

The Fiddleback

That Night

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Fiction by Shelly Oria

1.

We have been indoors for many days and long nights now, due to fear of disappointment. Our fear is rational, fact-based. When we go outside—if we go outside—we will be devastated. We will want life to feel as it did that night, and life will fail us. After that night at Lamplight with Gary, life is bound to forever fail us.

2.

That night, we spoke with abandon. We drank in good rhythm. We befriended former lovers, tapped their left shoulders with only one finger, even though we were many. Do you go to the gym, we asked each other that night. Do you at least *plan* to go? But we never answered. We didn't have to.

That night, we counted countless things—the advantages of dairy, the siblings we never had. There were moments when we twirled our hair coyly, and in those moments our hair was the kind that twirls well. When we hummed, everyone enjoyed it. Our smiles were the texture of ice cream, which is to say we could be cold and still perceived as sweet. It was our birthday that night, it was Gary's book party, it was everyone's Christmas. We didn't know it walking in, but it was true, and we had the gifts to prove it. The more we gifted, the more we got, and Lamplight was getting wrapping-paper crowded. Isn't there an old adage about that, someone asked. And there was. There was an old adage.

3.

We had no special expectations that night—just Gary, reading. He had never been a poet before, or if he was, we knew nothing of it. He was a foot surgeon last we saw him, which was in Argentina and a while back. Before that he sold snakes to collectors, and before that the cookshow, of course—the one that made him famous.

You can't see Gary and *not* want to bed him, but that night wasn't about sex. Walking into Lamplight and seeing Gary, we knew that right away. Tonight was too good for sex.

4.

We danced ourselves happy that night, lightness in our toes, our heels. But we were also productive, successful. We found solutions to problems, fixed things that were previously broken. Some people were cooking or baking, some were working on making umbrellas unnecessary. It wasn't raining that night, not yet, but we were seeing the bigger picture. Everyone felt understood. It was an unspoken rule that night—if anyone said anything, everyone stopped and listened. We followed with nodding, just to make sure.

5.

When we stepped outside, it was pouring but silent. We stood there, looking at the rain, hearing nothing. Strange, isn't it, we said half to Gary, half to the sky. Some storms are silent, Gary said, shrugging. In his head, he was already under the covers, perhaps with a lady or two. Sometimes Gary was a tourist, but that night he was savvy. He knew the ways of our town. Go home with us, we whispered. We wanted to touch his cheek, but we knew better. This wasn't Argentina. I had a good time, Gary said. Thanks. He smiled his Gary smile at us and we knew the night was over.

6.

Indoors, the walls are inching toward us. We measure the distance every few hours. The rain is loud outside, always loud, and we try not to listen. We talk about that night a lot, but as time goes by, it gets harder to remember. Did we grow strawberries, we ask? Did we suck on their long stems, did it make Gary laugh? We usually say yes, yes we did. Gary laughed, we say, he laughed his quiet Gary laugh. But we can never be sure.

Every once in a while, the rain seems to stop. We look out the window, and it's hard to tell; all we see is wetness and fog. But it doesn't matter. What matters is the loudness quiets down. We gather in the center of the room, we don't measure the distance. We sit in a circle and try to pretend that we are back at Lamplight. We sit in a circle and listen to the silence until we remember loud enough to feel.

Shelly Oria was born in Los Angeles and grew up in Israel. Her fiction has appeared in *McSweeney's*, *Quarterly West*, *cream city review*, and *fivechapters* among other places, and won the 2008 *Indiana Review* Fiction Prize among other awards. Shelly curates the series Sweet! Actors Reading Writers in the East Village and teaches fiction at Gotham Writers' Workshop and Pratt Institute as well as privately.



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