

Open Hearts

Brigitte Malana | Short Story

Always stunning, always attractive, that's what she was and I couldn't say anything. Because it was true. It was all true and the truth was always glaring at me, mocking me, yet I still loved her anyways. I met her when I was five, when she held out her hand to me on the playground and said "Come." Even then, her voice had an edge to it that could not be replicated and her green eyes constantly flickered over to mine, captivating me as my breath caught. She was always there, she was always mine, until our world collapsed and she wasn't mine any longer. Because the person I was looking for no longer existed.

"Another scotch, please," I said commandingly, though not overly so, because I did not want to intimidate our waiter any further. He was already a bit fidgety with those beady brown eyes in that large head of his because like most men, he wasn't accustomed to serving a woman like me. A woman who ordered more scotch than a man. A woman who wore red to a restaurant with a black-and-white only dress code. A woman, who had, miraculously, grown from an ugly, skinny adolescent into a striking, lithe woman. The kind of woman men feared.

"By the way I really do love your dress, it's quite stunning," Tom said, trying to recapture my attention as I studied the drink menu intently, planning on ordering a third scotch later in the evening.

"Oh thanks, that's very sweet of you," I said coyly. I could see my bleached white teeth gleaming in the reflection of his glasses as I suggestively placed my hand on top of his, and I loved it. Although my meeting with Tom was supposed to be about the upcoming wedding, as I was its wedding planner and he was its caterer, I knew how this night would end because Tom and I had a history. A history of working together. A history of convenient lovemaking because we were both single, getting older and had not quite found the happiness we had always hoped for. But why would I want to think about my lonely, hollow life now? Why would I want to think about how my beautiful, polished exterior masked the grotesque loneliness I was incapable of overcoming? Tom and I would have fun tonight and I knew that after our dinner, our taxi would speed off, anxious to get us out of the backseat, and at the hotel, we would be wrapped in each other arms late into the night. Everything would be fantastic until we had to wake up to the crippling morning silence, the blinding sun and the debilitating hangovers that forced us to confront ourselves and all of our nasty truths in a way we were almost incapable of handling.

"Have you thought any more about the wedding, any details you might like to add?" asked Tom.

"No, I haven't. The couple is so fucking demanding and I can't wait for it to be over," I responded, with all the grace of a wedding planner who has spent years living vicariously through everyone else's happily ever afters.

"Well, let's toast to the upcoming wedding!" exclaimed Tom.

"Let's!" I stated as I smiled authentically for the first time in months. All the stress of the wedding was leaving me as I looked forward to my passionate night ahead with Tom. As our glasses clinked, I looked over the railing and saw the sun settling over the sea, the day seeping into night. We were on the island of Santorini for the wedding and even I, with all the cynicism of a 90 year-old woman, was managing to enjoy myself.

"By the way, I have a new sous chef," Tom added.

"Oh really?" I said. This was news to me, perplexing news because Tom was notoriously hesitant to hire people for his world-renowned catering company. This led to suspicion of course because perhaps Tom had a real love interest, and perhaps it wasn't me.

"Her name is Isla Reyes."

Suddenly, the lovely scotch in my mouth curdled and I coughed abruptly.

"Are you alright?" Tom asked.

"Oh yes, I'm fine," I said, obviously flustered, trying to disguise the fact that this bit of news had thrown me off completely, had shaken me to my core.

"Do you know her?" Tom inquired.

"No I don't, the name just reminded me of someone that I used to know," I said gracefully covering my lie, like a snake slithering away.

Needless to say, for the first time in years, my night did not go as planned because Isla's name grabbed me by the throat and refused to let go. I bid Tom goodnight, claiming to be unwell, and disappointment flooded his face as he realized that we would not be spending the night together, helping each other overcome the tide of loneliness that had overwhelmed us in recent years through the carnality of our bodies. As I lay in my hotel room staring at the white speckled ceiling, I began to reminisce about Isla, my former best friend, my love.

