

## **Beat the Heat**

### **By Shannon Lough**

That summer, I was dried timber, and he was a shock of lightning. What follows is my memory of how we met, it's all that I choose to remember.

...

The metal was cool against my temple. I shut my eyes, imagining that instead of taking refuge in the recesses of my outdated apartment building, I'm surrounded by my aunt's lavender fields, swaying in the breeze. Last night was a mess of sweat between sheets, then on them, and a cold shower before another round of slow roasting in attempted sleep.

Minutes, maybe an hour, passed before my rest was interrupted. Yellow light punctuated the dull grey of the basement.

"Hello," a deep-throated call rumbled into the dark.

"Hello," I chirped back from my gremlin-like perch on the cement stoop next to the laundry machine.

His backlit silhouette in the doorway made me think of a martini glass. All shoulders, and long legs. I twisted the ends of my ponytail in my fingers as my heart picked up. I'd locked eyes with this wavy-haired stranger in my hallway and at work more than once. These encounters always produced a jolt of heat.

"Are you alone?" He reached for the lights.

"Don't. I'm trying to sleep."

"I was planning on trying that as well." He looked apologetic, realizing he'd just crashed my party of one.

"Sit." I beckoned to the uncluttered concrete spot next to me, noting the slight tremor in my voice. I swallowed it down.

"I bear gifts." He held up a small desk fan. I yelped in delight. Crouching next to me, I could feel the heat emanating from his body. Too much, I think, and not enough. In response, heat rose to the surface of my skin. I was thankful for the dim lighting emanating from the emergency exit sign. He passed me the fan's cord, and I plugged it into the outlet behind me. Cool air brushes our faces. I lean back, my fingertips spreading on the ground next to his. What would he feel like?

He turned his square jaw toward my face, studying me as if reading my mind. I refused to look back, afraid of the sudden intimacy between us.

“Have we met before?”

“You know we haven’t unless you count me whipping up an espresso for you. Americano misto, is it? Have you always lived in urban paradises with niche cafe menus?” I turn acerbic when I’m nervous.

He chuckled, unfiltered. I tilted my head to see how his skin crinkled at the corners of his eyes, eyes so brown they seemed black, locked with my icy blues. Take me, they said. I bit my lip. He doesn’t take the bait, and I’m glad. Too soon. I clear my throat and regret the sound I make, so I fumble with the wide corrugated waistband on my harem pants, where a thread has come loose.

“No cooling centre for you?” He asked. I could feel his gaze over the top of my head.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I lifted my chin at him, resisting my shyness.

“Yes, you could call me a city boy. Except, I’m from the other side of the country. You?”

“Coastal, or centre of the universe,” I fired back.

“The latter. And you?”

“Adjacent”

“To?”

“The centre of the universe, except — ” I stop myself. He doesn’t need to know everything. Mystery, I thought, was more intriguing than the full platter of backstory.

“No cooling centre. I tried last year. Too many people, and wailing kids,” I said.

“Last year? You haven’t been able to find a better place than this old dump?” His large palm patted the damp wall behind us.

“You haven’t.” I caught his eyes, and pulled away before forgetting myself in there.

“Fair point. It’s all I could afford.”

“Same.” We both go somewhere. The silence warped into a hidden thought cloud.

Eventually, he stood up and left. I expected I’d scared him off. Too frank, too quirky, too quiet. I fumbled around for my earbuds and put on a podcast about the history of misguided medicine. I

closed my eyes, imagining I was rocking in a hammock in a shaded forest. I woke to the sensation of his towering figure standing over me. With a wide grin, he held up two frozen drumsticks.

“Rude,” I replied, wiping the sleep from my eyes, but unable to hide my smile.

He crouched down, closer this time. “It’s cold,” he says into my ear, and my stomach tightens. Slowly, he tore the wrapper off and handed me the sugar cone.

“Wait, you’re not vegan, are you?”

“Unlike everyone else in this city, no.” I greedily grabbed the ice cream cone from him and licked the chocolate surface. He looked away, and I was certain a blush crept up his tanned, muscular, neck. He unsheathed his own ice cream and pierced the nutty chocolate crust with his teeth.

We both looked into the middle distance of the bleak basement. Each time I snuck a look, his eyes were already on me. I tried to mask my internal writhing with small talk.

“Remember when night meant cooler temperatures? The heat doesn’t let up anymore.”

He nodded solemnly. “You’re on the fourth floor, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Me too. I asked about getting a window AC and was refused.”

“What a dick. He, or whoever our landlord is, doesn’t want to pay more for our utilities.”

“It’s criminal.” He said and went quiet. I think of frail Mrs. Lee in the apartment next to mine, and how she’s coping.

The frustration balloons between us as we sulk at our misfortune. The sound of him crunching away at the remainder of his sugar cone was a welcome distraction, and I turned my head to him. A piece of chocolate had melted into the stubble on his chin, and instinctively, my thumb reached for the stain. I stopped myself before I made contact, my eyes widening with embarrassment. His mouth broke into a wicked grin, and he leaned into my touch.

“So, it’s like that.”

“Like what?” I’m breathless. I wiped the stickiness on the thin material of my pants.

“You’re the type of person who tells someone when they have food on their face.”

“I wasn’t telling.” I held up my thumb, and his eyes darkened.

“You went in for the direct removal. Bold move.”

I picked up the fan from between us and directed it solely on me, my neck. The wind brushed my ponytail back, like I was a model in a photoshoot. I play the part. “Stealing your fan, that would be a bold move.” He reached for it. I drew back. We ended up entangled, him leaning over me as the fan’s breeze made his inky hair dance around his face, which was mere inches from mine. Eyes scan faces for reactions and invitations. He smelled like cedarwood and sweat. We crashed into each other clumsily, all lips and teeth. I tasted the aftermath of sugar cone, chocolate, and ice cream. His hand cupped the back of my head, fingers combed through my jungle of hair that was coming loose under my scrunchie. I allowed myself to experience the butterflies within. My first kiss with — I pulled back.

“I don’t,” I rasped, “don’t even know your name.”

“Isn’t it more exciting that way?” He teased with a wink, then bit his lower lip as he stared at mine.

“Dominic. Kato. Brent. Ren.” I listed names I’ve seen on the side of coffee cups, knowing full well what his name is. I memorized it weeks ago.

“Darren,” he offered, tilting his head to one side. “But you already knew that.” He moved in, brushing his soft lips against mine. Then, to my ear, he whispered. “Flora,” and I shivered. “You wear a name tag at work.”

I nodded like an infatuated fool, both of us caught in the act of distant longing. I met his gaze, my whole body on fire, and allowed myself to imagine that the collective burning of lovers caused this heat wave, and not the other terrible reason. Either way, we’re at fault. The pauses between touches, and words, was too comfortable this soon. I was afraid to trust it, and rightly so.

“Tell me Flora, what happens next?”

The city was held hostage for a week. Every night, with the heat failing to depart with the sun, we met in the basement, sharing the small red desktop fan, and snacks, usually ice cream. Fellow renters found refuge in our in-house cooling centre. We heard the local pool was open late during the extreme heat warning. One night, Darren and I floated together, two ampersands in water, until our fingertips pruned. The next morning, Darren came with me to check in on Mrs. Lee, and we held each other as the ambulance pulled away. On the final day, before the temperatures broke, we rented bikes and pedaled to the beach. Darren raced me into the salty depths of the harbour, where we swam until our bodies quaked. We dried off, sitting against a driftwood log, our toes touching the sand.