

'Final call for flight 284, gate 16 to Romania', says the airport speaker as twenty three year old Estelle Leon rushes to the gate, a travel pillow embracing her neck and a carry-on hanging from her shoulder,

'Sorry', she grunts as she pulls out a huge notebook instead of her passport in a clumsy way, and she hands her boarding pass to the man before he lets her pass. As she skips towards the entrance, she thinks of how exciting it's going to be when she finally reunites with her family back in her hometown. When she settles down in her seat beside an old couple, probably in their eighties, she smiles at them and looks out the window, everything crossing her mind.

After they take off, she drags her ink onto the sheet of paper; even in these cases, she doesn't help but write, it's her hobby after all.

" Forgiveness is rarely the cinematic scene in a movie; in reality, it's a mess, like scribbles on a masterpiece, like a rainy day in summer, like an arrow piercing through my heart. The hardest thing I've ever learned is that no matter how much you care, you can't force someone to communicate or fight for you, you can't beg someone to see your worth or choose you like you chose them, and that truth hurts more than anything, because you start wondering if your love wasn't enough. I used to think that if I stayed a bit longer or loved a bit harder, things would change. But love shouldn't feel as if you're convincing someone to care. And if someone asked me how I want to be loved, I might say with flowers, gifts, or even candles, but if someone asked me the same question on a deeper level, I would say I want to be loved in a way that feels safe. The kind of love where I wouldn't think if it's temporary or permanent, the kind of love where I feel loved through actions, not just words, don't get me wrong, I love being a poem, but how can I be the poem of a poet who can't show his love merely with words? I admit it, I'm a person who talks a lot, but when hurt quite, I'm sensitive, I hate being yelled at, I laugh at everything, I love deep conversations, and my heart barely handles mere yelling, but that doesn't give any person the right to come and hurt me. But even if you almost kill me, I still want to forgive you, but my mind is still comprehending why you did that in the first place, why you stabbed me in my back when all I ever did was embrace you, why you pulled the trigger on the gun aiming for me when I'm the one who handed you the gun. The craziest thing is the level of my empathy, I

mean, if someone has hurt me before but recently has problems in her life, I won't hesitate to forgive, and that sometimes frightens me, not being able to stand up for myself just because I care too much and love too hard. It really is complicated, being a person with a smile covering my problems around people who have hard hearts, but acts as an angel around others, because who will come and comfort me when I cry? Who'll come and close my open wounds when it's raining alcohol on them? Me. I'm the one who's forced to comfort myself in a life full of storms, in a life where a kind word rarely slips out of someone's lips, where any behaviour is excused when they have a problem. I get it, life is unfair, but why does it have to be unfair? Mankind is supposed to raise each other, not pull each other down into a life full of misery." She was so focused on pouring her thoughts on this page that she didn't realise that the flight attendant was asking for her food choice.

'Grilled chicken with steamed veggies and mashed potatoes', asks Estelle nicely, thinking it was a warm, nice meal, and when she was served the food, it was cold, but better than nothing. Chicken was colder than a windy day in short sleeves, and the veggies and mashed potatoes were somewhat good. They also came with complimentary appetisers, hummus, a juice box, and a small fudge brownie, which was perfect and better than the meal itself. As she pulls out her paper and pen to continue writing, the old woman addresses her and asks for her name,

'Estelle, such a pretty name, what does it mean?' the elder woman asks curiously,

'A star, it means a star', she replies affectionately, 'what's your name... ma'am?' she continues, not knowing how to call her.

'Lubna, it's an Arabic name, it means fragrance and a graceful tree', the old woman answers, with a wide smile spread on her face.

'What are you doing in Romania, Estelle?' she added

'Oh, I'm from there, just visiting my hometown', she beams as the elder's face clouds over,

'What's wrong?' asks Estelle, genuinely concerned about her.

'Oh, it's nothing serious, just that the last time I visited my hometown was a long time ago', she mutters, her eyes resting under her long lashes. How can someone this old have lashes this long?

