was. You are not at the table but there is coffee and bread and jam. Plum, my favourite.

I make myself breakfast, two slices of bread, and listen to the birds outside as I eat. My split lip aches with every bite I take but the sweetness of the jam almost washes the pain away.

Afterwards I go upstairs again, showering quickly and then dressing carefully. My side aches a little as I stretch to grab a sweater from the top shelf of my closet, and I end up choosing the grey one instead of the purple I was originally going for.

You call my increasingly dark wardrobe my 'funeral attire', and I conveniently keep forgetting to tell you that it is my colourful clothes that are buried somewhere deep down in the closet, perhaps right next to your tux.

When I am finished dressing, the house is as empty as it was

earlier, and I wonder idly where you might have gone to as I take out the cleaning products from beneath the sink. It does not truly matter where you are, only when you will come back. For now, I have the house to myself, and I use the time to clean the bathroom and kitchen. I enjoy cleaning, at least if I let myself see it as something meditative, something to focus on, something that takes my mind off other things. Cleaning is simple, if at times gross and uncomfortable; it is structured clearly and unapologetic. There is no room for errors because there are no errors to be made. Sinks and floors are forgiving; there is no need to be cautious or careful or afraid. One cannot harm anyone or anything while cleaning.

But cleaning also never takes quite as long as I think it will. I am done before midday, and you still have not returned. I could call you to ask where you are, or text you to ask if you are alright but the sun is shining in through the windows, the house is quiet and clean, and my ribs are still sore.

I leave my phone on the kitchen counter and go into the garden instead, bringing a book with me. Our neighbours' garden is empty, the kids are either still asleep or playing inside, and I enjoy the quiet, small mercy it is. It is rare I get a moment like this, all to myself, all alone, and I cherish it, let the seconds tick by, one after the other, unobserved and all for myself.

The book is good, a gift from my sister who has a penchant for crime novels with gruesome descriptions of murder and detailed descriptions of sex, and it takes my mind off the memories of yesterday that try to creep in, as well as the plans I have for today, plans that have been long in the making.

I go back inside again once the sun gets too hot, and putting my book on the kitchen table, I go to the bathroom upstairs. I wash my hands, look up and watch my face turn from neutral and relaxed to horrified as I look in the mirror. I forgot. Today, I forgot. Because I woke up alone, maybe, or because the neighbours' children were still inside and their garden was empty, no one there to see me and my face.

My hands shake a little as I take out the foundation and concealer from my washbag, going through the motions quickly, each stroke and dip practised a hundred times already. The colour on my face

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that is not supposed to be there is mercifully light, green and yellow today, easier to hide than the predecessors, the blue and purple that hurt to even touch with a brush or sponge.

The only purple on my face is the tinted chapstick I put on afterwards. I have the house to myself. Who will judge? And even if you come back, I had plum jam this morning and the fruits in our garden are almost ripe.

I watch myself apply the makeup, the protection, layer after layer on my skin, evening out the tone, matching the colour to my skin until everything is gone, neatly tucked away in a closet, or hidden underneath a mask, buried by make-up and chapstick.

Even with my face now looking like it should, I do not go out into the garden again, at least not immediately. Instead, I make lunch, cook enough for us both, should you come back today. You have been disappearing every now and then for at least three weeks now, sometimes for a few hours, sometimes for almost the entire day. You rarely provide an explanation or excuse, and I almost wish that your disappearance from this house would be on a weekday in the evening, when you come home hours after you have finished working, because it just was a busy day at the office, honey, you know how it is, they needed me. I had to stay longer, and no, my tie is tied perfectly fine, and that's just wine on the collar. What are you even talking about? Hand me the water, would you.

Only it would not be water; it would be wine or Scotch or whatever you have in that cabinet of yours I never touch and never dust. Not that it is dusty to begin with. Too frequently used.

That daydream disappears while I cook and I focus on other things that are not horrible wishes but rather the sound of children playing outside. Cooking is a process that happens automatically when I am distracted, and when the food is done, the rice cooked and strained, the vegetables mixed in, the children are still screaming and laughing outside, and our house still only has one person in it. There are no crooked ties or badly concealed affairs brought in from the outside, dragged over the doorstep like a dog's carcass, dead and surrounded by flies, dressed up in linen and pretence.

The only person concealing anything in this house is me, yellow and green, you would not even bother. You do not bother, no need

to present facts as anything but. There is no hiding, not from you, there is nothing you have tucked into the back of the closet, except for a few empty promises, maybe. You have a mask too but one that almost always falls as soon as you step inside this house, step over the dead dog as if you could not see it, could not smell its foulness, the decay.

