

Lavandula

by Tracy Biggerstaff

Kat took one last stare at the whirling ceiling fan, and sighed deeply. Her heavy eyelids did not fight her this time. Without warning she was transported. She could feel herself floating, or ... was she flying? Her chestnut hair was wafting in the warm breeze, and with each breath she could detect a hint of lavender in the air. She kept her eyes closed for a bit longer than she thought she should, before cautiously opening them. She found herself traveling low above the ancient cobblestone streets, whipping around every corner without pause until she came upon it. Before her stood a brilliantly white building which was quite a contrast against the intense blue sky. The building was two stories, stucco exterior, with windows lining the upper floor. Most of the significant cracks were covered by draping green ivy which overflowed from the rooftop. Someone has been taking good care of it she thought ... or at least was. Exactly how long has it been?

By now Kat's feet had planted firmly on the ground, and she had a solid grip on the black iron door handle. The front door slowly creaked open. The sun shined through the single window in the front room, warming it up just enough not to need additional light. Minimal furniture encased the walls, as if moved aside for some purpose. To the right was a hutch displaying hand painted dishes, teacups, and small serving platters. A wooden rectangular kitchen table sat dusty, with a glass hurricane lantern, hardcover book and metal coffee mug cluttering the center. Then she turned her head to the left, and gently gasped.

On the left side of the room were two somewhat ordinary items, hardly gasp worthy, yet peculiar for main room offerings. A sizeable clothing trunk, made of brown leather was off-kilter in the corner. It was rounded on top, square on the bottom, with tarnished brass plates and buckles serving as its locking mechanism. No question this trunk had miles on it. The other item, an antique bicycle, was perfectly rusted with a patina-like finish. The massive wheel was missing a few spokes, but still commanded the focus it deserved compared to the tiny handlebars, seat, and impish back wheel. Indeed, a beloved treasure. This was his.

Suddenly, she heard two men speaking outside the window. She opened the door and as she approached them, their voices became

louder and louder. They were talking about the storm heading their way and now there was a stalled vehicle on the—oh.

Her eyes shot open as she realized her alarm clock had been blaring, for 10 minutes already. Shit.

Kat worked for a National Insurance company. She had one of those paper-pushing jobs; nothing special, neither here nor there. The job paid the mortgage and sometimes the work was mindless enough to zone out and still put in a respectable day's work. While she was at work she received a phone call from her sister, Ava. Ava was usually full of drama, but even more so on this particular day. She and her fiancé, Rafael, had broken up, for good this time. He moved out of their river-view condo last night—sounds pretty final. Will she keep the dress?

Ava asked her sister if they could please meet up after work for Happy Hour.

"There's something really important I need to discuss with you," Ava sniffled.

"Sure, of course. Grab us a table at Ole's and the margaritas are on me," Kat replied.

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Kat spotted Ava sitting at a high bar table, already indulging in the complimentary chips and salsa and gulping the remainder of what Kat had hoped was only her first margarita of the evening. Straight up, Jesus. They chatted about the break up and

Kat found herself dishing out clichés such as 'better now than later', and 'obviously, it just wasn't meant to be' and the usual rhetoric. Then about an hour into it, her sister popped the big question.

"So ... I was wondering," Ava started. "Do you want to go on my honeymoon with me?" She tried to crack a smile, but couldn't make it genuine. The wounds were still too fresh.

Ava and Rafael had planned a two week vacation in Spain. Rafael gifted Ava his plane ticket and hotel reservations as a departing gesture—Non-refundable of course. Some of the meals are even paid for, some tour group deal.

"Don't you have tons of vacation saved up?" Ava asked.

Kat did have plenty of vacation time saved up and was overdue, so really there was nothing stopping her. Sure, why the hell not. Now it was settled. In four months time she'd be whisked away to a far-off land. Paid trips to Spain don't just fall in people's laps every day, right?

The wind blew heavily outside her bedroom window and Kat could hear the trees swaying back and forth. It was oddly comforting. She could feel her hair blowing in the breeze, while the familiar scent of lavender lingered in her nostrils. Kat turned up the flame on the glass hurricane lantern and carefully carried it up a stone flight of stairs. The second floor tile

was Kelley green and uneven in spots, making the room appear slanted.

