



THIS SMALL WRITTEN THING

by Lara Williams

WHEN Joseph announced he'd found a job the way one might announce getting TiVo, or getting into Harpo Marx (fist on hip, knee crooked jauntily to one side—*Honey, I got the job!*), there was talk of them both moving to London, but it was little more than radio interference, what with renting costs and Flora's own job. And so, with little argument from either side, it was decided he would stay at his brother's in Hammersmith Monday to Friday and come home to Manchester at the weekend. Though what weekends they could be—weekends that extended before them

like a single beckoning digit, long, glorious weekends filled with flat whites, breakfast scrambles, and languid walks around the art gallery. In many ways it was exactly what their marriage needed. They found themselves curiously excited about the separation—planning their evenings apart, their long-awaited reunions. It could be like the beginning of the relationship again. It could be like dating.

The first week he left, Flora saw him off at the train station. His laptop in one hand, a small suitcase in the other. He came home the following Friday, arriving at Manchester Piccadilly at quarter past eight. They went straight out to dinner—wine, penne and candlelight so readily accessible. The next morning, they lay in reading the papers, taking turns to make coffee. Their flat invited it. It was a homely flat, a sedentary flat, more like a little house than an apartment. Porcelain vases erupted dried flowers bound by a constellation of fairy lights. Scented tea lights with titles like for coffee or conceptual art lit up the peripheries. On Sunday, they sampled artisanal cheese and squirrelled herbed loaves into canvas satchels at the local farmer's market before

returning home to watch a film, entwined on the sofa. Flora dropped him off at the station, his suitcase slightly bigger than the last time. On getting back into the car, she noticed he'd left his gloves behind. Flora knew his hands would be cold, and felt a pang that wasn't quite hurt, but more the foreshadow—the blueprint of pain.

He got in a little later the next Friday and went immediately to bed. “Sweetheart,” he said, kissing the top of her head. “I am exhausted.” He spent most of Saturday working, looking handsome and dishevelled hunched over his computer. As his features shifted tectonically with age, he was becoming ruggish, earthy. He'd even started growing a beard. Flora placed a cup of tea to his side, running her finger over the corner of his glasses, thinking, if she wanted to, she could crush them. The performance of love and the fire of it—an endless negotiation, a series of audience asides, of controlled explosions. As Sunday evening drew in, Flora tied back her hair and put on a coat. “It's silly you always driving,” he said stopping her, his suitcase bigger still. “I'll just get a taxi.”

As he left behind the packed grapes, crime dramas on USB, treats she had prepared for his journey, Flora cried. At first, a tentative misting of the eyes, an overture, making way to gasping, flatulent sobs.

The following weekend he didn't come home until late Saturday afternoon.

The weekend after that he didn't come home at all.



She started feeling closest to him during sleep. Her waking thoughts and dreams meshed in an addled glue. She'd wake from a ferocious, thrashing sleep feeling like he was physically there, a garbling of non-sequiturs, a blizzard of scenes, conversations, and events impossible to pin down and immediately forgotten, but he was always there, every time she fell asleep. She preferred Dream Joseph to Real Joseph. Dream Joseph was reliable, preserved, packed in ice. Real Joseph was, well. "I can't quite put my finger

on it,” Flora told her friend Casey at Body Blow, a new fitness class at their gym where they pelted a gender-nonspecific, human-shaped training bag.

“Something’s different.” She slugged her fist at a pillow-y circle, a resonating thwack punctuating her words. Joseph had been in London four months now. “He seems distant on the phone, like he’s not listening to anything I’m saying. Then, suddenly he’ll be really sweet. Last week he sent me an e-card. He called me his little donut hole.”

“Babe,” Casey replied, jogging on the spot, landing punches with a tiny grunt. “It’s another woman,” she wheezed. “It’s always another woman.”



They’d met at a party. Flora had taken ecstasy for the first time—a tight swell expanding in her stomach, an artifice of joy fizzing around her head, yielding to a sudden, sick and terrifying weight.