My mask is worn everywhere. It is makeup and cloth of just the right length, a smile, some teeth, some hair over my face, sunglasses and a sharp tongue, a laugh at certain times, and eyes that are wide open, taking in non-existent lipstick, perfectly straight ties. Hands that shake but hands that grip, too, and hands that have always refused to touch the dead dog. Only one day, they will have to, and they will have to pick the plums from our tree, too.

Lunch is ready and consumed in silence by me, and me alone, and I put your portion in the fridge, carefully labelled. The plum jam stares accusingly at me, asking questions I do not answer. Where is he, where is your lover, where are you? Where are you going?

Just to the garden, today. Book in hand, birds singing in the tree. I bring a pair of sunglasses and a mirror, just in case. I lie down under our plum tree, and when I roll over on my back, baring my throat and stomach, the most vulnerable places, I see dark leaves above me and purple plums that have been green already; they follow the colour guide in reverse. They are beautiful, not quite ripe yet, and I long to stretch out my arms and touch and pluck and eat. Tonight, or tomorrow. But no later than that, the plums will not keep, unless turned into jam.

Around noon, clouds drift over, obscuring the sun, and I pack my things and go towards the house again. The two youngest of our neighbours' children have already gone inside. Through the window I can see Helen talking to them but the older kid, the one with dark brown hair and a smile that is missing one tooth, is still in the garden, looking at the sky, and then at me.

I smile and wave. He waves back, exposing his teeth, his smile, the gap.

“You missed a spot!”

He points at his face, and I mirror the action, trailing my fingers from underneath my eye to the corner of my mouth.

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“When eating plums, you missed a spot. You have some purple here.”

He points at his mouth, or rather just to the side of it, and I smile and nod my thanks. He grins back and turns around, walks inside. My hand drops along with my smile, and I wipe the chapstick off my face, away from my cheek where it smudged, and press just this side of too hard and feel again where yellow and green hide, purple not too long ago.

I cover my face as I walk inside, cup my hand around my mouth and nose, breathe like this, my hand now a mask, a shield, something to hide behind for when my hand as it is is not good enough, for when I need to transform into something that is not me and sometimes not even quite there. A dead dog, perhaps. Like this, with my hand cupped over my face I get less air but still just enough, always just enough. I do not reapply the chapstick this time, only some concealer, to be safe.

You finally return in the evening, and at first, you give no explanation as to where you have been the entire day. You just bend down as I greet you, kiss me, your lips so soft against mine, so gentle.

I tell you about my day, and you smile and laugh and joke, and I smile with you. You keep your mask on today, as you do every once in a while, and I listen as you tell me about how you went fishing, met an old friend of yours, coincidentally. Last week you went to the gym; the week before on a long drive; the week before on a run that lasted two hours, and I would wonder where that sudden interest in sports has come from, only that I already know, and the only thing I truly wonder about, the only thing I care about, is how to tell whoever you are going to, running to, fishing with, to stay the hell away from you, away from your hands. How to tell her to lift her own two hands to your face, cradle your face and rip off your mask before it is too late.

I could tie the dead dog to your running shoes as a warning sign but only if it is tonight, because after that, this house will be void of me, and all my masks will be lying on the floor, and whomever you spend your time with will probably not see you again, anyways, come to think of it. It would not do to have an affair as the husband of a runaway bride, especially if it is a bride, a wife, of three years.

Most people would frown upon that, even the tie-crooking ones. It is better for them, especially the tie-crooking ones.

Dinner passes in what passes as a relaxed atmosphere for us. You even notice that I cleaned the kitchen. You smile freely today, tell me about how you saw Elise at the river; she was taking a walk with her children.

“They’re getting a divorce,” you say, mouth full. “Her and Robert. It’s been a long time coming, hasn’t it? They never seemed happy, and it’s probably better for him, anyways. I expect she’ll be taking the kids. What did you put into this? Garlic? You know I don’t like that much garlic, darling.”

I shrug, do not look up from where my hand is clutching the fork. I take another bite, my eyes avoiding yours. Not now, not today. I do not cower like I used to, back in the beginning, the first year of our marriage when everything unravelled. I do not scream like I did in the second year. I do not walk out or try to do anything at all. I just keep eating. You were in a good mood mere seconds ago; perhaps it will keep.

But your fingers come into view, tip my chin up and I am left looking at you. You have put your fork next to your bowl, tidy, and you are smiling, the barest a hint of a smile, now.

“Are you not going to answer me?”

Your voice is soft; the window behind me is partially open and I can hear the last few birds singing, nestled in our plum tree, tucked away from sight. We are invisible too, at least from the outside, our curtains are drawn, swaying in the breeze. Your voice is soft but your face is not. They can hear, outside, they can hear but they cannot possibly see what is happening inside, the mask has been slipped over the entire house now, no one can see what is happening underneath.