Back in our younger days, Isla and I were the best of friends and we lived our lives as one. We took dance classes together, worked on school projects together and giggled throughout the night at our frequent sleep-overs. We did each other's hair, nails, and confided in each other about everything - anything you could possibly

imagine. We were inseparable and often referred to as sisters, which was funny, because Isla was striking, incredibly beautiful at that young age, and I was - well I was not. Yet Isla moulded me - in fact, she made me. As we got older, she passed along her stunning fashion sense to me, helping me shop for the most flattering clothes and make-up, teaching me, her subject, to assume the image of a pretty, popular teen. With her guidance, and slightly maternalistic impulse to help me, we became two peas in a pod - the prettiest that could be. But Isla was always one step ahead of me because she was much more savvy, and much more mature, advanced if you will. While I was dreaming about kissing a boy, she had already done it. While I was considering trimming my hair, she had already chopped hers off into the chicest, latest bob. When I started shaving my legs, she had already been waxing hers for a year. She acquired quite the name for herself as we progressed through high school and she was always referred to as Isla, and I was always referred to as Isla's best friend. But I didn't mind, I really didn't mind, because I loved her - my truest, closest friend.

Oh God. I looked at the clock. An hour had passed and I was still in my hotel room, staring at the ceiling, thinking about her. I knew I had to stop, but I couldn't. I simply couldn't because her life, her presence had impacted me so deeply. I was trying to fight it, but the one memory of her that I always suppressed was coming into my mind the same way vomit creeps up your throat no matter how hard you fight it. Even though I was doing everything in my power to avoid it, my mind whisked me back to the devastation of my life, when 17 years ago, in my final year of high school, I took the long road home from school, « le chemin des écoliers » as the French would say, that ran by the river.

Crunch, crunch - went my innocent, oblivious feet as I marched along on the gravel path. Swoosh, swoosh - whistled the early autumn air as it rustled my hair and brought a faint blush to my cheeks. Hum ... hum ... I hummed as I marched along ... hum ... and there they were. I suddenly saw what I wasn't, was not supposed to see. There they were laughing, skinny-dipping in the river like naked rats. Isla had been cutting class recently, but she wouldn't tell me why, wouldn't reveal it, but now, now it was clear as day. Clear as the lovely hazel flecks in her eyes that came out in the sun. And my God, it looked straight out of a movie. The sun bathed them in a golden, divine light and they held each other, kissed each other gently ... and I could not bear it. I absolutely could not bear it. Of course it was my father's fault and he would never, ever receive my forgiveness.

But Isla, Isla was different. She was my best friend, my truest friend, the only person to whom I didn't have to filter my thoughts, the only person that understood me completely, the only person ... I wanted Isla to be happy because I loved her but this, this was too much. Suddenly a destructive rage engulfed me and I screamed, "Isla, you slut!" at the top of my lungs. She looked up, her green eyes widening with shock as they met mine for the last time, her wet chestnut hair glistening in the sun. She opened her mouth to reply just as my father turned to look at me, losing his precarious footing in the muddy riverbed.

With Isla tight in his arms, the strong river current that my father had always warned me about as a child whipped their their naked, fragile bodies down the river as I watched in horror. As both of them flailed and screamed for help, I ran along the river bank, trying to help them, trying to do something to prevent the tragedy I knew was imminent. I kept running and running, a painful cramp devouring my side, my breath coming out in hoarse gasps, tears streaking down my face, but the water was too fast and soon they were out of sight. Yet I kept going though I felt that I would collapse, a devastating sense of dread filling my gut as I saw a huge, white grub washed up on the shore. Choking on my tears, I realized that it was my dead father. Then, although my entire being said no, I began to search for Isla's stunning body, screaming "Isla, don't leave me!" But as I staggered around on the slippery riverbank, no matter how hard I looked, I still couldn't find her. And no matter how hard the authorities looked, her body was still nowhere to be found.

I woke up. I was back in the present, back on the island of Santorini, back in my debilitating reality after having dreamt about Isla all night. I had fallen asleep thinking about her in my red evening dress, with my make-up still on and my contact lenses still in. My eyes were blood red and I felt, and looked, like hell. Tom's announcement of his new sous-chef had shattered my universe because it allowed that thought to resurface. The thought that even though the authorities declared Isla dead long ago, she might somehow still be alive. I had worked with counsellors, therapists and psychiatrists to get rid of this agonizing idea so that I could move on with my life. But last night, in just one sentence, Tom had unravelled my progress by saying that his new sous chef was named Isla Reyes. The same name. The same fucking name. Could it be? Could it really be? No, there was no way; it was essentially guaranteed that she was dead. Yet, I held onto the hope that maybe I would meet her again, finally get the opportunity to ask her what had happened and why. I needed closure from her to accept their affair and the death of my father; I needed my questions answered. The tragedy of that day had haunted me daily, resulting in my debilitating trust issues; I have never been able to connect with another

person the same way I connected with Isla. I have never been able to open up to anyone, for fear of them hurting me like she did. Thus my life has been a series of disastrous relationships with men and bitchy relationships with other women, all because I am incapable of letting another person love me the way she did, of letting them in. But how could I possibly blame my life failures on a 17 year old girl? How could I possibly blame the failure of my seemingly perfect, yet disgustingly hollow, life on Isla? All these thoughts whirred through my head as I plodded about my room, making my coffee and trying to put myself together because the wedding rehearsal would begin in a few hours. But although I tried to avoid it, my mind returned to the first time I met her, on the playground in Chesterfield, in the glittery, golden light of autumn.