A billiard table sat in the center of the room. The tabletop was covered by a worn burgundy felt, with thick black netting and gold tassels hanging under each pocket. Three balls sat in a perfect line across the middle of the table; 7-5-9. On the wall hung a few pool cues and small chunks of broken blue chalk that had seen better days. As she walked to the side of the pool table she barely noticed the elderly gentleman sitting in one of the two captain's chairs. She was startled, but said nothing.

The old man extended his hand and pointed to a frame on the wall at the end of the room, near the windows. Then raised his glass—as if to toast her—and sipped his sherry. Kat walked to the end of the room which seemed to lengthen with each step. She approached the frame, but it was so blurry. She could just make out that it was a portrait of a woman. Who was she?

She awoke to the familiar alarm clock chit-chat, confused, then elated upon realizing it was Saturday. Thank God.

Three months passed by. The trip was almost here. Kat spent the remaining month studying the itinerary and perusing the internet for details on the cities, hotels, and restaurants they would be visiting. She was getting excited about it; a real vacation. This would probably be the closest thing to a honeymoon she would ever have. She had a few serious

relationships, but for some reason she always felt satisfied not having a partner. She told Ava time and time again (usually after an uncomfortable 'set-up'), that she just didn't have the desire for a long term relationship. Been there, done that.

She tossed and turned for what seemed like eternity before finally falling asleep and slowly, softly ... drifting.

She floated up the stone staircase and headed for the picture at the end of the room. The closer she got the further the picture stretched beyond her focus. What was she seeing? A woman? Old or young? Is it ... me?

A tree branch thumped against the window, jolting Kat awake. She stared at the ceiling fan, now idle. She wondered why a dream could make her feel so uneasy. Perhaps she had seen The Shining one too many times. This is just silly, go back to sleep.

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The long overseas flight was brutal. But in just one day Kat was able to overcome her jetlag and start pounding the pavement, along with the other thousands of visitors. She and Ava were getting along famously and cramming in as many sites and bites as they could accommodate each day. Then they boarded the train to Jerez de la Frontera.

The sun shined brightly as they walked the streets of Jerez de la Frontera. They preferred the solitude in the back of the tour

group today. The two were reveling in the idea of the 'siesta' and wondering how they could possibly incorporate it into their existing work schedules back in the states. They were hardly keeping up with the walking map, just following the masses, which were disappearing one by one as they reached the end of the block. They rounded the sharp corner, and there it stood. Kat was taken aback almost to the point of breathlessness. A two-story stucco building, white as the heavens and draping with ivy, emerged.

She walked toward the building with her eyes fixed on the windows of the second floor—the glass reflections were nearly blinding.

Kat was last to enter the building. She could see the top of a hutch with plates displayed over the tallest heads of the group. As she moved closer, the hutch and kitchen table came into view. They were against the wall, being minimally guarded by a red velvet rope and brass posts. As the crowd parted slowly and went down the hallway, she turned to the left. There in the corner sat the old time-traveler's trunk, and balancing nearby—the rusty antique bicycle. Paralyzed, she stood while a cold chill climbed her back. The eerie prickling sensation of all the hairs on her body standing on end, rocked to her very core. What the hell is happening to me?

This wasn't just Déjà vu ... this was something else. This is something real.

Kat felt helpless and confused. She couldn't explain all of this to her sister; the same reoccurring dream for months on end. Ava would have her committed to a mental institution. The anxiety was overwhelming, and Kat was starting to hyperventilate.

Ava noticed the lag in her sister's step, and wandered back down the hallway to find Kat in the same place.

"Is everything ok? You look ... pale and strange."

"Oh, um, yeah," Kat muttered unconvincingly.

"I'll go see if I can find you a glass of water," said Ava. "Stay right here."

Kat didn't wait. She bolted in the direction of the stone staircase. The stairwell was blocked by another velvet rope, with a swinging sign that read 'Private, No Entry'. She moved the rope aside and headed up the stairs. She came face to face with a big wooden door which, to her dismay, was locked.

