

ELLIOTT GISH

WHAT BRINGS YOU BACK THERE

THERE'S A SMELL, but it's not one you can easily name. You wish you could, as you think that would make it easier. Sometimes you write lists of scents you can identify, hoping to find it on there: lemon, wet dirt, grass, copper, yeast. None of them are what you mean, but making the list is soothing anyway.

Once, when you're drunk, you say: "living rooms." It's a smell like a living room, but only (and this is important, you insist, swaying only slightly on your bar stool, this is the heart of it, really) a very certain *kind* of living room—namely, the closed-up kind that is entered once or twice a year, with a neglected piano and a spiny couch covered in slick, cold fabric. There's a shuttered sort of smell there of stale air, old potpourri, and settled dust.

You leave your doors and windows open, even in winter, just to keep the air moving. You don't want that smell creeping up on you.

"I can deal with most tastes," you say, keeping your eyes on the road, "but nothing banana-flavoured. Bananas themselves are fine—that's a different taste entirely. Did you know they're actually different fruits?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"The flavouring's based on a different strain—one that died out," you explain. "That's why it doesn't really taste like a banana—at least, not like the bananas we eat now."

"I didn't know that," I say, and you nod as though you hadn't expected me to.

"I was sick around that time with this vicious flu that knocked me off my feet for half a week," you say. "I couldn't go to work, get to the gym, or even walk the dog. I spent three days lying at home on my couch and just drinking bottle after bottle of cough syrup. I usually got the menthol stuff because at least that doesn't pretend to taste good, but on the third day they were out of that one at the pharmacy so I just grabbed the first bottle I saw,

which turned out to be banana. I couldn't really keep anything else down, so that was the only taste in my mouth at the time."

One of your hands clenches tighter on the steering wheel for a moment and then relaxes, finger by finger.

"I don't take medicine these days," you add. "No matter what flavour it is."

"But what if you get sick?"

"I get better," you say with a shrug, and you leave it at that.

"*Little House on the Prairie*," you say with a laugh, as if it's actually funny. "I don't know why, but I can't watch it anymore. There's something about that shot of them running down the hill.... I have to turn it off every time." You pause, stir the pot of pasta you just put on to boil, and add thoughtfully, "I don't even know if it was *on*."

There's a list of things that you can't deal with, which you carry around in your head at all times. It includes such things as yellow walls, radio stations that play classic rock, and the smell of freshly chopped onions. They are normal, everyday things, and avoiding them is often difficult, but you manage. You paint your house. You change the station. You stop eating vegetables.

But every now and then something sets you off and you have no idea why. Last week, when you decided to go out for lunch instead of eating the same sandwich and apple you've been bringing to work every day for the last six years, you saw a man behind a counter at a fast food place who had a beard that was grown out a little too long, which is the way kids wear them now. You found yourself staring at it, although you didn't want to. He asked if he could take your order, and you opened your mouth to speak, but then all of a sudden you started bawling right there in the middle of the grease, noise, and buzzing lights. You didn't even feel upset, but the tears kept coming, running down the bridge of your nose, and dripping off the tip. It was involuntary, like hiccups. The poor kid looked horrified. He kept calling you "ma'am" and reaching out over the counter towards you, which made you start back and shuffle out of range. You knew that if he touched you, you would die.

The next day you saw someone with the exact same beard walking down the street towards you, and you were fine. So it must have been something

else, like a smell or a sound.

You change the channel if a game is on. It's not the players so much as the uniforms.

The corner of the desk in the office was chipped. You hadn't realized until then that it wasn't solid oak but just plywood covered in some kind of laminate with a fake grain.

He was a teacher, and that corner was usually covered by a stack of assignments that he'd taken home to correct over evenings and weekends. He knocked them out of the way with his hand when he backed you against the desk, and then you saw the flaw in the surface, which exposed the layers underneath. It reminded you of the time you bit into a jawbreaker, as if the rings of Technicolor candy had been reproduced in beige and brown.

After it was over, he picked everything up and tidied the room, whistling a little to himself. You both went downstairs to watch television. He made coffee the way you like it: with a little pinch of cinnamon to give it a kick. You curled up next to him on the couch, his arm warm and heavy where it lay over your shoulders, and began the slow process of forgetting what had just happened.

You are a teacher now yourself—something for which you give him credit, although not without a flush of shame. The corner of the desk in your classroom is also chipped, and you cover it with a flowered cloth with strategically-placed objects on each corner as anchors: coffee mug, pencil case, hole punch, and stapler.

“Heat,” you say, and that's all you say for hours. Then, later, “It was just so hot in there.”

Pride and Prejudice was your favourite novel. You knew it was a cliché—that you should have liked something cooler, harder, and more for boys—but you couldn't help it. You were sixteen, you felt awkward, and you liked to think that maybe someday you would be able to make witty, cutting observations like Elizabeth Bennet. You read it over and over—a fact that irritated your father, who thought that it was ridiculous to read a book more than once. It would never say anything it hadn't already said, so why bother?

But it did. Every time you took it off the wicker shelf in your bedroom, you found something new, such as a clever turn of phrase that made you laugh or some little aside you'd never noticed before. You sometimes felt that you lived more in the drawing rooms of Pemberley than in your own house or your own body. Remembering that makes you cringe now, but at the time it was the truest thing you'd ever felt.