Laughter. That's what I remember on our first day of Kindergarten all those years ago. The awful feeling of waving good-bye to Mum, yet the surprising ecstasy that followed as I played on the playground with my fellow peers, us wee, innocent creatures that had all the world open to us in those moments. As I laughed and ran around like a fool, I met Isla. She had on a pretty emerald dress that matched her lovely green eyes, and long, chestnut hair - straight as a pin. As she looked at me, assessing me even then, she whispered to me "Come" and took my hand, commanding me to climb up the tallest playground tower with her, the tallest tower with the tallest slide. I climbed up apprehensively and sat at the top of the slide with Isla at my back, telling me to "Go, go down already!" However, I couldn't, the slide was too steep and I could feel my heart hammering in my chest and my small hands sweating while they tightly gripped the slide. As I sat there, paralyzed with fear, I suddenly felt two strong hands on my back and before I knew it, I felt a push, and before I knew it, the wind whistled through my hair and I was at the bottom of the slide. Isla had pushed me, she had pushed me down and instead of being angry, crying about this, I felt a strange sense of happiness, a strange sense of joy. And that was our relationship in its essence, because even then, she was teaching me how to live.

Knock-knock.

Someone was knocking on my hotel room door and I was pulled out of my thoughts. With my wrinkled red evening dress still on, streaked, oily make-up, rat's nest of hair and cup of black coffee in hand, I was in no way ready to interact with another human being. However, in my heart I knew who it was. And for the first time, I decided to let him in.

"Hey! Good morning beautiful. How are you feeling?" asked Tom as he stood in my doorway, looking

as handsome as ever with his straight white teeth, brown hair speckled with grey and taupe suede jacket.

"I'm feeling like more of a train wreck than usual. Come in," I replied, opening the door of my hotel room.

"I brought you something," Tom said as we sat on the couch. He reached over into his bag and pulled out a container of chicken noodle soup and a bouquet of flowers.

"Tom! That's so sweet of you," I exclaimed.

"Of course. You do know that I am the sweetest," he said with a cheeky smile as I laughed.

Suddenly, his face became overcast and he looked me straight in the eyes.

"I wanted to ask you something," he said.

"Sure," I replied.

"Is there something bothering you?"

My breath caught and I could feel my heart in my throat. Usually, this type of question would have rendered me speechless. However, this time, I decided to tell someone who was not a counsellor, not a psychiatrist and not a therapist about her. I decided to tell him how much I had loved Isla, how much she had meant to me, until she had betrayed me and died along with my father. I told him everything.

"Do you have a picture of her?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said as I reached into my wallet, pulling out her 12th grade picture that I had never thrown out despite everything. Because at the end of the day, I still loved her and missed her more than I could put into words. I still struggled to live without her because she had been my leader in life, my light.

"I'm so sorry, but that's not my sous chef," he replied.

Upon hearing this, a tear rolled down my face because I realized that Isla was truly dead. I would never get to see her again, never get the closure I so desperately needed.

"I'm so sorry," Tom said as he took me into his arms, rocking me back and forth as I cried.

"I really wanted to see her again," I choked through my tears, "I just want to know why, and fuck, I still miss her to this day even though she did what she did."

"I know hun, I'm so sorry," he murmured, gently kissing my forehead.

As I felt his warm lips on me and his strong arms around me, I realized that I loved Tom. I loved him because he was the only person who had always been there for me. The only person who had seen me at my absolute worst and still wanted to see me the next morning. The only person who texted me first. The only

person who held back my hair when I was vomiting. The only person who brought me chicken noodle soup and flowers. The only person I ever told about Isla who wasn't a medical professional. The only person who loved me unconditionally.

“Tom?”

“Yes?” he replied.

“I love you.”

“Brienne, I've been waiting for you to say that my entire life,” he whispered as he carried me into the bedroom, our lips locked in an eternal embrace.