

OLIVES AND FRUIT

by Kim Chinquee

They were on the twenty-second floor; she heard far-off music, got out of bed and looked out the window, down. She put in her contacts, then looked out again, seeing tiny figures on the road: splotches of people in colors, a moving kaleidoscope. Heads were like bottle caps. "Looks like a race," she said. "Everybody's walking."

She got back into bed, next to his warm body, his arms pulling her in.

They reunited yesterday, him driving two hours his way; she drove four. They were professors at different universities. He was a musician. She taught art.

She touched his chest, fingering his hair. She kissed his shoulder.

"I dreamt of this woman and my child," he said.

In her dream, she played a blue piano, but the legs kept breaking, then later there were three dogs. One died, the others ran around. And there was a baby wrapped in plastic wrap, its mouth stuffed. She held the baby.

*They'd sip Sauvignon Blanc,
Pinot Grigio, Merlot. They'd
feed each other berries at sun-
rise, truffles when it set.*

She said, "Maybe you should meet him."

At breakfast people wore T-shirts in memory of loved ones. Some wore suits and dresses. He wore the jacket she'd given him for his birthday; she had on a silky shirt with the one-hundred-dollar pants she bought the last time in Chicago. The waiter poured water, and said, if you're a mother, Happy Mother's Day. She tried to think of what to order. She heard people talking at the next table about cancer and the walk, and she ached for her stepfather. The Cancer Walk was over. Her son was home. She'd have to call her mother. She'd get the continental. He ordered the American, and the waiter gave them coffee.

"Is there Mother's Day in Cyprus?" she asked.

He talked about his relatives in Cyprus, who prepared their own grains, olives, and grew fruit; they'd been at his father's funeral, following the Greek Orthodox customs. He'd gotten the news of his father's death one night after she arrived. She'd stayed up with him as he grieved, pouring himself whiskey, and the next day, she took him to the airport.

She ate her muffin and banana and he ate his eggs and bacon. When they weren't eating, they were touching: hand-on-knee, hand-in-hand or hand-on-arm, resting on the table.

Now he talked about his cousins, who lived on the streets in Nicosia, raising and butchering chickens, selling eggs to his mother.

"My grandmother raised chickens," she said. "She butchered them." She thought of her grandmother's red bandana, her leaning over a stump, ax ready.

For dessert, they shared a bowl of oatmeal. He said he better call his mother, then reviewed a conversation he'd had with his mother the week before, when he finally told his mom he had a son. He said he resented his son's mother, who'd sent him a letter saying she needed more support.

"If she makes things difficult," he said. "My son will never see his father."

The woman listened, feeding herself oatmeal. It was warm in her mouth.

Back in their room, he unbuttoned his shirt. It was his signal. She put her jewelry on the dresser, and he lay on the bed, patting the spot next to him. She got on the bed, beside.

Afterwards, he called out to her, "I love you," then he sort of trembled, saying, "You're really wonderful. I love you so much."

At check-out, the hotel clerk asked if he was Greek. The clerk spoke to him in Greek – she was chubby with dark hair, and the woman wondered if the mother of his child looked anything like her. He'd said she was Greek, that she got pregnant for one reason.

She listened to the clerk. She tried to understand the language.

They put their bags in their respective cars, leaving them in the lot. They walked down Balbo, to Michigan, and she saw remnants of the Walk: more people in their matching t-shirts and different numbers, some people with balloons, and tents were set up along the park, lines of port-a-potties. She had flashbacks of the marathon she'd run there, in Chicago.

"Reminds me of the marathon," she said.

"The time," he said, "you got drunk the night before?"

She remembered dry heaving at the end, leaning over the bridge they were now passing over. She'd gotten a taxi, the driver weaving in and out of traffic while she hung her head out the window.

They walked past cones that people were beginning to pick up, past the crew with t-shirts that read Volunteer, and past an ambulance that was parked in a clearing. "A woman died," she said, "at that race."

They crossed the street. "She just collapsed and died. She was in her thirties."

They went toward the lake. "I could have died," she said. She remembered her running buddy Larry, meeting him in the hotel room. Larry used to be her friend. He was fast. He finished in under three hours. She told Larry pre-race night that she'd sleep on the floor, but he said if she slept in the bed, he wouldn't touch her. She woke to his hand on her breast, and she moved to the floor. She was always slower, never winning.

"It was my last race," she said. She told him about her hopes to run the Boston, hoping for a qualifying time. She started out too fast and lost her breath, her energy, dry-heaving her way through it.

They walked along the lakeshore, and inside her head, she tried to retrace. She been to Chicago since the marathon, but now, staying at the Hilton, seeing the fervor of the people made her feel nostalgic. Her son had been with her mother for that marathon weekend, and he would have been eight or nine or ten then. Now he was sixteen. It was Mother's Day. She had to call her mother. Her boyfriend didn't want children. They'd been together two years and she knew what to give him. She massaged his hands. They were made for the piano.

They headed to Navy Pier and she told him that this walk reminded her of San Diego, where she'd gone to a conference and had an interview. It was the busy-ness, the water. It was right before she'd met him. She got the job.

"I can't believe the weather," he said. Yesterday they needed hats and scarves and mittens, and today people ran in shorts and tank tops, a pair of bicyclists with bare chests. Dogs were pulled on leashes, babies sucked on bottles in their strollers. An elderly couple

walked by in matching purple glasses.

He asked if he should get a lawyer.

"It wouldn't hurt," she said. She'd told him of her situation. It was long over.

He was quiet for a minute. Someone screamed from far away, and the sun hid behind clouds. She reminded him she'd been getting child support through the state of North Dakota. She said, "It's better when it's over."

"I'm not sacrificing," he said.

She said it's hard alone. She pulled him closer, arms around. They always stayed close, arm-in-arm, hand-in-hand, hips against another's.

As they wound around the lake, they got to Navy Pier, where boats were loading, people passed, and everything was color. The shops and restaurants reminded her of somewhere fake like Disney, and she figured everything was probably real expensive. She said she'd never been to Navy Pier.

"I took you here," he said.

She tried finding anything familiar. Nothing seemed real. She looked around, trying to convince herself she'd been there. They stopped and she paid five bucks for lemonade, then had to use the bathroom, so they walked faster. Maybe he had another girlfriend. There'd been other girlfriends with her husband. She wasn't married anymore. Neither of them were.

They walked to the end, leaned over the rail, and looked down into the water. She put her face up to his cheek. And then her phone rang. It was her son. "Hi," she said. He was coughing. "Are you ok?" she said.

They went back, retracing, and when they reached a statue of a sitting man, she remembered some other time, seeing people talking to the sculpture; "Ok," she said to him. "I remember. I recall that man." It was all she could remember. It's hard to tell what's real.

As they walked, they continued talking. Under the viaducts, birds flew before their faces, the wind blew a bit, and people passed them like before.

He said he wished they lived closer. She thought of them together in a high rise, cooking rice with mussels. They'd sip Sauvignon Blanc, Pinot Grigio, Merlot. They'd feed each other berries at sunrise, truffles when it set. Afternoons he'd compose at his piano while she painted. Their sons might even be together.

"I miss you," he said. Birds flew all around them.

"You need to see your son," she said. "You do."

He talked of moving back to Cyprus and staying there forever.

She called her own child on her cell phone. He said he'd taken Tylenol. He asked when she'd be home.

She took her boyfriend's hand. He said, "You better go."

She'd been without him for a very long time. "I know," she said. "I know."