

The Second Sunset - A short story

By Sara Jane Potter

Eyes wide as open palms and quietly in awe, Raelya stared at the first sunset through the South-facing wall of her apartment. The wall had been carefully constructed using reinforced, purple-tinted glass for her full protection. Absent-mindedly, she adjusted her position on the marble floor, shifting a deadened limb without shifting her sky-blue eyes from the magical view, like an unreachable child entranced by a fairytale.

She watched the setting sun like she watched it every day, imagining the shrinking rays were the spiky, bright limbs of a billowing sea-creature - stretching and receding - diminishing into the deep, dark depths of the sky.

Pressing a fingertip against the glass, her heart sank with the sun. She closed her eyes, trying to imagine being outside where a million needles of light - shades of pink and blue and purple - would impale her against the dusky sky. Like another engorged cloud. She opened her eyes again. The clouds shone like lamps whilst the sun drooped sorrowfully, its colour draining away like blood.

Raelya's crazy neighbour began banging on the glass in the adjoining apartment, but she barely noticed. It was something to notice later when she wasn't so preoccupied. It was nothing interesting, nothing new. She traced the streaks of colour in the sky with the tip of her finger, as if she were painting the poisonous beauty of the scene. It drew her mind from the clean, cold loneliness of her square apartment; this self-contained prison perched high on the cliff face.

A strand of hair fell across Raelya's cheek as her eyes were pulled across the sky by the line of an aircraft. It pierced the clouds like a needle, dragging behind it a trailing thread of smoke. Raelya waited for it to reappear. The sun dropped a little further.

However extraordinary this vision before her, Raelya knew it to be a muted display; the tinted glass tempered the fire in the sky. She'd never seen the sun's true colours or experienced unfiltered heat. Yellow, red and gold were all but mythical, barred colours. So in all its current glory, this sunset wasn't real.

Raelya exhaled quietly, the corners of her mouth crinkling, and on trembling lips her smile was as diluted as the sun.

Behind her, the whirring purr of her computer failed to break her concentration. The sounds were always there, as reassuring and familiar as her own breath on the glass, as the embryonic clouds. Her computer was her life. Literally. Her only means of communication with the outside world, and those beyond.

Now, the computer began to click and sing, tapping into her consciousness, fracturing her heavy trance.

She turned.

A message was being transmitted. This technology was so advanced that its workings occupied two-thirds of her North-facing wall. Slowly, his rounded, colourful words began to dance across her six-foot, flat screen - radiating tenderness. And the very essence of him filled the room.

"Always together. We are never really apart. You are forever mine, my exotic, beautiful Raelya. I stare into the empty depths of this cold, glassy face and all I see are your eyes, like molten amethysts, sparkling and watery with warm tears. I wish I could touch you. I love you. Tem. Xx"

The screen wobbled and flickered, almost as if it were disgruntled by what it relayed. Raelya slipped across the floor, moving towards her lover's words. The message slid around the silver surface as if losing its tenacious grip.

A power surge perhaps. Nothing terminal, certainly.

Tem's words juddered and separated like dance partners out of step, accompanied by an angry, electronic creaking. They faded in and out, as if emphasising the ghostly intangibility of this distant relationship. Raelya blinked rapidly, moving her face closer to the screen. How easily the two

of them slipped in and out of reach through words, yet remained trillions and trillions of miles apart. Usually.

There was a deeper problem here.

Raelya frowned, causing sand-dune furrows to swerve across her brow. She tapped the keyboard with an impatient fingernail, but the screen darkened. And Tem's sentiments shrank into an electronic abyss. This simply didn't happen, should never happen. This system was her lifeline. Everything she did involved this failsafe computer. Its vast capabilities propped up her sanity, lit the dark corners of her mind and opened up the only roads along which she travelled. Behind the cold glass and steel, superior technology would be at work to reconnect her, to retrieve power. Her connection could not recede. It couldn't desert her. Could it?

Gripped by panic, Raelya turned back to the sunset as if searching for inspiration in the breathtaking view. A view that could do precisely that - take her last breath away. Before dusk, it was said that a single splash of sunlight could infuse the body in seconds, melt down the organs and syphon off the soul. Raelya found this fact laughably disturbing.

Her sole friends were the distant clouds, and they frothed and bubbled and rolled playfully on the horizon, full of life and light, like helium balloons hinged to the dying sun. Tethered. Not so very different from herself.

An involuntary spasm rolled Raelya's hand into a fist, which she then smashed down onto the keyboard. The glass desk rattled as the keyboard skidded, but the computer remained quiet and dark. Raelya screeched. This tin monster was none of the aforementioned things; it was an unreliable stack of junk.