‘Well, Mrs Lubna, where is your hometown? Correct me if I’m overstepping’ asks Estelle.

‘Not at all, love, I’m from the occupied land of Palestine, I was deported from there in my early 30s,’ says Mrs Lubna, her voice cracking, and Estelle’s smile softened. ‘I’m so sorry, Lubna,’ she whispers, ‘what do you remember most of it?, The place you grew -’ I was interrupted by the aeroplane speaker announcing that the plane doors had opened.

‘It was nice meeting you, Estelle’, says Mrs Lubna, bidding farewell to her as she stands up from her chair with her husband and walks into the crowded paths.

Estelle packs her fat notebook and stands up from her seat, still thinking of her interaction and how gut-wrenching it is to be forced out of your home country.

When she first set foot into the landscape her relatives live in, she was in awe, the grass was a mocking, vibrant green, an endless field of clover that felt like a weight under her ankles as she walked towards her family homestead, her heart pounding, excited to reunite with her flesh and blood after 5 years of being away from them.

She knocked on the door, her smile a mile wide, before a charming woman opened the door, ‘Hello, how can I help you?’ Asks the woman wanting to know who’s on her doorstep,

‘Is this the Leon’s house?’ Asks Estelle, curious who’s in her childhood home,

‘Indeed, who might you be?’ Replies the woman as she looks into Estelle’s confused eyes.

‘I’m Estelle Leon’, she answers, her face lighting up when the woman recognises the name,

‘Come on in! I’m Paige, the housemaid’ she smiles, leading her to the giant living room,

‘Where’s Laura?, the old housemaid?’ Asks Estelle, longing for every memory from her childhood, even the old maid.

When her eyes meet her mum’s, she runs like never before and wraps her arms around her, embracing her warm body as she used to when she was young,

‘Oh Estelle, I’ve been longing for your hugs since the day you left’, says her mum, her daughter still caught between her arms. Estelle slowly lets go and kisses the back of her hand, her lips lingering on the surface of her mum’s skin. When she raises her head, she turns around to hug the others and see how they have been doing.

Later that day, she was savouring the sweet taste of her mum’s famous grilled turkey, the honey on the surface making her groan at how good it tasted. ‘This is heaven compared to the food in the US. It’s all greasy and dense there’ she emphasises while basically devouring the meal in front of her. Her mum chuckles and shakes her head, amused by how fast she’s inhaling the food,

‘Tella! Where did you put my undershirt at!?’ her dad barked at her mum from upstairs,

‘It’s dirty, so I threw it in the laundry bin!’ she replies,

‘So what should I do now?!’ he exclaims, his tone showing that he’s fed up with not finding his undershirt,

‘Don’t wear one, Ronald,’ her mum shot back, making Estelle laugh at the interaction between her parents, just like when they used to a long time ago.

Estelle wiped a smudge of honey from her lips, the sound of her father’s heaving footsteps echoing the familiar rhythm of her childhood. In America, her afternoons were silent- just the frequent honking of cars outside her window and the hum of the refrigerator.

‘I’m going for a walk outside, need anything while I’m out?’ she asks, wearing her sandals,

‘Oh yes, 1kg tomatoes and 2kg parsley,’ her mum then looked at her and added, ‘not coriander’. She chuckles, remembering how much she used to mess up between them when she was a kid, like ten years old. She then grabs 25 Lues, which is approximately 6 dollars back in the US.

As she walks down a bumpy pathway, she recognises the place as her favourite cafe that she used to go to when she was feeling down, their croissants always made her beam with sunlight. It was no longer a cafe though; it’s a hardware shop now, an old dusty one with not a single soul inside.

As she stops at a farm stand, she picks up 1kg and 2kg of parsley, and she recognises the man as her childhood friend, Diego.

'Buna ziua! Is that you, Diego?' asks Estelle, unintentionally staring into that man's soul.

'Da, indeed I am Diego, who might this pretty face be?' he answers, confused for a second,

'It's me, Es-' she got interrupted by his exclamation,

'Is that really you, Estelle?!' he blurted, not realising that the people around him turned their heads to his direction,

'Scuze', mumbles Diego in Romanian, but he doubts any of them heard him.

