

meadowyarn

**the light inside**

a #yarnfictions novella

part one : her/end

## **Her**

I see her, through the layers of paper and cloth and earth, and I know her. She shifts slightly in her seat, adjusts her skirt, arranges her hands carefully in her lap. She looks towards the door, her expression thoughtful, as if she is contemplating something outside of this space, beyond this frame. Soft, cool light illuminates her pale skin, highlighting her gently arching brow. The artist works quickly, soft strokes on canvas with pastel sticks, shading and colouring the blue and rust plaid of her bodice. Indigo and madder, colours of the earth, of me. Now though, her colour is faded, the pigments leaching away. She is within me but not yet part of me. I need time, much more time. But I am patient, I can wait.

## **End**

Some make a mark but it's impossible to tell which ones will stay with you. Children are always hard to get over but, honestly, it could be any of them; the old man with the sentimental tattoo, or the middle-aged woman who just didn't look ready. If we're involved there's usually a story, even if it's only one of neglect and despair.

Inevitably, the final one etches itself permanently into my memory. He is younger than he looks, the years have not been kind. Isn't that the standard platitude? Broken veins across his cheeks and nose; brown stained teeth emerging from receding gums; long, dirty fingernails; a grizzled beard; the skin across his concave stomach wrinkled, shrivelled. He was sleeping in a shop doorway just off Archway and didn't wake up one morning. The manager found him when he arrived to unlock. It was a computer shop – one of those ones that already looks old-fashioned, redundant, even though it feels like computers have only

just been invented, with signs advertising internet access and memory upgrades; obsolete modems and routers and other random bits of hardware piled up in the dusty window, steel grills protecting the filthy glass. The manager told the police that the man, who he'd called Steve, had been sleeping in his entrance for a few months. Steve had mostly already tidied up and moved on to one of his daytime begging pitches before the shop owner arrived but they sometimes crossed paths and passed the time of day. He always gave Steve a few quid for breakfast when he saw him, he seemed like a nice enough bloke. I mean it could happen to anyone, couldn't it? There but for the grace of God.

We record the cause of death as heart failure resulting from acute hypothermia but that doesn't tell the whole story. There is evidence of sclerosis of the liver, he has smoker's lungs and clogged arteries that suggest he was once better fed.

I ball up my gloves and polythene apron and stand on the waste bin's foot pedal before dropping them onto the metal chute. It clangs shut, the last time I'll hear the noise, so familiar I'm almost deaf to it. I've already emptied my locker, there has been cake today, and a card from colleagues who regard my departure with a mixture of bemusement and envy. There will be a few drinks in the pub and then I'll wait for the bus.

A couple of days later I pop out for more packing tape and walk past a makeshift shrine in a shop doorway. A large photo in a frame is propped against the shuttered door and bunches of faded, wilted flowers and candle stubs are arranged around it. I stop in my tracks when I realise that the face in the photo is the man from my final post-mortem. The photograph looks like a fine art portrait; black and white, eyes looking directly into the camera lens, the lines etched around them picked out sharply in the high contrast print. The matted fur of a parka hood frames his face, there is a hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth but his hooded eyes are serious.

The portrait is signed, like an old master, and as I walk away from the shrine I Google the signature on my phone. The artist photographs the homeless and sells the prints for quite extraordinary sums of money. The two-dimensional face has a value that the living version seemingly did not.