She'd staggered into an unfamiliar living room, peering at a waltzing brocade of light, feeling woozy. Beads of sweat slid from her forehead and she felt for something, for anything, to grab onto. She clutched an arm—Joseph's arm—and pulled him close. He held her at a distance, swept hair from her face, and ran a finger beneath her eye. She watched him as if from afar—a blur beneath a twinkling haze—a blur that remained a blur, absent, abstract, always at arms' length. She remembered drinking a glass of water, but didn't remember much else, though he told her later he'd taken her home, and slept on the floor beside her. The next morning, he informed her someone had put something in her drink, and she should at least report it to the support officer, and maybe get checked out by her doctor. So creased was his consternation, so wide-eyed his belief that this thing, this little blonde thing, with the pine-framed Roman Holiday poster and the Carole King records bookended by oversized church candles, could not have voluntarily taken something as impure and crass as ecstasy that she hadn't the heart to correct him.

“You’re right,” she replied, flattening her hair, rubbing make-up from her face. “I’ll report it to the university. And I’ll book a doctor’s appointment on Monday.”

How was she supposed to know this thin sliver of untruth, this morsel of fiction, was being dispensed to her future husband to grow fat, to develop wings? She hadn’t realised she was signing such a lengthy contract with this small fabrication. She hadn’t yet realised that if you’re not in it for the long haul, well, best not to bother at all. She hadn’t yet realised that in a relationship, honesty was just one of many options, a sort of moral high ground, yes, but no more so than vegetarianism or recycling. And she was both a vegetarian and a recycler. And so it took flight, Joseph showing her newspaper clippings with drink spiking statistics, sagely nodding towards public service posters.

At their wedding, he’d toasted, “Of course she only spoke to me because she was on Class A drugs! And before anyone says anything, it wasn’t me who put it in her drink! But I’d like to raise my glass to whoever did!” On hearing his niece had been molested by a teacher on a school trip, he’d volunteered her counsel, telling

his brother “Flora had a near identical experience. I’m sure she’d be happy to help.”

“Near identical?!” she’d exclaimed as he slipped his phone back into his pocket. “How exactly have I had a near identical experience?”

“Well,” he replied. “Yours was a near miss.”

So regularly did this spiked drink motif recur, she often suspected he knew she’d taken the pill all along and they were both complicit in a lengthy sort of private joke. Her mind arched back to that bleary morning, his furrowed concern, his voice so deliberately tempered. She thought of him handing her a coffee, telling her the caffeine would annul any trace of hallucinogens in her system and how, when she rubbed her face and said she must look horrendous, he replied, “You look beautiful.” How he had meant it. No, it couldn’t be another woman. She was the liar, the deceiver, the fraud.



They booked a weekend away to the countryside. Joseph drove while Flora pressed her forehead against the glass, intimate with her dewy reflection. Paragliders hovered above the hills, floating nail clippings against the brilliant blue sky. *How strange that England should have mountains*, Flora thought. *How gauche*. They checked into a chintzy B&B, sprawling out on the velvet bedding. They went walking through the hills, faces damp and flushed, finishing with a butternut squash stew and mashed potatoes. They had lethargic, languorous sex. Watching him sleep, his back smooth and grey in the dark, Flora traced the names of former lovers onto his spine: Daniel, Simon, Guy From The Library. Then, feeling particularly bold, spelled out their names and her fondest memory. Daniel, drunk in Liverpool. Simon, eating cereal, watching *The Wonder Years*. The Guy From The Library, abs. She wondered what her fondest memory of Joseph was and ran her hand through his hair. “Sometimes,” she whispered. “I just want to punch you in the face.”

“What?” he asked, opening his eyes. “What did you just say?”

“Nothing,” Flora replied, turning over. “I said nothing.”