“It is part of the recipe,” I say, my voice nowhere near as soft as yours. Softness has no place in this. “You liked it last week, I didn’t change anything today. If you don’t like it, maybe bring some of the fish you catch, then I can cook that.”

Your fingers disappear from my chin, your smile slides right off your face, and the cutlery rattles as your fist lands on the table, making me flinch.

“Julia,” you say, calm, always so calm, despite your fist trembling

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on the tabletop. “Julia, I think it would be better if you held your tongue now.”

I open my mouth to answer, say something, anything but you stand up and turn, walk towards that cabinet I never touch, bend down and open it, look at the options. What will it be, which colour, brown, golden, white, red?

I take another bite of my dinner while you are busy choosing your drink and my eyes are drawn to our entrance door, to the dead dog on our floor that only I can see. Its eyes have rolled back in its head, only the whites are visible, and the flies buzzing around it have become louder, a constant hum in the back of my mind.

I have taken care of everything, not just dinner. My bag is packed, my sister is informed, I have money, a plan, somewhere to go. I have a way out of this, and I have the courage to take it, too, for the first time.

Today you choose gold, you straighten, close the cabinet, and I look away from the carcass in our home, the body soon to be a skeleton, and look at you instead. Your mask is gone entirely now, lying somewhere between whiskey and wine, crumpled, and you walk towards me slowly, place your chair next to mine.

I continue eating as you start drinking, slowly, ever so slowly. You are sitting just far enough behind me that I cannot see it when you lift your arm and I tense when your hand lands on my shoulder.

You huff, amused, and your hand starts running up and down my back, slowly and gently. When I am finished eating and want to stand up to put the dishes in the sink, you catch my wrist and tug me down again, pulling me a little closer to you.

“I love you, you know that? I love you. I’ll bring you a fish next time, my love.”

I nod and turn my face away, just far enough that you cannot see it.

“I love you too,” I say, a lie so sweet on my tongue, and you start stroking my back again and start humming, too, a song I do not know. It probably looks like it should, us sitting at the kitchen table, your hand running up and down my back, me half leaning against you, as if there had never been any threats at all, nor any pain. It looks domestic and quiet, peaceful and like two people in love.

The lengths you go to to secure your mask will never fail to astound me.

After dinner, I excuse myself to the bathroom. I shower and wash my face, apply a little makeup, just enough to cover up. I put on leggings and a comfortable T-shirt, clothes as suited for the streets as they are for staying inside and I smile at you as you pass me to go to the bathroom. You smile back and lock the door behind you.

I know how long you take in the bath, I know your routines, and I know I have almost exactly fifteen minutes to disappear. My bag is packed, I grab it from underneath the bed and walk downstairs, turning off the lights as I go.

I have texted my sister already. I do not have to walk far from here to get to her car. Far enough for nosy neighbours not to connect the car and our house, even after they hear of my disappearance.

I pause in the kitchen for a few seconds, take one last look around. I am leaving a lot of things behind; a lot of possessions and memories; three years of marriage and hiding and pain; three years of constantly washed and re-used masks until the tears started to appear. The masks were repaired, sewn together; any holes would be patched up, over and over again.

My fingers are sore after years of holding needle and thread, after years of stitching and patching up but I still walk over to our entrance door, pick up the dead dog that is not truly there. The flies buzz away, disturbed, only to circle me seconds later. The dog is heavy but not as heavy as it looks, and its fur is soft, if matted with blood. I carry it to the sliding door that leads to our garden and step outside, place it on the damp grass. The flies stop buzzing around me and fly away, a swarm taking off into the cold night air. The dog's eyes twitch, turning, looking, the whites returning to where they are supposed to be, and then it gets to its feet slowly, unsteadily.

It is bleeding still; I can see a hint of bone shining from underneath its fur and I grip the straps of my bag tightly as it turns its head to look at me. Then, it turns around, and the carcass moves. The dog is running, away, away, away. Away from the house and who is still inside of it.

I can no longer tie the dog to your running shoes as a warning sign to whom you spend your days with but there are other ways to



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warn someone. Ways without blood and violence, without pain and anger. I will find a solution; I am sure of that.

With the dog now gone, I finally start walking, making my way across our garden, away from the house. The air is cold; a soft breeze sweeps through the trees, sounding like a whisper, a scream, a cry. The plum tree at the far end of our garden is just a silhouette in front of the dark sky, darker than the night even, hunchbacked and old.

I walk over, one foot in front of the other, taking something away from myself with every step. Inhale, exhale, let go, let go, let go. Piece by piece it all falls away, sheds like old skin, like fur, like a mask torn to shreds—the fear, the pain, the anger, the shame, all that landing on the grass beneath my feet. I let go. The bark is cold as I touch it, damp. The leaves above me rustle, the branches bending low, a few of them almost touching the crown of my head.

