



THINK OF ME

KJ HUTCHINGS

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A short story by

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The weather woman on television said it was the wettest April in years. Each day was a ritual of weeping.

Emily woke up to find her lashes clogged and the corners of her mouth sore and tasting of tears. Her head was heavy as the cloudy sky, having spent hours listening to the night rain beat incessantly on the roof. She heaved herself out of bed to look out of the window: the soil was always sodden, the flowers bowed into broken submission, more seeds washed away.

Think of me, he used to say to her, while the rain pours or when the winter chill bites down to the bone. He was like a golden giant stomping in work boots and as she watched him she could think of nothing else. He had looked so tall and strong in the flinty morning light. She longed to say, please, no, come to me. She would try to tempt him back to their big ruffled bed, snake her arms and legs around him like roots. He was so beautiful that she wanted to engulf him. His muscles were like sun-reddened mounds, and his fingernails were black crescents. His skin was like a soft peach glistening against her pallor.

You are my rustic lover, she thought, my gypsy man, my weather-beaten gardener with calloused hands and straw blond hair. You smell of sweat and grass, earth and toil, and when I kiss you it's like tasting the sweetest fruit.

I will wish for sunshine, she used to say to him. I will wish for sunshine everyday, only for you. No rain. She had told him this each morning on his way to work, handing him his sandwiches and thermos, planting a succulent kiss on his full lips. She seemed to hold the taste of love in her mouth all day. Eat your lunch in the park today, he told her. Get out of the office. Get some colour. And it has to rain sometimes. Nothing grows without sunshine *and* rain.

He was proud of his gardens. Sometimes he took Emily to see them. His face would be animated with pride as she peered over gates or walls in leafy Wimbledon or Richmond to view the neat rows of flowers, apple trees, carefully curving bushes and manicured lawns. She thought of her mother's small plot in Croydon that flourished on love rather than money. Cheerful pansies and polyanthuses beamed out of an

eclectic array of pots and vessels, and the lawn was always sprinkled with resilient but colourful weeds that her mother did not have the heart to dig out.

He used to point out the names of the plants, Latin words rolling off his tongue as quickly as his aiming finger; she could not help but watch his mouth as it formed the words. She wanted to roll with him on those neat lawns in sacrilegious abandon, press themselves up against the trees, so that petals, fruit and leaves fell at their feet.

The mansion houses were always exquisite and they both sighed over their beauty and unattainability. He said he had plans to live in a house like that one day, and Emily agreed how wonderful that would be but secretly she preferred their cosy little flat. Large houses never suited the intimacy of snuggling, of burrowing into a sanctuary of homeliness. She liked the confines of their four small rooms; that way she was never far from him. If she could not see him, she could hear him in one of the other rooms. She was thankful that their top floor flat did not have access to the garden below. That way no moment with him was lost at home.

She had told her mother about the big houses a few miles away and his plans to live in a mansion. 'On a gardener's wage?' her mother had replied. 'You can't live with your head in the clouds.'

More and more often he had worked long hours and fallen into bed like a drugged man. Emily yearned to touch him. Biting her lip she would watch him, her body pounding and pulsing whereas his was on a plateau of heavy slumber. His beauty was best captured when he slept. His features relaxed into the smooth yet defined shapes that make a man handsome. Other women undoubtedly found him beautiful too.

What did those women think when he tended their gardens? And did they continue to think of him when he was gone? Emily imagined a ghostly weight in their bed, pressing down and upsetting the balance. Jewelled, idle hands, older and richer, tracing his skin, inducing sighs. Was that really why he slept so heavily?

As it happened, yes it was.

The April rain made Emily's body ache. The cold and damp wrapped around her wrists, elbows and knees, and clung on until it felt as if each joint creaked like an old, neglected house. She watched the streams cascading down the window and murmured *Think of me*. Much of his hard work would be undone, the beautiful gardens he loved so much now in ruins. She stared blankly out of the window. The sun sometimes flashed its teasing face between the clouds and she knew he would be looking up, like everyone else, encouraged and half hopeful, searching for pockets of blue sky. She pictured his face and for a short moment the ache in her bones eased.

The rain became a comfort. People lived indoors in such weather. It washed all colour away leaving an insipid greyness behind that linked each day to the next. People's faces looked blanched as the downpour continued and everyone in the office grumbled about washed-out weekends and cancelled events. Even the mansion gardens continued to look muddy and bedraggled. Week after week the pattern continued and Emily counted out the days since he had taken all his belongings from the flat. She had watched from the bedroom window as he drove off in his new van and afterwards she had crawled into the big empty bed and pulled the covers over her head, and stayed like that for days.

'I wish him no ill will,' said Emily. Her mother folded up her umbrella, sat down on the edge of the bed and regarded her daughter's gaunt face.

'Don't think of him at all,' she replied softly. 'Think of yourself.'

'I still love him.'

'I know you do. But it won't always be like that. I promise you.'

