

Saffron

By Lesley-Anne Bourne

from the novel currently in progress, Plate By Numbers

So, flag down our lovely waitress, get us some kind of coffees, and tell me what I'm thinking.

Dessert?

That's it? That's the extent of your clairvoyant abilities? Sophie was disappointed and relieved at the same time. At least tell me what kind I want.

Two, actually said Jarrett studying her carefully. Then he closed his eyes and looked like he was consulting with the spirits.

So this is what he looks like when he's sleeping, thought Sophie. His soon-to-be-ex wife was crazy. I can't think why she'd leave him, I wouldn't.

Sophie tried to turn from those thoughts and physically turned her body to face the fountain full-on. All the men had gone.

Probably back to work, she thought.

Four women, at points north, south, east, and west, sat with paperback novels, or nothing. Why had his wife left him? Why had Sophie left him, for that matter? She had left him for Nick, one night, in his single bed in the dorm room at the end of the hall.

The room was larger than most, with bigger windows, because Nick was a grad student and was also the residence assistant for two floors. After months of seeing a lot of each other, but always in the company of his doubles partner, and now her apartment mate, Jarrett, Sophie and Nick found themselves alone on a Friday night.

Some kind of sponsored demonstration at the racquet club required Jarrett's participation. The three had just figured they would all go to the club, but at the residence pub for a quick dinner, they'd seen flyers for a jazz-singing pianist named Saffron.

Yeah, like that's her real name, said Sophie.

Well, I don't care, those look real to me, said Jarrett pointing at the photo of the performer.

Sophie blushed and thought she also saw Nick look a little uncomfortable.

She IS really good, said Nick, I heard her on CBC.

You ARE older than us, aren't you? joked Jarrett.

I listen because it reminds me of my house — my parents always have it on.

My parents may have had it on, I couldn't hear above their yelling.

Sophie wanted to say something, but didn't know what. Jarrett had told them one night over many beers in their apartment that his parents had split up, something which Nick and Sophie already knew, and knew he knew they knew, so they figured something else was coming.

It was that Jarrett's mother had left when he was sixteen, Thomas was twelve, and Mickey was five. When they'd come home from school one afternoon, it was Mickey's first year, there was a note saying she had an apartment in Toronto and a new job as a massage therapist.

There was so much in the note that the boys didn't understand. They focussed on what a massage therapist was — it was the late seventies, and no one in Timmins seemed to know what massage therapy involved. The boys told anyone who asked that their mother was away because she was in therapy. No one seemed to press for more information after that.

And even the boys didn't press, Jarrett said that night on the floor near where Sophie was stretched on the futon couch. Her feet were crossed on Nick's lap, mostly because he really had wanted to sit somewhere with support, his back was hurting from the previous week's tournament, and Sophie was really sleepy but didn't want to miss whatever the talk would be about.

We knew my father couldn't handle any questions, so we all just got on with things. We all helped Mickey do stuff, and played with him, and told him Mom kept phoning and saying she missed him and loved him. She didn't phone for three years.

Nick opened another beer.

She called to wish me a happy graduation at the end of grade thirteen.

Sophie shook her head, hoping some words would fall loose.

That's why I went to York, he said. I thought she'd want me to move close to her.

Sophie knew she'd never answered any phone calls from his mother. Jarrett's father called the apartment often, from all over the world. He'd been in politics in Timmins for years, and when he'd suddenly found himself single, he'd applied for any foreign posting he could get. As soon as Jarrett had left for Toronto, his father had taken the other two boys with him to Africa, various parts, various homes. And always,