

Dirty girl

I hope it dies. That was the first thing she thought as she closed her eyes tightly against the screeching sound coming from the street outside her house. The noxious noise of screaming rubber and fast friction felt like bitter choking in her throat and it seemed to go on forever, or at least long enough for a number of thoughts to run through her head.

I hope it dies. That was always the first one. Next, a hot wave of guilt then the justification she always repeated to herself: because if it doesn't die we can't help it. And then it's going to die anyway but in howling, hot, dirty pain in that pile of rubble down the road. So she hoped its head hit the ground hard enough to shatter its skull and it died without a whimper.

But if it did die, who was there to shovel the mess off the road? Her brother had left during the night. Mum can't do it, she thought. Is dad here?

Then a new thought, an acrid stench of an image, seeped into her mind. Her father in the skidding car, the car missing the dog, the wheels spinning out of control, screeching, screeching EEEEEEE CRASH the filthy front windscreen of his taxi shattering as it hit something solid. No hot wave of guilt. No justification.

The screeching stopped.

The car *did* miss the dog. But it didn't crash. And when she jumped up and knelt on her bed, ripping back the tattered lace curtain, she saw a beaten up black car kicking up billows of chalky brown dust as it drove off. A three-legged dog, panting in the rising morning heat, still lay foolishly in the middle of the cracked, gutter-less road. Stupid strays, she thought.

Arta's eyes stung. The curtain had stirred the dust that had settled on the windowsill overnight and it had floated into her tired eyes. She blinked. More dust, disturbed by the car, now filtered in with the diffused sunlight through a crack in her bedroom's brickwork. She sometimes thought that the whole of the earth's dust had been swept into her little corner of the world and that there was so much of it here that there couldn't possibly be any dust in any other countries. If there was any more in her room alone she imagined she would probably choke on it during the night. As she breathed, tiny particles of white and brown matter would mix with her saliva and form a muddy concrete seal deep in her throat and her brother would find her in the

morning, glassed-eyed like a dead dog. Yes, and no one would even be surprised, she thought.

She reached down and pulled her phone off its charger and free from the tangle of white cords between the two beds. It was early, she saw. She'd have time for a swim in the sea before work. She would stay in too long to come back and take a shower afterwards, she knew, but caked salt was better than caked dirt plus she liked the way it made her hair dry in waves.

Her brother's bed was empty like she'd thought. He worked on the ferries that left in the middle of the night. He'd come and go a few times then be gone for five or more days and come back with a backpack full of electronics, smelling like Italian leather and teenage girls and stinking hot city nights. Last time he came back with a thin moustache growing on his upper lip. She thought it somehow made him look like a kid, even though he was older than her and she hadn't even thought of herself as a kid in years. Once he'd brought her a watch, another time a thin gold chain for her wrist that she had to hide from her mother. And last time he'd brought her back this phone. "Here you go, dirty girl," he'd said and playfully rubbed an imaginary smudge of grime off her soft cheek. "Now, keep it hidden like the rest."

Dirty girl. Vajzë ndyrë. It was a nickname her father used for her but he never used it playfully. He said it with a mean sneer. It used make run from the room crying until her brother sat her down on his lap one day.

"Filthy girl, dirty girl, don't you see? This is a good thing, Arta. You're lucky," he'd told her. "The dirtier you are, the more you'll blend in around here, and the easier it will be to run away. No one will even be able to see you!"

She'd looked up into at his dark, teasing eyes.

"Really?"

After that they began playing a game where she'd grab a handful of dust from the street, pat it on her clothes, and creep around the abandoned building sites in their neighborhood.

"Dirty girl, where are you? Where did you go?" he'd call out, pretending he couldn't see her as she slid along the wall in front of him in fits of giggles.

Eventually he'd catch her of course and tickle her so hard all over her body that she'd inhale a cloud of dust and couldn't breathe anymore. She loved him for that game.

But these days they played less and less as her brother spent more time working and had grown more serious and distant and so the dirt had begun to get to her once more.

She smudged the phone screen clean with her bed cover and checked the Wi-Fi signal. It was connected. She had the password to the Wi-Fi from Lina's café next door. One of the male tourists had told her.

Her brother had said only to use the phone for text messages but she also used it to listen to music under the covers in bed. She liked to listen to music from other countries in languages she didn't understand. She'd mouth the pretty-sounding words that meant nothing to her and imagine herself dancing with people she'd never met at parties or even in the glowing streets of some exotic city.