You were in the middle of your ninth re-read when it happened. Once it was over, you picked up the book from where it had fallen to the floor next to your bed, face down and open. A fresh crack zigzagged up the spine like a tongue of lightning. You found your page again and made it through half a chapter before you had to bolt down the hall to the bathroom, where you knelt with your head in the toilet for nearly an hour.

You never read it again, and that bothers you more than anything. Through no fault of your own, a world you'd loved so much was suddenly closed to you forever, like a room with a lock on the door.

"What you need to understand," you say, "is that this wasn't the first time, or the last. It was just the one that stuck."

He took you on a trip to Scotland for your honeymoon. You are eager to tell me about this, describing in detail the lush green of the Highlands, the waters of Loch Long, the mist that pressed in against the windows of the train. You'd wanted to go ever since you were a child, when you'd read one of your mother's romance novels on the sly—a tattered thing with a brooding man in a kilt on the cover—and fell in love with that proud, harsh country. When you came back to the house that had been his and was now yours as well, the noise that the door made as he closed it sounded unnaturally loud.

It's here that your words become slower, your pauses longer and more frequent.

"I was grateful to him," you say, and your eyes are pleading. "Please don't think I wasn't grateful to him. But it hurt. I hadn't realized how much it would hurt."

He had a messy room. You don't remember much more about it, to be honest, other than the fact that it was messy. There were posters on the wall with their pins coming loose and falling down. One of them had doubled

over so that the top edge was brushing the carpet, which was that dirty beige colour that never looks clean no matter what. Part of a candy cane had been crushed into the fibres, even though it wasn't near Christmas. Plates were stacked high on the nightstand, and glasses were crowded on top of the stereo—one with about an inch of thick, off-white liquid in it, which might have been curdled milk (there was that sour smell, after all). You'd done laundry sometime before, and the clothes were piled on top of the chair, floor, and couch. You wish you could go back there now—not to change anything (“what’s done is done”), but to clean up: make the bed, fold the clothes, clear the dead flies from the overhead light, and maybe vacuum to get the stink of old skin out of the air. You can't stand thinking about people living like that. You can't stand the thought that you once lived like that yourself.

“Do we really have to talk about this?”

“But yeah,” you say, “that’s why I hate daffodils.”

You were wearing your favourite dress, which was short and black with a plunging sweetheart neckline. It was the same dress you always wore on date night, and that night was no exception. When the police came to the house afterwards, they bagged it up and took it away as evidence. You could see them take in the shape of it: the neat waist, the brief, tight skirt, the little crystal on the front meant to draw eyes to cleavage. You noticed that their mouths became thin lines, their fingers twitched, and their backs stiffened and turned. They were clearly struggling to remain civil, and they didn't bother asking those old standards (“what were you wearing,” “did you lead him on,” et cetera) because it was all laid out in front of them.

When they looked around the house, they also found traces of him everywhere: his toothbrush by the sink, the drawer you'd cleared out for him in your dresser. They took your statement because that was what they were paid to do, but when they drove away you saw one turn to the other and say something that made his partner shake his head and laugh. Your hands balled into white-hot fists, and the next day you went out and bought the exact same dress because you liked it and you knew damn well you weren't getting the first one back.

Every time you wear it you see their faces—their raised eyebrows and averted gazes—and you drum out *fuck you fuck you fuck you* with your high red heels.

It's not that you're afraid of the dark. You're not. What makes you afraid is the sound that your door makes when it opens—the slow spill of light across your pillow and the acid-penny flood of fear in your mouth as you squeeze your eyes shut. So you keep the door open and the hall light on. You want to be able to see it coming.

You stopped wearing your retainer afterwards. You knew you shouldn't, as crooked teeth run in your family and you had braces for years, suffering the monthly indignity of tightened wires and aching jaws. Now, finally, your teeth were perfectly straight—with the exception of two in the front that conspired to overlap. You were given something to bite into, and a model was made of the inside of your mouth, complete with all the strange, rough ridges on the roof, which you can't help but run your tongue over. You were told to wear it at night to stop your teeth from moving, but there was one little wire that stuck out a bit too much. By the end of the first week, it had pierced a deep hole in your gums. Every day it healed over by the afternoon, and every night you had to puncture the slippery pink flesh again, which meant that you always fell asleep with the taste of fresh blood in your mouth. It eventually stopped closing, and the hole became a permanent feature, like a navel.

You cleaned the retainer as often as you could, but it always tasted bitter and wearing it made it hard to breathe. You didn't like having anything pressing against the roof of your mouth.

One night you took the bus to a friend's house for a sleepover with the retainer in its plastic case nestled cozily in your backpack on top of your yellow dog pajamas. Right before you came to your stop, you took out the case and placed it on the seat beside you, moving slowly so it wouldn't rattle and draw attention. Your feet pounded in time to your heart as you disembarked, wondering if the driver would yell for you to stop.

He didn't, of course, and your parents never noticed. The only one who did was your dentist, frowning down at you with rubber fingers busy in your mouth. You could have bitten them off if you wanted to.

"Those front teeth of yours are getting worse," he said, and you smiled around the taste of his hands.