

Anywhere else but here by Zoe Venditozzi

Thursday the 16th of December , just before Tea Time

Laurie scanned and rescanned the endless rows of soup. This task was clearly beyond her. Each can she picked up was heavier than the last and she had difficulty finding its station on the shelf. The dietary information baffled her; she kept losing her place in the column that showed the calories or saturated fat content or whatever. She eventually tossed some low-fat, low-salt vegetable stuff into the basket, shrugging the handle slightly further up her arm.

She made her way towards Toiletries veering around an immobile, puce toddler; mouth torn open in a silent scream. There was a temporary stall set up at the end of the aisle. A small woman with a big orangey mouth smeared a yellow substance on what appeared to be tiny squares of lino.

She knew that Ed would love this faux-food. Anything processed was ingenious to him; the more nutritionally deficient the better. She smiled at Orange Mouth and picked up a jar. Easy Cheese - No Cutting Required. She could picture Ed's delight at this new-fangled snack food. The jar clunked against the counter as she dropped it back in place.

The shop was filling up. She uncovered her watch. 5.18.

She turned in to Toiletries. Again the array was bewildering. She grabbed an apple shampoo and a coconut conditioner. She wasn't above smelling sweet.

There was something else she needed but nothing in her memory made itself known. Moving along the crisp and biscuit sections, she willed herself to think of the something else but this trick didn't work. She knew that as soon as she put her key in the front door that the mystery item would resurface. She ran through her constant shopping list: milk, bread, toilet paper, cereal, butter...

She had wandered into a corral of pensioners. They bumped their trolleys against the edges of shelves. They didn't appear to know each other but were all dressed similarly. She felt like manhandling them out of her way. As she stood, hemmed in by their chat and indecision, she felt the last drop of her patience drip out. Tutting loudly, she put her basket in the nearest dawdler's trolley and headed for the door.

The arcade that led to the bus stops was suffocated by Christmas decorations. They were intricate and fierce, the colours mashing together behind the plate glass. Laurie kept catching sight of the patterns blinking out of the corner of her eye. She'd turn her head towards the movement, convinced someone was motioning towards her. She really ought to get on with decorating the Christmas tree it was only nine days until the big day. But what was the point? He wouldn't notice the tree anyway. He took these things for granted. And there was certainly no excitement in her for the event. It was all just a hassle really.

A group of boys were clumped around one of the shelters. She had to pass through their cigarette smoke to see the timetable. Her wrist goose-pimpled when she pulled back her sleeve. 5.27 Almost time for Neighbours. At least the TV would drown out the noise of Ed's computer.

The journey was slow. The bus detangled the route to Queen Street in a stop-start, nauseating fashion. When she arrived home she stood outside the block, and looked up at the flat. She could see Ed through the lace curtain that his mother had insisted on giving them. Laurie could only imagine this was a last-ditch attempt at respectability. They may be living in sin but at least the view of them at it was obscured.

"Chance would be a fine thing," she muttered, reaching into her hand bag for her key. She raked around through all the bus tickets, sweet wrappers and scraps of paper. Her bag was looking more and more like a bin. "Fucking bin bags! Fuck! Fucking fuck!"

She kicked the door closed behind her. Inevitably, it caught on the invisible rise in the concrete floor, requiring her to turn back and push it home. She felt like smashing the glass out.

She could hear the shooting before she reached the top landing. As usual, there was a pile of mail by the front door. Not even on the table, just toed out of the way. She moved towards the green glow.

"Hello." She tried for cheery.

"Check this. You can actually see his brains splatter." He kept his eyes trained on his opposing number's death. "Did you get anything for tea?" His voice had the wheedling tone of a child wanting a treat.

"No, the shop was closed. Power cut."

Ed accepted this mutely. His hand reached out for the phone and he dialled without looking.

"Yeah. Curry meal for two. Chicken Korma and Passanda. Peshwari naan. MacDonald. Yeah, that's the one. Cool." He hung up.

"You know, Ed, It might be nice to be asked occasionally what I might like."

He finally turned round to her.

"Did you want something else?"

"No. But it might have been nice for you to ask."

A look of confusion passed briefly across his face. Then he swivelled back to the screen.

She walked out of the room and went into the bathroom. She sat down on the toilet and tried to cry. Nothing happened. She looked into the mirror and gave herself a severe look. Something had to be done. There was only so long she could put up with take-aways and being ignored. When she was younger she'd envisioned a different relationship. Even when imagining an unhappy relationship, she'd pictured a Bastard. A thumper or a philanderer. Not this boring nothingness. She'd almost happily put up with a bit of domestic abuse just to relieve the monotony.

The door bell rang. Laurie dragged herself up and answered the door.

"Awright. Delivery for ya." The guy was about seventeen. He had the ubiquitous fauxhawk and an eyebrow piercing. He raised his eyebrows at her. She realised she'd been staring.

"How much?"

"Twelve fifty."

She ducked in for her purse. Twelve fifty, plus tip, of course. It wasn't enough that she'd already be paying the best part of two quid for delivery, she also had to pay the delivery guy. For what? Driving a mile and climbing a flight of stairs.

"Here," she handed over the money, almost everything she had in there. It was mostly pound coins - the least she could do was weigh him down a bit.

"Listen, can I get a lift off you?"

"Yeah, whatever." He shrugged and turned to go back down the stairs. "I've got to go back to the shop anyways."

She put the bag with the curry round the corner into the hall. Ed still hadn't shifted.

She reached into the bag and took the naan.

The delivery car was a dressed up black and yellow Punto. There were lights under the wheel arches and a good deal of chrome. She climbed into the passenger seat and pulled the racing seat belt around herself.

"Where you goin'?" his accent was that strange Pakistani-Scottish hybrid. He was acting less confident now; he wasn't sure how to behave in this unfamiliar situation.

Laurie looked out the window.

"I don't know, Vicky Park? Do you mind if I..." She waved the naan at him.

"Please yourself. Roll the window down though. I don't want my car stinkin'"

"Don't you like peshwari?"

"Not all Asians like curry y'know."

"Oh sorry, I didn't mean anything." She felt wrong-footed. Had she been racist? She didn't really know any Asians. There was a Nigerian guy in her office, but that was the extent of her multi-cultural interaction. Had she implied something?

"Nah, I'm only messin'. It just interferes with ma aftershave. Y'know?" He smiled at her.

Still, she didn't unwrap the naan and her stomach was starting to hurt with hunger pangs. The warmth was seeping out through the tin foil and she could smell the almonds.

"Seriously, go ahead." He flicked his head at her. "Go on." He grinned again. She peeled away the foil, careful not to spill the sugary powder. She peeled off a corner and took a bite.