'Do you perhaps want to catch up on things? Maybe tomorrow morning for a coffee ?' she says, looking up to him, although when they were kids, he used to be the shorter one.

'Coffee? Pfft' answers Diego 'how about we go and explore the forest we used to adventure in? He recommends, since they do want to catch up on things,

'Deal', replies Estelle as they exchange numbers, and the money for the veggies obviously.

When she goes back home, she hands the veggies to her mother, but with her mum's disappointed look, she feels that something is wrong,

'What's wrong, mama ?' asks Estelle, and her heart relaxed after hearing her response,

'You got coriander', she sighs, then she continues ' , I guess I'm making Lebanese taboule with coriander instead of parsley'.

The day after, Estelle wakes up to the smell of fresh eggs, she rushes down without brushing her teeth or washing her face, and as she settles in a chair, her mum eyeballs her, saying, ' At least brush your teeth, you look like a waking up hazard'.

Estelle groans at her words, forced to stand up and tidy herself up. When she goes back down, she's met with a long and neat table in the dining room, she sees all kinds of stuff that she hasn't seen in the kitchen, from Turkish Simit, to Telmea cheese ,and most importantly... eggs scrambled with potatoes!

Estelle rushes to the table, she looks at the food, then back at her mum and then says,

‘Oh, how much I love you’, she pulls her mum in a deep embrace, kissing her forehead, then sits down and digs right in.

After a delicious breakfast that she can never find in the land called the United States of America because of how mindblowing it was, she taps numbers on her phone so she can know exactly where to meet Diego, just to realise that she can’t call outside the USA.

‘Oh goodness me’, sighs Estelle before an idea comes to her mind, why doesn't she go to the stand that he was at yesterday? When she arrived there, there was no one. She asked about him everywhere, but everyone claimed the same thing: there was no one in the area called Diego. Estelle then walked back home with a frown on her face, but she won't let some guy from her childhood ruin her day, so when she reached back home, she packed a bag of essentials, from flashlights to water bottles.

She left the house at noon, in an olive green tank top, beige pants filled with pockets, long cacao brown boots, and a forest green and black backpack hanging over her shoulders with all the essentials and her Canon R50 camera with an extra battery. She was really excited to find out what had changed in the forest and find all kinds of animals, except really dangerous ones like hyenas that look somewhat adorable but are actually creatures that can tear up your soul in 5 seconds.

As she loses herself in the beauty of nature among the ever-changing leaves, she suddenly feels something underneath her foot, and when she looks down, she almost screams because of the scene. A large red circle with yellow outlines, which seems to be a landmine. She remembers all the movies she watched and pulls out a pair of pliers, her heart pounding in her chest like Tom from Tom & Jerry. The pliers tremble in her sweaty palm as she remembers always to cut the red wire as she kneels slowly, trying not to pull her foot away from the mine, she is met with a surprising scene that she did not quite expect.

All wires were a bright shade of red, tomato-like. Estelle starts clenching her jaw, not sure what to do. Her somehow ‘brave’ and idiotic self thought of an idea, a really stupid one, and she did it without a second thought.

She wakes up on a hard surface, and she barely has time to open her eyes before she finds out that she actually jumped off the cliff and into the empty pit; her head is banging, and all her body parts are aching.

As she tries to move, she lets out a deep gasp, and when she looks down at her body, she finds out that she has been injured, and yeah, it looks severe. As she tries to do something, anything, she hears a rustling of leaves above her, so she tries to stop the flow of tears streaming down cherry-red cheeks.

With the corner of her eye, she spots something moving, and it is for sure not an animal. At her adrenaline's highest point, she reaches for her emergency kit in her backpack that she packed all the essentials in, and while treating herself with ice packs and pain killers, she sees it again, but this time she took a photo of it with her camera.