The next morning room service brought breakfast to the room, waking Flora and interrupting Joseph, who was up writing a message on his phone. “I’ll get it,” he said, wrapping himself in a robe, making for the door. Flora rolled across the bed, peering up to see him arranging a percolator in the adjoining room. She tapped his phone, lighting up the message he was sending to a woman’s name she didn’t recognise. It was a wordy email about their trip. It was very *written*.

Recherché? she thought. Where the hell did he learn a word like *recherché*? He called her and she quickly set the phone aside. “Well,” she said, sitting at the table, picking up a miniature chocolate croissant, turning it over in her fingers. “Isn’t this *recherché*?”



He came home at Christmas and they spent the holiday together in lieu of visiting family. Flora shuffled to the living room on Christmas morning to find Joseph up and dressed, chained to his laptop once more. “Don’t do any work today,” she said, slipping onto his knee, winding her arms around his neck. “It’s Christmas.” He closed the lid.

“You’re right,” he replied, wiggling out from beneath her. They prepared a homemade nut roast, toasting hazelnuts, crumbling stilton, grating parsnips in a silent communion. After they’d eaten the roast, Flora trotted to the kitchen, reaching for the back of the fridge.

“Linzer Torte!” she said. “Do you remember how many of these we ate in Austria?!”

Joseph rubbed his stomach, contriving large, swirling circles. “I’m trying to watch my weight,” he replied as Flora removed a slice, covering it in a thick layer of whipped cream, eyeing him warily. He returned to his laptop on the settee. Defeated, she spooned a dollop of cake and cream into her mouth—a soggy cloud, squelching beneath her teeth.

They exchanged presents late in the afternoon.

Joseph presented her with a small, flat square. Flora peeled back the papery wrapping, removing a long gold chain weighted down by a single charm, a tiny telescope, dangling delicately from her fingers. “It’s beautiful,” she said, swinging it back and forth, holding it up to her face, pretending to peer through it. “Now I can keep an eye on you.” She clipped it around her throat. “I’m going to wear it all the time.”

Joseph ran his thumb across the bitty ornament. “I knew you’d like it,” he yawned, kissing her forehead.

Flora gave him a knitted blanket she’d been working on for the best part of a month. “This is so you don’t get cold on the train home,” she said, kneading it in her palm. “This is so you don’t forget me.”

They slept off dinner, lying side by side, in their bedroom. Flora woke first, staring at Joseph, wondering about his thoughts, his dreams, wishing herself small—so small she could crawl into his ear to explore, to investigate. When Joseph’s eyes opened,

Flora squeezed hers shut, pretending. She lay still a while waiting for him to get up, finally peeping to see if he'd fallen back asleep. On opening her eyes, she caught him blinking his shut, the same theatrics as he rolled over, exhaling loudly. She got out of bed and poured herself a glass of water, settling on the settee, staring out of the window. She noticed his laptop perched on the desk beside her. She pressed her palm to it and felt its gentle, enticing heat like a bubble bath. She slid it onto her knee, pried open the lid and ran a finger across the mousepad, bringing it to life. An incoming email from the woman he'd emailed. She read it through, a narrative sashaying in front of her—each word an apéritif, calmly digested. She read it again and then shut the lid, returning the laptop to his desk and walked through to the bedroom. She watched him lying there, breathing in and out. *So, she thought. This is my nervous breakdown.*

Joseph let out an ungainly snore and jerked his foot from beneath the duvet. On instinct, she leaned over and tucked his foot back in, then slipped under the covers beside him. She wrapped both arms around his stomach, nuzzling her face into his

back, pressing her nose into his shoulder blade. He smelled of mint shower gel and mouthwash. Of Christmas dinner and coffee. Of the North and the South and everything in between. She held him close and shut her eyes, feeling that they were sinking into the bed, and then through the bed, and into the ground—further and further down. She gripped him tighter, because what is it really, this thing, this small written thing, gone with the click of a button, the collapse of a screen, vanished, gone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lara Williams is a writer based in Manchester. Her debut story collection, *Treats*, launches March 3rd from Freight Books.

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