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Last Night in Montreal

Written by Emily St. John Mandel

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LAST NIGHT IN MONTREAL

EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL

PICADOR



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To Kevin

PART ONE

1

No one stays forever. On the morning of her disappearance Lilia woke early, and lay still for a moment in the bed. It was the last day of October. She slept naked.

Eli was up already, and working on his thesis proposal. While he was typing up the previous day's research notes he heard the sounds of awakening, the rustling of the duvet, her bare footsteps on the hardwood floor, and she kissed the top of his head very lightly en route to the bathroom—he made an agreeable humming noise but didn't look up—and the shower started on the other side of the almost-closed door. Steam and the scent of apricot shampoo escaped around the edges. She stayed in the shower for forty-five minutes, but this wasn't unusual. The day was still unremarkable. Eli glanced up briefly when she emerged from the bathroom. Lilia, naked: pale skin wrapped in a soft white towel, short dark hair wet on her forehead, and she smiled when he met her eyes.

"Good morning," he said. Smiling back at her. "How did you sleep?" He was already typing again.

She kissed his hair again instead of answering, and left a trail of wet footprints all the way back to the bedroom. He heard her towel fall softly to the bedroom floor and he wanted to go and make love to her just then, but he was immersed so deeply in the work that morning, *accomplishing* things, and he didn't want to break the spell. He heard a dresser drawer slide shut in the bedroom.

She came out dressed all in black, as she almost always did, and carrying the three pieces of a plate that had fallen off the bed the night before. The plate was a light shade of blue, and sticky with pomegranate juice. He heard her dropping it into

the kitchen garbage can before she wandered past him into the living room. She stood in front of his sofa, running her fingers through her hair to test for dampness, her expression a little blank when he glanced up at her, and it seemed to him later that she'd been considering something, perhaps making up her mind. But then, he played the morning back so many times that the tape was ruined—later it seemed possible that she'd simply been thinking about the weather, and later still he was even willing to consider the possibility that she hadn't stood in front of the sofa at all—had merely paused there, perhaps, for an instant that the stretched-out reel extended into a moment, a scene, and finally a major plot point.

Later he was certain that the first few playbacks of that last morning were reasonably accurate, but after a few too many nights of lying awake and considering things, the quality began to erode. In retrospect the sequence of events is a little hazy, images running into each other and becoming slightly confused: she's across the room, she's kissing him for a third time—and why doesn't he look up and kiss her? Her last kiss lands on his head—and putting on her shoes; does she kiss him before she puts on her shoes, or afterward? He can't swear to it one way or the other. Later on he examined his memory for signs until every detail seemed ominous, but eventually he had to conclude that there was nothing strange about her that day. It was a morning like any other, exquisitely ordinary in every respect.

"I'm going for the paper," she said. The door closed behind her. He heard her clattering footsteps on the stairs.

HE WAS HUNTING just then, deep in the research, hot on the trail of something obscure, tracking a rare butterfly-like quotation as it fluttered through thickets of dense tropical paragraphs. The chase seemed to require the utmost concentration; still, he couldn't help but think later on that if he'd only glanced up from the work, he might've seen some-

thing: a look in her eyes, a foreshadowing of doom, perhaps a train ticket in her hand or the words *I'm Leaving You Forever* stitched on the front of her coat. Something did seem slightly amiss, but he was lost in the excitement of butterfly hunting and ignored it, until later, too late, when somewhere between Andean loanwords and the lost languages of ancient California he happened to glance at the clock. It was afternoon. He was hungry. It had been four and a half hours since she'd gone for the paper, and her watery footprints had evaporated from the floor, and he realized what it was. For the first time he could remember, she hadn't asked if he wanted a coffee from the deli.