When she was somewhat better, she picked herself up and jumped out of the pit with a groan. As she looked around for shelter, she found an old shed that she had never seen before, not even in her childhood, although it looked way older than she is, and when she stepped inside, she was greeted with an antique table in the middle of the shed, with nothing else in it.

As she limped towards the surface of the wood and leaned on it, she found 4 handmade wooden mini coffins among the dust, brown and for sure terrifying. She took photos of these small boxes that carried handmade human-like dolls, each labelled with a name, and as she observed them, she recognised a name, Diego.

As she unravels the coffin, she finds a handmade porcelain doll that looks exactly like Diego, so she lets out a surprising gasp and throws it to the creaky floor of this abandoned shed, she gawked at the doll as it started tearing apart immediately after thudding against the ground, the roof started shaking, with a sickening rip, the doll's torso split wide open, but there was no stuffing in there, only a choking charcoal black smoke that erupted from the wound. The shadow stuff clawed its way to the cold air, twisting and elongating until it formed a towering silhouette.

Two hollow, burning eyes snapped wide open, staring down at the shredded remains of its former body.

As a scream escaped Estelle's lips, the silhouette shaped Diego's features, the exact jawline, eyes, lips, everything.

Her scream cut short, dying in a choked gasp,

'Estelle, we need your help', the... ghost of Diego says, and as she scrabbles backwards, her hips land on the hard floor of this terrifying place, she tries taking photos of him, but he will just not appear in the pictures.

'Di-Diego... What happened? Why are you here? Did you-' Estelle's tongue pours out questions before she's interrupted by the deep voice of this terrifying swirl of grey shadows that shape Diego.

'Estelle, we have been trapped, we need your help, but don't see too obvious, or he'll catch you too' he pleaded before they both hear footsteps echoing from outside the door, as she looks out the window to see who, it was the same 'thing' she took pictures of when she was in the pit, she looks back at the doll to see nothing, so she takes it that Diego repaired the doll and made it back into the coffin.

Estelle takes her chance and runs toward the back door, just to be reminded that she's injured by the sharp pain in her legs, so she limps across the flooring until she reaches the end and throws herself on the golden brown leaves of this petrifying forest.

She peeks an eye through the window, and finds the anonymous structure of an old man and woman, she recognises her face as the old lady from the plane, she didn't think that she could be fooled by an elder, she moves her eyesight from the pair of wicked elderly to the coffins laying on the table, she suddenly hears a high, whistling wail that sounds like a tea pot left on the stove for too long and her eyes immediately dart to the old man forcing her to sew dolls with a belt in between his palms, and then Estelle instantly regretted thinking that she has been tricked by this suffering, old lady.

She accidentally lets out a gasp because of a twitch that poked her side, and the man's head directly snaps toward her voice. He turns on his heels and starts dragging his feet based on the rustling of leaves.

She shuts her eyes closed, knowing that there was nowhere she can go to, the door cracked open, letting out a horribly terrifying creek, well to her it was really intense, she looks at the silhouette of a large man towering over her, and as he stares at her, as if he's memorising her face, then he reaches for her, so she starts repeating a prayer with her eyes tightly shut,

and when she opens them, she finds herself back in her town, she starts questioning everything, what? How? And more importantly, why?.

She was in her pyjamas when she looked down at her body, and no injuries. She lets out a deep gasp when she spots nine fingers instead of ten; her pinky finger is no longer there, but it didn't hurt.

Later that night, she couldn't sleep, and she also could never say anything to her parents, they might either think that she's going crazy, or make them also afraid of whatever's creeping around their daughter.

So not knowing what to do, she decided to pull out her journal and ink and write down everything that's trapped inside her. In the end, a man's partner is always a paper and pen, and as she swerved the black ink onto the piece of paper, it made her think of how wicked this life can be, how cruel it is, from suffering Palestinian people to people trapped in coffins unwillingly. In the morning, she did not get any sleep, so she grabbed an egg and a veggie sandwich while leaving before anyone else woke up.

She held the straps of her backpack tightly as she stepped into the woods, not knowing if she was doing something right or wrong.