She got back on her knees and looked out the window. This time her cheek pressed hard against the warm glass so she could just glimpse the front of Lina's café.

Lina was a kind and overweight woman whose skin became darker throughout the day as dust would stick to her foundation. Arta liked her because Lina gave her delicious Albanian sweets. But Lina didn't serve those in the café. She served cold toast and frozen pizza and American coffee in dirty cups to tourists who sat on bent and tarnished metal chairs. She only turned the Internet on when she had these tourists in there, which wasn't very often.

Three dusty backpacks were thrown against a brick wall by the café. Arta didn't live too far from the port in the south of the country and she supposed the tourists had come over on the morning ferry from Corfu, or the overnight from Italy, because they wouldn't have driven through the night on the roads around here.

Her phone beeped. Arta threw herself back down on the bed and muffled the speaker but there was no more sound.

Will you be at work today, beautiful? The message said. It was Armend.

Her stomach tightened.

Yes, she typed slowly and hit send.

“Arta?”

It was a frail voice that clung to every fiber of the small house and Arta cringed at how needy it sounded. She turned her phone off and hid it back under her bed.

Arta pulled on her black swimsuit and her white work dress. Over 5ft tall at 14, she had a lean torso and slight, waify limbs which she was yet to learn how to move deliberately so that when she was sitting, her legs would often fall apart at the knees and her arms would slip down between them, delicate wrists laying to rest on the tender hollow of her inner thighs. Her hair was short, almost black, and fell tousled around a face that could have belonged to a small nocturnal animal – sharply defined,

slightly rounded eyes and small dark lips which could make Arta look either sullen or sultry. She was, she'd been told, extremely beautiful.

Arta grabbed her workbag and walked into the front room. It was already oppressively hot inside. The windows were closed and the curtains were drawn but the burnt rubber stench had managed to snake its way in from the street.

“Water, Arta.”

Her mother was lying in a lounge chair with the ragged red crochet blanket pushed down so it covered only her ankles; legs and arms peeling and papery, like dried mud. Arta felt a surge of anger towards her father when she saw the water glass and jug were empty. And dirty.

She walked into the kitchen and came back out with two glasses of water and gave one to her mother. Her dry, cracked fingers wrapped completely around the glass, extra long at the final joints, like the soft appendages of a lizard. Arta took a step back from the radiating heat of the woman's fever-riddled body and stood in silence, watching the liquid mingle with the beaded moisture on her upper lip as she sipped it between her raspy breaths.

Her mother's sickness weighed heavily on every old and weathered surface in the room. It was if her constant infections and fevers were aging the household's very belongings as well as her mother. Or, Arta sometimes wondered, was it this dirty and disturbed house itself, along with her father, and not some chronic condition that really made her mother sick?

Arta sipped her water and tried to think of something to say.

“Lina's got tourists,” Arta told her, then immediately regretted it.

“Mmmmm,” her mother croaked and raised her chin. “Does she need more staff?”

“No mum. She said she'd tell me if she did.”

Her mother looked her up and down. Arta took another sip of water then lowered her eyes to the ground.

“I ... I don't want to work there, mum.”

Arta's mother turned her head and looked toward the front door, past her small table of pills, expensive pills, pills that did nothing but ease the pain. She said nothing and Arta felt a nervous heat simmering in her belly.

“Imer said he could try to find you some better medicine in Italy,” Arta said. “Did he tell you that? He said he could get them in whole boxes. Soon.”

“Where's your father?”

“I don’t know. Probably driving,” Arta said. Probably drunk, she thought. She’d noticed the empty bottle of rakia on the kitchen bench.

Arta breathed the tense air deeply into her nostrils.

“Mum?” she said. Her mother turned back to face her.

Arta exhaled her breath in a rush and at last said, “Mum, I can get a better job. In the capital. In Tirana.” Her mother’s eyes a solemn stare.

“It’s been offered to me,” Arta continued. “In a good business that makes shoes and I can be a secretary. I’ll answer the phone and things. That’s all I have to do. I can make three times what I do at the beach. Enough to study maybe. And extra to send back,” she added quickly. “Imer has organized it. He said he will look after you while I’m gone.”

“Imer,” her mother sighed and closed her eyes. “Imer is selfish like your father, Arta. He only brings back plastic not pills and less and less he brings back money.”

Arta said nothing and her mother let out a scratchy moan.

“You cannot *see* it. If you go, they will leave me here to rot.”