Let go. I remove my hand from the bark, running it through my hair. I turn towards the house just in time to see the bedroom lights switch on, illuminating part of the porch from above. I watch your silhouette as you get ready for bed.

The wind picks up. The leaves around me are rustling loudly, and if I close my eyes and tip my head back just so, then it is a roar, a scream. I stare at the bedroom window, can clearly make out your movements, and I recall what you do every day, every night, the rituals you have before going to bed.

It will take another three minutes for you to leave the bedroom, and then perhaps another two before you realise that I am not where I should be.

You will look in the kitchen first, expecting me to be hunched over the table as I so often am, and when you find the kitchen void of my presence, you will check the living room, which will also be dark. No trace of me there, either.

Only then will you think to even look outside, look at the gnarly old plum tree, its leaves swaying in the wind. You will see me, then. The fury will slide off your face, easy and quick as water, and I will watch as your expression grows neutral, like it does every morning, a mask of pleasantness over your features, the mask of a loving husband, a good neighbour, of someone who enjoys fishing and likes his acquaintances' kids. You will walk outside, stride towards

me, grab my wrist, your face already turning back to fury, the mask torn to shreds once more because really, who will see? Everyone is asleep.

Your hand will wrap around my wrist, and you will lead the way, drag me back to our house, as if I did not know my own garden, as if I did not know where to go. As if I would run if you let go. I have no doubt that your fingers will bruise when you find me.

For now, I look up, look at the branches above me, the plums barely distinguishable from the leaves in the darkness. I extend my hand, my fingers searching for a plum, finding it more through touch than vision. I pluck it from the tree, testing how soft it is with my fingertips.

I bring it to my mouth, take a bite. The plum is bitter, not sweet, it is not ripe yet. The plum's flesh is hard and slightly sour, and it takes willpower to keep on chewing.

I watch the bedroom window as I eat, taking small bites. I finish the fruit just in time to see the lights flicker out, and as I toss the pit aside, I can see your silhouette approach the stairs, illuminated by the lights in our corridor.

I look at the rectangle of light for another few seconds before I breathe out, slowly, deliberately. Not looking away, I pick another plum from the tree, not testing this one. I need to hurry, now.

Carefully, I walk towards our garden gate, turning my back to the house. I pray I do not slip on the wet grass. I walk towards the gate, one foot in front of the other. The plum is heavy in my hand. My wrist hurts from the last time you grabbed me there; the bruises you left as purple as the fruit I hold.

I reach the gate just as I hear the kitchen door inside the house creak. I open the gate a second later, step out of it, away from the streetlights, away from our house, towards our neighbours' hedge facing the street, tall and green as it is. I walk up to it, step behind it, my body so close to the leaves I can feel their dampness on my skin. I am hiding, and like this, the house's hungry, golden eyes cannot see me.

I wait.

The plum is smooth in my hand, and I run my fingers over it as I hold my breath. You step out on the porch a minute later; I can

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hear the wood creaking. Carefully, I turn, angle my body in such a way I can see but cannot be seen. The porch light above you is on, moths buzzing around it, and your face is illuminated. I watch, fascinated and terrified, as your expression changes, as one mask gets exchanged for another, and another.

You look furious as you step through the door. Neutral, as soon as you are outside. Three breaths, three passes of my thumb over the plum, three agonising moments. Then your face changes again, neutrality sliding off like water running over a smooth surface, leaving fury behind once more.

Fury, neutrality, fury.

And then—worry.

You look around, your gaze darting past the plum tree, out onto the street where I am standing. Your eyes almost touch me but you cannot see me, not this time. I am not there. You do not see me, only a gnarly old plum tree, dark grass and a hedge that is not exactly a safe space but still, something to hide behind.

I watch as the worry slides off your face, replaced by anger once more, and then fear. No mask, not this time. Your fear is real. I have lifted my hands from metres away and with my disappearance, I ripped your mask off your face. You turn, and the front door closes behind you with a bang.

I watch as the lights in the house turn off, one after the other, living room, kitchen, corridor, bedroom. Darkness.

Once the last light has disappeared, I turn around and walk down the road, the air cool around me, and wet. I take a bite of the plum as I walk. It is softer than the other one, and its juices spill over my chin. My hand holds it tight, the bruises on my wrist as dark as the plum itself. I go, I walk, and I remember how the fury slipped from your face. I breathe, and every breath is another bit of fear trickling away. It is me, letting go, go, go. The plum is soft, ripe. Good. I bring it to my mouth once more, take another bite. The juice spills over my hand, and I smile.

The fruit tastes sweeter than any jam you ever bought.