As she took the last bite of her sandwich, she carefully travelled down a steep hill until she reached the old, abandoned shed, which looked like it was falling apart.

'It really is old', mumbled Estelle under her breath.

She looked through the window to see if there was anyone in there, and when she was sure that the coast was clear, she stepped inside, the floor creaking under the pressure of her foot.

As she once again observed the wooden boxes, she realised that they were no longer four coffins, but 5 now, and when she picked it up, she read her name on a label over the layer of wood.

Estelle was shaking in her boots as she opened it up and found a pinky finger sewn, with a needle and thread beside it, which based on what she thinks, means that they are stealing her slowly, like they stole Diego and the other victims.

When she looks down at her missing finger, she throws herself onto her knees and starts sobbing, tears flowing down her face uncontrollably, thinking that it was her time now, to get murdered by that man that she thought was an elder. The wood of the floor bit through her pants, though

she didn't feel it, all she could hear was the frantic, trapped bird beating of her own heart. The implications of the tiny wooden box settled over her like a suffocating blanket. They weren't just going to kill her, they were going to disassemble her, piece by piece, memory by memory, until there was nothing left of Estelle Leon but a porcelain doll stuffed with ash. As she almost gives up, she mumbles under her breath, 'No', she whispered, the voice echoing in the damp breath of the shed 'I am a star, that's what my name means, and stars don't just give up, they glow even in the dark'

And when she tries closing the lid of her coffin, she accidentally knocks over another coffin, and when she reads the name, it was Diego's, but when she thought that smoke would fill the shed, nothing was in there when it snapped open.

Cold sweat drips from her forehead, her lower lip trembles, and her limbs shake violently until she hears footsteps coming from outside in the vast forest, and when the door opens, it is not who she had expected it to be. Through the gloom, a figure stepped inside. It was not the towering silhouette of the old man, nor was it the fragile form of Mrs Lubna. It was Paige, the new housemaid.

Except Paige's skin looked too tight, like leather stretched over a wire frame, in her hand, she held a long, curved bone needle threaded with thick, black twine.

'You shouldn't have come back, Estelle, ' she says, her voice dropping the cheerful sound she had met Estelle with, sounding instead like 2 dry stones grinding together.

'The master doesn't like it when the pieces wander off before the stitching is complete'

Estelle's eyes darted frantically toward the door, but a heavy shadow blocked the exit.

The old man stood there, his hands raw and bleeding from pulling the thick twine. Beside him stood Mrs Lubna with her long, beautiful eyelashes casting shadows over a face that was entirely emotion-free, so... bland.

'Why?' Estelle cried out, her back pressed so hard against the wall she thought the wood might splinter.

'What do you want from me?'

Mrs Lubna stepped forward, her voice a hollow echo of the kind woman from the aeroplane. 'A hometown is a beautiful thing, Estelle. But when yours is stolen, you learn to build a new one out of whoever and whatever you find'. The old man raised his hand, and in his palm rested a small, pale object

Estelle looked down at her own hand. Her left ring finger suddenly began to throb with a white hot heat. She watched in absolute horror as the flesh around the knuckle began to turn translucent, fading into streaks of grey smoke. 'Stop! Please!' she screamed, reaching for her backpack, her fingers desperately searching for the camera, a flashlight, anything to use as a weapon.

'Don't fight it, star,' Paige whispered, stepping closer, the needle raised high. 'It hurts less if you just let the stuffing out.'

The old man threw his head back, and from his throat issued that high, whistling teapot wail. The sound vibrated through Estelle's skull, blinding her with pain. The charcoal smoke erupted from the floorboards, wrapping around her ankles, dragging her down into the wood. As the shadows swarmed her vision, cutting off the light, the door of the shed violently slammed shut, then suddenly, a voice whispered directly into her ear, aking her skin tingle, saying:

'I told you not to make it obvious. Now, look behind you.'

The alarm rang through the air, and Estelle woke up in her Mickey Mouse pyjamas. She grabbed her phone and read the notification:

'Flight 284 to Romania cancelled.

It was all a dream.