"Excuse me," a woman said, sternly. "You are not allowed up here."

At that moment Ava came bounding up the stairs with a small paper cup of water. "There you are!" she yelled.

The woman continued to Kat, "This is a private floor, you can't be up here."

Ava chimed, "I'm terribly sorry, my sister isn't feeling well."

As the woman was ushering the two back down the stairs, Kat was insistent, uttering, "But who lives here..? Can I speak to the man that lives here..? Please, you don't understand ... This is an emergency!"

The woman stopped and stared at Kat. "What kind of emergency?"

Kat stared back in silence, not knowing how to proceed.

"Very well then", the woman said. "Let's continue with the group, out to the tasting room."

Ava perked up. "Oh, what will we be tasting?"

"Sherry, naturally. Haven't you been paying attention?" quipped the woman.

"Right, we are in a sherry bodega, of course!" chirped Ava, obviously trying to make up for her lack in attentiveness.

Kat turned to Ava, saying, "I'll meet up with you. I have to look around."

"Wait!" shouted Ava. But it was too late. Kat had vanished out into the courtyard.

What was she looking for? Where is the old man? Kat wanted answers. She walked all around the courtyard, not knowing her purpose. It was hot and she was exhausted. She sat on a shaded bench to calm herself for a moment. As she rested, the woman who chastised her earlier walked toward her.

"We have been looking for you," the woman said.

"Yes, I know. I'll just meet my sister at the ..."

"No", interrupted the woman. "We have been looking for you, and for a very long time I might add."

Who's we?

"We don't have much time," the woman pressed, then turned and headed toward a darkly lit hallway.

Kat was even more confused. Time for what?

The woman kept on. "The window is small. We don't want any errors. The bodega will close soon and then we can—"

Kat finally spoke above the woman, while standing her ground in the courtyard. "I have no idea who you are or what you are talking about. Can you explain anything to me?" she demanded. "Why do I know this place?"

The woman paused, then motioned for Kat to sit down.

"My name is Nadeen. I am an investigator that was hired by the Confederation to find you, as well as the others"

"Others? Confederation?" Kat was grasping to understand.

"There was a security breach during the collection," Nadeen continued. "The safety of our sphere was compromised, and the portal had to be closed permanently. Not all the DCs made it out in time."

Kat was silent.

"Sorry, DCs ... Data Collectors," explained Nadeen, as if that were really the clarification Kat was looking for. "Luckily we were able to transport Agent Markham." She looked to Kat for any sign of recognition. "Agent Markham, Gregory ... your husband?"

All the color drained from Kat's face. Her body was numb, but her mind was racing. Husband. Even though she was hearing it for the first time, she wasn't shaken by this.

With numerous questions buzzing through Kat's brain, she managed to get one out, "How long has it been?"

"Well, just a few years now, but a few transfers earth time."

Kat had no concept of how long a transfer was.

"He's alive and well, and don't worry, they will reactivate the neuro transponders so your memory will be fully restored."

Good ... or is it? What about Ava? Kat couldn't help but wonder, was her existence all a lie?

Nadeen could sense Kat had many more questions than she had time to answer. "I assure you, all will be explained once we return to the sphere, but for now we must get to the bodega."

They walked quickly across the courtyard toward the darkly lit hallway. At the end of the hallway there was a giant wooden door. As they entered the bodega, Kat's eyes widened as she tried to adjust to the darkness of the cavern-like surroundings. The smell of the hundreds of wooden barrels hit her instantly. The tour group was immersed in conversation, standing around a

small table at the end of the main aisle. They walked toward the group, passing barrels stacked high, lining the way like obedient soldiers.

"Kat!" Ava came toward them holding two small glasses containing an amber liquid. "You have to try this. It ain't the stuff you get in the grocery store, that's for sure."

Kat took the small glass and sipped the liquid. "It's really good, we should buy some for the trip home."

Those were pretty convincing words for someone whose world was just turned upside down.