He told himself to stay calm, and realized in the telling that he'd been waiting for this moment. He told himself that she'd just been distracted by a bookstore. It was entirely possible. Alternatively, she liked trains: at this moment she could be halfway back from Coney Island, taking pictures of passengers, unaware of what time it was. With this in mind, he returned reluctantly to the work; a particular sentence had gotten all coiled up on him while he was trying to express something subtle and difficult, and he spent an uneasy half-hour trying to untangle the wiring and making a valiant effort not to dwell on her increasingly gaping absence, while several academic points he was trying to clarify got bored and wandered off into the middle distance. It took some time to coax them back into focus, once the sentence had been mangled beyond all recognition and the final destination of the paragraph worked out. But by the time the paragraph arrived at the station it was five o'clock, she'd left to get the paper before noon, and it no longer seemed unreasonable to think that something had gone horribly wrong.

He rose from the desk, conceding defeat, and began to check the apartment. In the bathroom nothing was different. Her comb was where it had always lived, on the haphazard

shelf between the toilet and the sink. Her toothbrush was where she'd left it, beside a silver pair of tweezers on the windowsill. The living area was unchanged. Her towel was lying damply on the bedroom floor. She'd taken her purse, as she always did. But then he glanced at the wall in the bedroom, and his life broke neatly into two parts.

She had a photograph from her childhood, the only photograph of herself that she seemed to own. It was a Polaroid, faded to a milky pallor with sunlight and time: a small girl sits on a stool at a diner counter. A bottle of ketchup is partially obscured by her arm. The waitress, who has a mass of blond curls and pouty lips, leans in close across the countertop. The photographer is the girl's father. They've stopped at a restaurant somewhere in the middle of the continent, having been travelling for some time. A sheen on the waitress's face hints at the immense heat of the afternoon. Lilia said she couldn't remember which state they were in, but she did remember that it was her twelfth birthday. The picture had been above his bed since the night she'd moved in with him, her one mark on the apartment, thumbtacked above the headboard. But when he looked up that afternoon it had been removed, the thumbtack neatly reinserted into the wall.

Eli knelt on the floor, and took several deep breaths before he could bring himself to lift an edge of the duvet. Her suitcase was gone from under the bed.

Later he was out on the street, walking quickly, but he couldn't remember how he'd ended up there or how much time had passed since he'd left the apartment. His keys were in his pocket, and he clutched them painfully in the palm of his hand. He was breathing too quickly. He was walking fast through Brooklyn, far too late, circling desperately through the neighbourhood in wider and wider spirals, every bookstore, every café, every bodega that he thought might conceivably attract her. The traffic was too loud. The sun

was too bright. The streets were haunted with a terrible conspiracy of normalcy, bookstores and cafés and bodegas and clothing stores all carrying on the charade of normal existence, as if a girl hadn't just walked off the stage and plummeted into the chasm of the orchestra pit.

He was well aware that he was too late by hours. Still, he took the subway to Pennsylvania Station and stood there for a while anyway, overexposed in the grey atrium light, more out of a sense of ceremony than with any actual hope: he wanted at least to see her off, even if it had been four or five hours since the departure of her train. He stood still in an endless parade of travellers passing quickly, everyone pulling suitcases, meeting relatives, buying water and tickets and paperbacks for the journey, running late. Penn Station's ever-present soldiers eyed him disinterestedly from under their berets, hands casual on the barrels of their M-16s.

That night there was a knock on his door, and he was on his feet in an instant, throwing it open, thinking perhaps . . . "Trick or Treat!" said an accompanying mother brightly. She looked at him, started to repeat herself, quickly ushered her charges on to a more promising doorstep. The whole encounter lasted less than a moment ("Come on, kids, I don't think this nice man has any candy for us . . ."), but it remained seared into his memory nonetheless. Afterward, when the thought of Lilia leaving seeped through him like a chill, he never could shake the image of that hopeful line of trick-or-treaters (from left to right: vampire, ladybug, vampire, ghost) like a mirage on his doorstep, no one older than five, and the smallest one (the vampire on the left) sucking on a yellow lollipop. He recognized her as the little girl from the fourth floor who sometimes threw temper tantrums on the sidewalk. She was three and a half years old, give or take, and she smiled very stickily at him just before he closed the door.