

## Erstwhile

By Finley Chiasson

My fingers grazed the hardened wood, eyes trailing over its roughened edges and rusted hinges, worn by time and by youth. How familiar it felt, like softened rays on an autumn afternoon; welcomed against the settling chill. Comfort ran deep beneath its chipped coating, a companion who had stood with me through thick and thin, and now? Was urging me onward toward a new path. A new start. A new me.

Except, I'd always be me—in a raw, unmistakable way—and somehow, that reality landed heavier than any stone. Boring down on my shoulders, pressing into my soul . . . I had little room to breathe. Memories echoed in the chamber of my heart, twisting and turning and tightening their knot. Would I ever change? Did I *want* to change? My hand stilled over the door handle, the whole room folding forward in anticipation. Change meant removing a piece of myself and laying it to rest, and that—that felt impossible.

But the universe always had a knack for perseverance.

The door groaned as I heaved it open, its heartbeat thrumming under my palms. I wondered what awaited me on the other side. Light spilled across the threshold, dusting my legs, my torso, my face in morning rose and mellowed gold, beckoning me forward with patient hands. Stiffly, I entered, the door shutting much quieter behind me. The room I stood in held no dimension: a space I knew intimately.

I wasn't afraid, no—that wasn't what the coiling tension in my gut was—but my feet itched to leave. Like they knew they wouldn't survive the dreadful hike ahead. Or,

maybe they were hesitant to try. Then I noticed her. A gentle deformity against the endless scape. Cloudless eyes, a curious smile, an outstretched hand. Her nails were immaculate, unlike my chipped ones.

“Are you ready?”

She sounded like me, though the vowels were articulated differently. With purpose. My mouth opened to respond—except, it couldn’t open. The words I wished to speak reverberated through my skull, echoing in the languid air.

*Ready for what?*

Her face crinkled, as if I had told a joke. The answer seemed to lay in the intricate silence left deliberately. My heart began to hammer, fingers brushing the door behind me.

*Who are you.*

“I am you.”

*You’re not me.*

“If you accept me, I will be.”

*I’m not ready.*

Her head tilted, irises flickering with soft empathy. Irises that looked too much like my own. “Not everyone is.” Slow, sure steps carried her forward. My hands gripped the handle, one push away from retreating. “Change cannot be forced, but it is inevitable. *You are inevitable.*”

My thoughts stumbled. *What will happen to me?*

“Growth.”

Light warped her being, bending to her grace. She was me—in a whole, undefinable way—treading under her own sun, in a world that spun counter to mine. The pieces shouldn't have fit, but they did. Perfectly. Messily. And beneath the nonsensicality of it all, a deep part of my subconscious whirred with understanding; an instinctive acceptance wired into the coding of my very being. That this was meant to be. That change was inevitable, comfort didn't last, and life moved on.

*I* moved on. She was proof of that.

My fingers fell from the door handle. The next breath I took was nourishing, colored with the hues of the sky just before a sunrise. She smiled a tender smile, held out her hand. This time I noticed the callouses, the dried knuckles, the creviced palms. No longer immaculate. She was human. *Me*.

For the first time since stepping through that door, I allowed myself to feel awe; wonder. The repetitive lull of my ribcage expanding and contracting was soothing, blanketing my worries. Tentatively, I reached out. Brushed my fingers along hers, settling our hands—*my* hands—together. It was then that the weight on my shoulders, on my soul, lessened. My airway opened more readily, my gut uncoiling itself.

This felt right. *I* felt right.

The ground exhaled below me, the force of it arcing up my calves. When I glanced behind her, there was a door. A different door. One which lacked blemishes and rust and wear, picturesque without the food stains, pencil smudges, and dust. Its handle was a knob: simple, round, and small. A child would have a harder time opening it.

“Are you ready?”

My eyes returned to hers, and any remaining apprehension dissolved.

*I am.*

Her hand gave mine a gentle squeeze. She turned, and I followed. Toward a new path. A new start. A new me. As my hand came to rest on the knob, I glanced back. Back at the rusted hinges and chipped paint. Back at the childhood memories, the scraped knees, the sibling sleepovers, all sitting dormant beyond the door that protected them. The door I'd never pass through again. And I smiled a soft, watery smile, heart panging in my throat like a bucket being pelted by rain.

I wasn't removing a piece of myself and laying it to rest, I was taking a part of my past and using it as foundation for a promising future. Even if it hurt, this separation, the loss was finite. I'd find my way. There was no other direction to go than forward, and regardless of where I ended up, I would still be me—in an unmistakable, undefinable way—and that reality landed with comfort.

I had been scared, stepping into this room. Afraid of what I'd find. But I found her. I found *me*. And now I had my courage to move, my purpose to stride, and my hands shook as they turned the knob. Life itself was a tapestry of contradictory orthodox, full of questions without answers, laws without rules—but there was beauty in the unknown, and the universe always had a knack for perseverance.

I only wished I had savored my time before it was gone.