“Imer won’t, mum!” Arta said, horrified. “He *told* me he would look after you. Mum, please, I don’t want to work at the beach forever. I ... I don’t want to live here forever.”

Her mother’s slumped back straightened as she pulled herself up in the seat with as much strength as her brittle body would allow.

“How *could you*, Arta?” she said, eyes narrowed. “How could you think of leaving me? Don’t you know how much pain I’m in? Or are you as selfish as them?”

Arta wanted to scream. She wanted to yell at her mother and make the room roar with her questions, ‘*Why should it be up to me? Why should I be punished because of this awful family?*’

But instead she shrunk away from her mother’s gaze and took her water glass back to the kitchen.

“I’m late for work,” she called and walked straight out the front door with her head down.

Outside, the same dog still sat in the middle of the street, panting. Arta turned right, towards the beach. Walking past Lina’s, she noticed the yellow port immigration stickers on the backpacks that were still outside. A memory shook her.

Arta had been to Italy once when she was just a kid, maybe seven, back when her hair went wavy without her swimming in the sea and before her mother started getting

really sick. She didn't remember everything but she could recall her father, holding her hand tightly, and what seemed like hundreds of shabby suitcases by their feet near a stairwell. A crowd of dark, formal faces, a few she recognised but none her mother or brother's, hovered at twice her height and the only thing that stopped tears from swelling in Arta's eyes as the ferry pitched in the aqua blue winter swell was a firm promise from her father that her mother and brother would be coming. *When*, she had asked without any real concept of time. *Soon*, he'd said. This had soothed her and she'd slept.

She remembered the port in Italy because it stunk of fish and she remembered a wall of sand-coloured uniforms lining the slippery cement dock because they scared her. As the ferry passengers walked forward so did the wall and no one stopped walking. The sand-coloured uniforms came closer and closer until the tightening space of hot, fear-filled air mingled with reeking fish and caused a claustrophobic panic to rise in Arta's throat. Then she felt herself being scooped up by her father, not playfully but urgently, and held above the crowd and shaken back and forth so that her teeth clashed and the faces below twisted and distorted.

Then came the memory of the rolling blue waves again but from a different position on the boat and the same faces but with altered expressions that told a ghost story Arta didn't understand. She guessed this was the long ferry ride home again. Her father had looked down at Arta with angry eyes and what he'd said then was very clear in her mind.

"We'll never escape, Arta."

Then she was back at their home in Albania and was being swept up again, this time by her mother. It was a desperate and frantic embrace with a smell of sick, sweaty relief and this time tears did well up in Arta's eyes.

After this, Arta's father changed towards her. He slapped her when she displeased him and, when Imer started going away, he began coming into their room at night. All because of that event on the ferry and for it, she hated him. And she supposed that it was also the reason her mother had started hating him too but they had never spoken about it.

A few years after that her mother had started getting really sick and had to stop working at the restaurant and Arta was pulled out of school and sent to work at the beach. And with her mother's fevers came a bitter anger and cold resentment towards not just her husband but her children, too. It was only recently that Arta began to

realise why her mother was so angry. She would never escape this place, just like her husband had said.

Arta walked down the street towards the beach. It was a 20-minute walk with a soundtrack of car stereos that blasted Italian pop music and the crunch of the gravelly and broken footpath under the soles of her shoes. Either side of her ran a seemingly endless combination of stalls selling bruised and molding fruit, run-down cafes displaying photos of horrible-looking fish dishes, the brick shells of half-finished houses, piles of rubble where houses used to be, and carwashes.

The carwashes irritated Arta. They weren't carwashes like she imagined they'd have in big cities, sleek and modern with staff in shirts and a café for waiting. Most of them were just people's houses with a hose out the front and a cardboard sign painted with the word Lavazh stuck to a brick wall. The carwashes were everywhere because the dirt was everywhere and so was the poverty and they irritated Arta because of how foolishly hopeful they were. Washing your car in Albania, Arta thought, was a foolishly hopeful thing to do, because it never made a difference. They would be dirty again by the end of the day. Some of the hoses even had leaks and would dribble water that ran onto the road and mixed with the dust to make mud that would splash onto the cars and onto the sidewalks making everything dirtier still. It was like the unfinished houses, Arta thought, with their stairs that led to an imaginary second story that would never be built because there was never enough money. Foolishly hopeful. Arta kicked a piece of rubble into the street as she walked, it skipped away, then a thought struck her. She wondered if she, too, was foolishly hopeful. About this man who wanted to marry her and about this new job in the capital.