Emily looked at her in disbelief. Everything was tinged with uncertainty as if the constant deluge on the windowpanes was washing away any kind of tangibility in her life. Only her love for him had been a constant. The mattress felt light and large without his body beside hers. Would he even think of her? Did he miss her? Did he regret what he'd done? She knew she would never know. The only thing she was sure of was that he had not loved her enough.

The elixir of sweet love, once imbued with thankfulness, had now disappeared and instead Emily swallowed a bitter taste. There was a bed somewhere in Richmond or Wimbledon containing him and a woman she would never see but felt she knew. Someone else now enjoyed what had once been hers to savour. Someone sophisticated, rich and glamorous, who could have her pick of men; not a little office clerk like Emily who had worshipped the ground he stomped on.

On the last day of April Emily could not get out of bed. Her heart slammed with a sickening heaviness as she lay staring at the ceiling in panic. The shivering in her belly would not cease. The fear was like a blade slicing down her chest and lodging beneath her ribs. Everything was pouring out of her and she was powerless to stop it. She could almost smell the essence of it and imagined it was red-black in colour, like clots of blood. She could not move any of her limbs but her head shook from side to side trying to dislodge the metallic taste that flooded her mouth. Her head was sinking into the pillow, drowning in the depths of her terror where it was almost impossible to breathe.

Outside, the wind and rain threw themselves against the window like punches. The curtains fanned out in fury and the window, which her mother had left ajar to let in some fresh air, slammed shut. The wind raced down the chimney and the room seemed to wail as if it were threatened with being prized apart, brick by brick. Rain pummelled on the glass like stones. Overhead, the thundering clouds crashed like booming cymbals and a deathly darkness extinguished the morning light.

Think of me. His face was before her with such clarity that it wrenched a wracking sob from her heart. *Think of me.* She knew he would not think of her at all, not anymore. Emily wanted to rake his body, plough bloody troughs in that smooth tanned skin and dig out enough flesh so it curled under her nails. She howled at the ceiling until she had no breath left. The storm howled with her, picking up the peak of her anger and carrying it higher and higher. Up and up it went, lifting the fury into a whirlwind.

And so it went on for hours and hours.

She could not remember when the silence returned and the room became still and light again. For some time all she could hear were the guttural sounds of her own

body: moans and whimpers, her teeth chattering and grinding. Slowly, Emily moved her arms and legs, wincing at the ache in her muscles. The bed was wet: her sweat had soaked the bed sheets. She pensively climbed out of bed and went to the window.

What she saw both appalled and excited her. The neighbours' gardens were in total disarray, displaying scenes of wanton wreckage. Sections of fencing had been ripped out and the gaps looked like wrenched teeth. A greenhouse was reduced to little more than a jagged skeleton and small trees lay like fainted girls, their roots clumped with mud. Slates had crashed down from rooftops. Gates hung off their hinges and dark demented stars had been smashed into windowpanes.

People were outside inspecting the damage with looks of bewildered dismay. They cast their uncomprehending faces upwards with the realization that it was no longer raining. Emily backed away from the window, her hand over her mouth. She suddenly thought of her mother's terraced house and its small garden, already drenched, and the hours that had been spent gently and doggedly attending to it. Without a further thought she got dressed and left the flat, her footsteps crunching on the debris.

'I'm so sorry,' she said to her mother, bending down to pick up broken pieces of a terracotta pot by the garden gate.

Her mother simply sighed and said she would have to begin again. Emily's eyes welled up but before she could speak her mother touched her arm and softly said, 'You can always begin again, you know. You build on what was there before and make it better.'

'What if there's nothing left?' Emily asked, sniffing.

'When that happens you're free to do whatever you want.'

Emily slept well that night, worn out from the work clearing the garden and had a series of dreams. In one lost letters were replaced by blank white pages. In another dream he had appeared before Emily as she sat writing and tried to spoon-feed her excuses but she turned away from him, her ears deaf to his entreaties. She had also dreamt she was holding a baby in her arms, beaming at the new life gazing up at her

with clear bright eyes.

When she awoke the next morning the sky was an expanse of blue. There was no ache in the centre of her chest and her eyes were dry. As she drank her tea she tried to fathom the extent of her dreams. She pondered the pages and the baby with a patient curiosity, safe in the knowledge that such revelations would come to her in time.

Think of me, she said to herself as she dressed in front of the mirror. Her face looked smooth and well rested, without the imprints of tears. Sunshine filled the room and Emily outstretched her arms in greeting. She decided she would buy as many packets of seeds as she could find and plant flowers in her mother's garden. In a short time those raggedy blooms and clashes of colour would be back. And then she would think about finding a garden of her own; a small patch of land somewhere.

When she thought of him she allowed herself a little smile and a shrug. Life was like weather cycles, with unpredictability woven rebelliously into the set pattern. The pattern would always continue and for that Emily was thankful. With a realization as clear as the sky, she felt the promise of happiness in her bones. It would come one day, like sunshine and rain clouds. Those moments would never last, but nor would they disappear forever.

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