Forcing herself to be calm, she pushed negative thoughts into boxed submission. The system would be restored. *Patience*. It was one hundred percent self-diagnostic and corrective. *System failure* was an eradicated phrase in this modern world. And Raelya supposed that even ingenuity needed time to think. Minutes later, with darkness closing in and the next-door-nutter screaming at his ceiling, Raelya squared up to reality

and conceded that she was facing colossal system collapse.

Her frown deepened. Colour slid from her face. Her anxiety was so heightened that it hung in the air like a scent she couldn't identify. She turned back to the sunset. It was almost done, half-engulfed by the Kismall Mountain. Soundlessly the fiery ball had fallen once again into the mountain's asbestos mouth, to be sucked in by jagged, rocky lips and swallowed without trace. It was hard to believe that the sun would return tomorrow. Did it magically roll beneath the crust of the planet, to be coughed up again by the black Garda Hills in the North? Raelya liked to believe so.

Staring hard at the bald head of the sun, she hoped to hold it in the sky by will alone. The computer sat, eerily quiet. No gentle whirr or sporadic clicking from the depths of its hard drive. Was it brain-dead? How would she speak to Tem now? How would she communicate her research with the others of her kind, or with those from other solar systems?

She couldn't.

Raelya's breath shunted the empty air, stirring the still silence. She felt suffocated, like she was drawing in puffs of toxic gas. Moving around the room, she grew heavier and heavier as thickening dread leaned against her, until she finally slumped down in the middle of the room, no longer able to support her body.

No computer. No tem. No computer. No Tem. The two thoughts streaked through the dark space in her head like blazing comets. The sun would roll back into the sky tomorrow, burning away the blackness. But then what would she do? Help in this independent world was a limited commodity that she had shrugged off years ago. She was alone with this.

The distant rumbling of aircrafts skimmed the surface of her consciousness, tangled in with more banging from next door. Everything had turned to shit. And there was no way out.

Crawling back towards the South-facing window and the sinking sun, Raelya's tears distorted her view of the deep violet arc. It was nestling inside the Kismall Mountain like a precious stone set in a black rock.

Without warning, a desperate energy swelled within her. Renewed de-

termination bound itself with Raelya's rage and she rose up on trembling limbs, flying across the room towards the silver-domed hard drive. The defeat on her face was chiselled into hope, and she sneered down at the shell of the computer's snug brain before scooping it up, holding it high on her shoulder.

There would be crafts leaving tonight. Only the most equipped of her species physically travelled. Raelya was not at all equipped, but she was desperate. The sun was low enough. Surely. It couldn't harm her now. There would be planet-hoppers departing all night. She could go anywhere. Her thoughts hit her hard and fast as she glided towards the South-facing window.

She didn't hesitate.

Raelya smashed the computer against the purple glass. She smashed it again.

And again.

And *again!*

When it finally gave way, a rainfall of diamonds divided up the sky, momentarily shattering its smooth continuity. For a second, the window was a multi-coloured kaleidoscope, a mosaic of tiny, dazzling lights. Just as suddenly, the glittering wall fell downwards. Hard, purple fragments of her once vital shield showered down the mountainside in all directions; glancing off the dry, black rocks on their journey to the dusty basin below.

An explosion of unfamiliar light pounded into the naked room, claiming new space, transforming the colour of Raelya's skin, hair, wings. It forced shut her stinging eyes.

Touching the two bare walls for the last time with silvery tips, she flexed her flightless wings. This flight might kill her; her wings had been decorative sleeves until now, but she had no choice. She stretched them in and out, in and out, not daring to open the warm lids of her eyes. There was no discomfort though, no pain, no meltdown.

Raelya dipped her head, pointing it towards the sun. The distant roar

of engines filled the air, so much louder now. The breeze was fresh and full of strange, compelling scents. Sucking in one last deep breath, Raelya leapt and flew. Curving over the black landscape she glided, slicing open the sky, following the light that shone through her eyelids. Red light. A loose smile unravelled across her features, wider than the sun.

Sweeping over the mountains, Raelya approached Kismall. She would find a flight to planet Icreous. She would find Tem. And together they could explore the Solar systems, planet-hopping to the furthest catalogued point in space. Earth.

Easing open her eyes, Raelya allowed slithers of light to gently bathe them. Reds, yellows, burnt oranges and golds oozed warmly into her retinas. The aesthetic orgasm graduated through the sky, funnelling down to a red-hot sun.

The second sunset.

Far behind her, Raelya heard the distant shattering of glass. Ahead, she saw her future reflected in the true colours of the sunset, and she fixed her eyes on it. Feeling freer with every wing-beat, she knew that she was now moving ever closer to Tem.