She didn't think so because Armend was one of Imer's good friends. Imer and he had met in Italy but Armend lived in Tirana. He had a good business making leather shoes and he was always travelling so it was hard for him to find a wife.

Arta had liked Armend when she had met him last week at a café. He had said she was as beautiful as her brother promised and they talked about her family and her job and how much she hated the dust here.

"There's no dust where I live. In the capital it's very clean and pretty with parks and nice places to walk," he'd said. "My apartment has big glass windows and you can see the whole city."

"Are there any stray dogs?" she'd asked.

“Not one,” he’d replied.

One day, he said, he planned to move to France or Spain and he could get her a passport and she could come.

“You should go with him,” Imer had said when Arta had asked for her brother’s advice. “You should escape, Arta.”

So she had to be hopeful and if she was foolish she didn’t care because she had no choice. Amend offered her a good job and a way out and she had to escape from here. Suddenly she understood something about the carwashes and the half-finished houses that made her less irritated: sometimes a foolish hope was better than no hope at all. Then Arta glimpsed the beach.

If it weren’t for the beach, she thought, she wouldn’t understand why the tourists had started coming here a few years ago. If it weren’t for the beach, she would be angrier that they would choose to come here at all when all she wanted to do was leave. But because of the beach, she understood why the tourists came here to sit on the sunbeds and swim in the sea and drink the drinks and eat the food that Arta brought them.

The beach was everything the dirt was not.

The beach was made of pebbles. Round, softly-coloured pebbles that warmed up in the sun and massaged your feet when you walked on them and made a pleasant hissing and clicking sound as the waves washed over them. Under the pebbles were more pebbles, and under them some more, and not a grain of sand or dust or dirt escaped this tightly packed protective layer so the beach’s water was completely clear and vibrantly blue and under it you could see for meters.

When Arta reached the beach it was still too early for the tourists so she threw her bag on the pebbles, took off her dress and waded waist deep into the iridescent clear liquid. She watched as the thinnest trails of fresh mud snaked and swirled away from her tanned skin before letting her feet collapse under her and slipping silently beneath the lapping sea, her mind washed clean by its warmth.

Arta spent the next hour setting up beach chairs and umbrellas, laying out towels and making sandwiches for the little makeshift café on the pebbles where she worked.

Then the first customers arrived and she charged them for their chairs and took their orders.

Arta worked with another girl, Mirjeta, and they covered each other when one of them wanted a cigarette or to pocket a tip from a leery group of men or talk to girls from

different countries. Arta liked to do this last thing a lot. She longed to know more about the other girls with their blonde hair and dressy beach clothes and their unimaginable lives in Australia or America or elsewhere in Europe.

Around midday, Armend came to see her. She gave him the spot furthest away from the café so they could talk.

“Sit down, beautiful,” he said and Arta perched on the end of his sunbed.

He was a nice looking man, Arta thought, much younger than her father. He had a deep voice and a comforting size and his face was a thoughtful darkness that Arta couldn't really understand. Today he was in a cap and expensive sunglasses. His dark skin and masculine scent were somehow familiar to Arta and she felt strangely comfortable with him.

“I have been thinking about your offer and I would love to go with you,” Arta said. “I would like to be your wife and work hard in your business. I am a hard worker.” She had practiced these lines and she was instantly embarrassed at how forced they sounded and then suddenly terrified that Armend would change his mind, that he would think she was too young or too stupid. But he just smiled.

“Relax,” he said, putting his large, warm hand on hers as it rested on the sunbed.

“That's wonderful news. I am so happy.”

“Oh,” Arta said, looking down at her slender legs. “That's good.”

Then he tightened his grip on her hand and leaned closer.

“Arta, can you leave tomorrow night?”

Nerves tightened her belly but she ignored them. A foolish hope, she thought.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, okay.”

“Wonderful. Here is an address of where we can meet. It is not far from here,” he said and slipped her a piece of paper.

“Okay,” she said again and then he leaned closer still and he kissed her on the cheek.

His stubble scratched her.

That afternoon Arta told Mirjeta she had met a husband and was leaving for the capital.

“You're lucky,” Mirjeta said. “Good luck.”

The following night at 9pm Arta sat on her bed next to a small bag. She was dressed in jeans and a singlet top and a light jacket. Imer was still not home and she was writing a note to him. It was hard to know what to say.

