

## Walking in Florida

*'Smoking may decrease fertility...'*, the black letters on the white box of Lileth's cigarettes warned. She sat on the green window-seat smoking, looking onto the glossy grey street soaked by Florida rain. She had agreed to meet him at the Oaktree motel, when she came back from London, her first holiday after college.

The room was medium-sized, decorated in a fifties' fashion. Green textured sofas, plastic-looking lamps, a clock that was shaped like a star bursting open, telling the time in its golden centre. The bed was a double; would they be sleeping tonight? Over the other side of the room there was a table with a green blown-glass bowl holding the room key, that she had placed there ten minutes ago and a lighter. Apart from these three items all together, the table top was empty. This allowed the light on the wall above it, to make it gleam like the street outside.

She glanced outside again, then at the clock, then at her hands with the cigarette poking upwards towards the ceiling. She was nervous, eager to meet him.

She had been looking for a man all her life. One man. Maybe tonight she would find him? She was told not much about this man by her mother, despite her asking about him as they sat at innumerable dinner tables, café terraces, and traffic lights over the past few years. The door knocked.

'Hello?' she said, stubbing the cigarette out in the ashtray.

'It's me.', came the reply.

She walked over to the green glass bowl, plucked the room key from it, and opened the door. There he stood. Black coat, belted at the waist, a trilby-style hat and a paper bag, full of what appeared to be bottles of beer and maybe some spirit, vodka or something. She thought him at this point a cliché, like he was trying too hard to be Dick Tracey, or a mafia boss. Maybe he was a mafia boss, was the thought that made her spine bristle, part excited, part frightened.

'You got here OK, then?', was her attempt at starting a conversation with this man. 'Yes,' he replied, 'the weather is awful and that makes the trains in this country fall apart, but I got here, nothing would have stopped me, I think'. She reddened. She had met this man through an agency, a genealogy agency. Her mother had not known who Lileth's father was. This was no secret to Lileth, and thus she yearned to know who her father was. Lileth wondered what her mom would think of her attempting to find her father.

'So, did the agency give it to you?' At this, he shifted in his thinly-padded chair. Twenty-one years, after all, is a lifetime. He thought of the emails he had sent to her, the trouble gone to arrange a meeting in Florida, thousands of miles for the both of them, she living in Charlotte, Illinois, he, Pasadena, California. He had always thought of her though. How she was doing at school? What choices she had made in life? 'Yes, they gave it to me, perhaps we should have a drink first?'

'Yeah... yes, why not?'. He went to the paper bag on the bed, ripped where the rain had soaked through it on his journey to the motel. Through the hole she could see it was beer, and they drank out of the plastic cups that

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hotel maids put into bathrooms, the ones covered in shrink-wrap. The fizz from the beer made her think of the birthday parties, where her and her friends were wild on sparkling cola drink, that he'd missed, if he was the one.

They sat near the window overlooking the cars whooshing past the motel, leaving a fine mist of drenching rain water in their path.

Aaron, as he had introduced himself, was rummaging in his coat, on the hook by the table with the green glass dish on it. He was reaching far into the deep pocket of the coat, with a squeezed expression on his face. Then the agency's manila envelope appeared, slightly crumpled. The words, 'Horizon Genealogy Agency', were printed in the top-left corner. He placed the envelope just next to the dish, under the searing and bright light from the above lamp fitting. She stared at him, at it and then back at him again.

'Is that the letter with the results?', she asked, knowing full well that it was. All this time she had yearned to know: Who is my father? And, yet, she felt reluctant, undecided. Like whether or not to sign a contract. Do you *really* want to be bound to this person for ever? Once it is out in the open, out of the envelope, it is forever. Whether he is her father or not. 'They are the results, yes, but there's no rush to open them

The smell of cigarettes was seeping into the polyester green furnishings, the air was thick, smoke was suffocating the room. The styling of this motel must be amongst the worst in Homestead. It's positioning was near to Main St., by the pubs and the bingo clubs. The wind was lapping across the

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typical American grid system streets and pushing the plastic palm trees almost over in the car park outside the motel. They sat and drank and smoked.

Lilith was impatient for something to happen, something to propel their situation forward. They had been sitting in silence, drinking from their beer bottles for about ten minutes, not getting any further to the truth that she had longed for, that she had travelled for. She needed to break the silence, so asked: 'Who do you work for?', she said. He looked at her, somewhat angrily, like she had asked something impertinent, and replied 'Do you think we should find out first, before we get to the small stuff? Do you want to open the envelope?'. She had asked herself this question the whole journey. Did she want this man in the life she had managed to live as well as any other young woman?