"Great minds," Ava replied, whipping her shoulder bag around to display two bottles wrapped in white paper protruding out the top. "Are you feeling better? You still look a little out of it."

Kat took a second. "Ava, I can't thank you enough for bringing me on this trip. I've experienced so many new things and I'm so glad I was able to share this time with you, truly."

"Aw, thanks, Kat."

She turned to Nadeen. "She's not usually this sentimental."

Goodbye Ava.

Kat sipped her last bit of sherry.

Ava smiled and grabbed her glass. "I'll get you one more—be right back."

Nadeen nudged, "Go quickly now." She pointed left across the bodega. "There, under that large stone archway, you will find it."

Kat turned to the left, but Nadeen yanked her arm.

"Not that way", she motioned back to the lobby.

Kat hurried and found herself back at the entrance where she first came in. She scanned the room for some type of clue to guide her, but what? Swiftly her eyes fixed on the traveler's trunk.

She walked over and knelt beside it. She noticed a small brass combination fixture on the padlock, and knew instantly. Her fingers started scrolling for the first number ... 7, the second number, 5, the third number, 9.

The lock unhinged and Kat lifted the heavy trunk lid. She slid aside the fabric lined tray, revealing a small spiral staircase that led, inexplicably, to a room below. Upon her descent, the smell of wooden barrels she encountered just moments ago came wafting back. One more step, and she was on cement ground. She quickly realized the smell was the same as the bodega, because that is where the staircase led back to.

Perplexed, Kat peered down the long aisle. The small table was there, but no tour group. Had they vacated the area that quickly? She heard laughter and glasses clinking as if they were right there in front of her, she spun around to see the wooden

door to the bodega, closed. There was no time to ponder this. She headed down the narrow path to the left, eventually leading her to the stone archway. Without hesitation she pulled back the brocade that hung on the wall. A bright green, swirling circle was hanging in midair. The Portal.

Kat inhaled through her nose, held her breath, and placed both her hands in the middle of the circle. At first it was icy cold, then something took hold—like a vacuum—and in a flash she was sucked into the deep void of the swirling green Portal.

Just then, the archway started to crack. Chunks of stone began falling onto the cement floor. She looked back and saw herself staring into the circle as she plunged deeper into the abyss. The heavy stones continued to crack and fall to the ground, shaking free some barrels from their stacks. The form—her form—fell to the ground.

Kat laid silent staring up at the ceiling fan. The only sound she heard was beeping; the steady spike of a heart monitor. She could see Ava through a window talking to someone in a white coat. She closed her eyes.

The hallway was bright, with lights of all colors pouring in through the skylights. Kat continued down the corridor. Frames hung on the walls containing photos of various people in a multitude of countries, places throughout the world ... and beyond. The Missions. She leaned in to take a closer look. I

know them. They were indeed the Data Collectors; her friends and colleagues.

Documentation hung on the walls for each mission with the names, places, and dates displayed below the frames. She held out her finger and touched the wall, sliding it along with every step. She stopped abruptly in front of one particular frame:

Senior Agent: Frederick Tuttle

Agents: Gregory Markham, Joanna Markham

Location: Jerez de la Frontera, Spain, Earth

Travel date: July 30, 1887 AD

In Memory: Frederick Tuttle died on Earth in 1968. He chose to live out his life in human form, only completing one life cycle.

She looked up at the picture, and saw a man sitting on an antique bicycle with his arms extended, Gregory. There was a man standing beside him to his right, Freddie. And a woman standing beside him on his left, Joanna ... me. As for the backdrop, a towering white building with ivy draping down the sides.

The heart monitor slowed its pulse to just every few seconds. Kat felt a squeeze on her hand. She opened her eyes to see the whirling ceiling fan.

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Joanna walked down the corridor, toward a handsome gentleman who was waiting patiently. He was holding a large fragrant bouquet of long green stems with purple flowers. He smiled, kissed her on the cheek, and whispered into her ear, "Welcome Home."

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Kat took one last stare at the ceiling fan and sighed deeply. Her heavy eyelids did not fight her this time. Without warning she was transported.