I am leaving tonight to go with Armend and start our new life in Tirana. He said once we get there I can call you and he will pay for you to come and visit me. I have left all my things. I won't need them. I told mum I was leaving but not about Armend but I will write to her explaining everything soon. She is not happy and very sick so please take care of her. Tell her I will send money home. She hesitated, then added: Thank you. I love you. Arta.

Arta crept into the front room and kissed her sleeping mother goodbye. She felt a pang of hot guilt when her lips brushed the hot, dry skin then she walked out the front door.

Arta walked briskly through the emptying streets. A light wind ruffled her hair and gave her goosebumps. *Goodbye broken pavement, she told the street, goodbye stupid stray dogs. Goodbye dust and dirt and filthy grime and carwashes and unfinished buildings. Goodbye dad. I'm escaping now, even though you said I wouldn't. I am going to a city with no dust and nice streets with lots of parks and places to walk and then I'm going to move to France or Spain and have blonde hair and live like the tourist girls on the beach.* She laughed and threw her head back to block everything from her vision except the early stars. *Maybe Armend and I will come back one day for a swim but for now, goodbye.*

Arta arrived a few minutes early. The address was a brick apartment block down a narrow side street. It was shut and there were no lights on inside. She knocked.

Nothing. She waited then knocked again. Nothing again.

I am young and stupid, she thought, and for the first time, shuddering in the cooling air, she wondered about her safety. Why hadn't this been something she considered before?

A few minutes later Arta knocked again and this time the sound was met by a distant whining noise. She narrowed her eyes and tried to peer inside one of the dark windows but she saw nothing. The whining grew closer, louder. Within 20 seconds the noise had become a deep guttural hum and it wasn't until it reached the next street over that she realized what it was.

The black Mercedes rounded the corner at speed, headlights off, before its breaks were thrown on and it came screeching towards Arta. She closed her eyes tightly against the sound but this time there was no stray dog, only a 14-year-old girl shielding her whole world against the noxious noise of screaming rubber and fast friction. She was still holding her arms over her face when the car door opened and

she was dragged roughly inside the moving vehicle. She was thrown onto the leather seat and looked up to see a man hovering over her but it was not Armend. It was a very ugly man. He raised his hand high to deal her a terrible blow.

She was on a ferry. She was a little girl again with her father on a ferry ride. They were on a boat together sailing across the sea to Italy. Communism had fallen but there were no jobs and there was no hope and so they were escaping and they were going to start a new life together. A happier life. But this time they had no battered suitcases with them and there were no other passengers by their side. She wanted to ask why, and to ask where her mother and Imer were, but when she looked up she was surprised to see the man holding her hand wasn't her father but it was Armend. He was smiling down at her warmly.

"Relax, my darling," he said. "We are going to our new life together."

The little girl wanted to relax but suddenly she felt the ferry pitching side to side very violently and then she realized they weren't on a ferry but a speedboat. She looked outside the window to where the sea would normally be but instead of aqua blue swell she saw an enormous dust storm, one that blocked out the entire horizon and held them up above the ground in its brown and blowing wings. Tears began to well in Arta's eyes.

Horrified, she turned back to Armend, wanting to see his comforting smile again, but the man holding her hand was no longer Armend but a very ugly man and all around her she saw the twisted and contorted faces of hundreds of terrified girls. Then the ugly man lifted his other hand high above the little girl's head and Arta braced for a terrible blow.

Arta woke up in a foreign room. The walls were white and the sheets were white and she was enormously relieved to see there was no dust anywhere. She had escaped the storm. But where was she, she wondered? She imagined this might be what a hotel would look like. Maybe this was Armend's apartment in Tirana. Except there were no windows.

All at once Arta felt her jaw aching and raised a hand to her tender face. Then she saw her arm and noticed it was bare. She looked down at the rest of her, expecting to see her jeans, but she was in nothing but her underwear. Arta felt a tightness in her stomach and tears began to well in her eyes.

Outside the white wooden door, two men were speaking in Italian. The door opened and a man walked in, swaying.

It was not Arta's father or Armend or Imer or the ugly man but someone completely different. Someone she didn't know. A fat older man with stubble and bloodshot eyes. He looked her up and down on the bed.

In that moment, the reality of a situation far beyond her years dawned on the 14-year-old girl: the fate she'd narrowly escaped when she was only seven, how much her father and brother were alike, that many awful deeds and foolish hopes are born from poverty and the fact, like her father had said, that she would never escape after all.

She backed away to the edge of the bed but the strange man only smiled.

"Venire qui ragazza sporca," he slurred in Italian.

Come here you dirty girl.