Did she need him anymore? Was she still hung-up about the 'small stuff'? Was the kick inside enough? The kick that told her she needed a father in her life. Feminist this kick wasn't.

'I don't know if I want to open it, do you? It's something that we should do together, I think. With both of us agreeing'. She hated herself for saying this. He seemed to be getting lucid after the beer. She wanted to leave the stuffy room for the hurricane air outside. To breathe in the present day, outside of this room that threatened to alter her future. The letter was on the coffee table in front of them, the empty beer bottles, too. Silence. She excused herself and went to the bathroom, switching on the harsh hospital-

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style strip light she looked in the mirror. A sagged, grey face looked back. She rubbed her eyes and sighed, thinking she needed air quickly.

She left the bathroom and went for her coat, Aaron noticing her plan to leave the room. He attempted to stop her, not threateningly, but enough to make her stay in the room. 'I have to go', were the words that met his hand on her arm. She burst through the motel swing doors and out into the howling wind that spat rain water onto her face. Belting her coat, she took a left and headed for Main St., the all-American high street. As she walked she thought to herself of the stupidity of asking a potential stranger to meet her in Florida, the Sunshine State; some Sunshine State!

She glanced back at the motel, an orange, yellow blurry light, hazed by the misty rain, wondering whether she should go back to what she had left there. Knowledge. Not just words written on a piece of paper, but the proof of a genetic match.

Aaron was at this point standing in the motel room, concerned at her hurried departure. He paced the room, as one does, smoking furiously. His abandon as to where the ash fell led to the carpet singeing underneath his feet. It was time to leave, to go after her. He got his coat on and took the room key, shoving it into his pocket along with the crumpled letter that had all the information tonight's outcome was hinged upon. He squinted up the street where he thought she had gone. Looking for a figure or something to run after. He darted left up Main St.

'The best cocktails in all Homestead', read the banner above The Floating Feather pub, where as Lileth stood there staring, teams of locals were drinking and dancing to country music inside, seemingly unaware of the

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wind and rain that awaited them come closing time. She entered the bar. It was one of those places where unknown people, those not local, are stared at the second the mock-Western shutters close at the back of you. She didn't care and sat squarely at the bar, not taking up the option of a 'Bloody Mary' and instead ordering a whiskey and cola. The barman obliged; she started drinking.

The sound of cars had grown more intense as the wind was starting to abate and Aaron was soaked through, looking down every side street that led from Homestead's major thoroughfare. He carried on walking past the other motels, the gas stations, the convenience stores: they all looked like a big blur of commercialism and neon lights. Red, yellow and blue in a mix of hypnotic colour. He felt dazed and hopeless walking around the town looking for a woman who might not be anything more than just that; a woman, not his daughter. He turned left from Main St., down to a row of small buildings, shops and bars. Above him a sign read: 'The best cocktails in all Homestead', in all Homestead, he thought.

Two empty tumblers were sitting in front of her, the Jack Daniels-aniseed taste lingering in her mouth. 'Another please barman,' she said. Another came and she shuffled on her padded fake black leather seat on a chrome four-legged stool. Tonight was sinking in. Would she ever find out who the man was that her mom had slept with in 1984? As the whiskey tingled her throat and numbed her face, she realised that she wouldn't find her father in the bottom of a glass. She upped and grabbed her coat draped on the next stool and made for the swing doors.

Aaron stood looking at the banner across the road and felt the urge for a nerve claming drink. He needed to find her though, he couldn't drink now. He stood there contemplating, thinking to himself of the day before when he'd been packing for this trip. He was feeling nervous about coming to a state never visited before, to meet the potential daughter he had left before her birth. As he packed he remembered thinking: what do you pack for something like this?

Lileth entered the street, calmer than she had left it. The wet leaves clinging to the ground and the fierce rain now reduced to just the odd sprinkle to the face. Walking she looked into the shops selling Homestead wares; homemade cookies, handmade oven mittens shaped like red-cheeked dollies and triangular flags with 'Go Homestead Healers', emblazoned on them. She felt the cold air against her whiskey-warmed cheeks, now probably as red as the doll's.

Aaron noticed her, leaving the Floating Feather. He was standing in a doorway across the road. He followed her path, still on the other side of the road. He held the envelope in his hand, slightly wet and now very crumpled after its journey the past few days. He quickened his pace to catch up with her. He crossed the street and called to her. She turned and smiled, a little relieved. Perhaps tonight wouldn't end as disastrously as she had thought. They looked at one another. They'd had time to mull things over, she time to escape that motel room, he time to realise he did want to know the child he left behind.

As the two of them walked on through the Homestead streets, behind them the navy blue ink on the manila envelope blurred and bled into the

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puddle in which the agency letter had been thrown. They weren't looking back, they were deep in conversation.