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Shimmer



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Five Letters from New Laverne

by Monica Byrne

My dearest Hiro,

I arrived at the way station early this morning. The government has designed quarters that are better suited to toaster ovens than human beings. The lights are neon, my cot feels like cardboard, the sheets are chalk-grey. But there is a tiny round window showing blackness and stars: comfort is comfort, and I am grateful.

To take me to the colony, the government has hired a trader: Leugnung Macht. What a name. Can you imagine? He may be of Swiss descent, a kinsman to me, God forbid. He walks slowly, and his belly is like a misshapen loaf of bread. He arrogates space like he has nothing to prove, which of course means that he has everything to prove. You know I detest such people. Understandably, he has not the warmest affection for me, either. When we shook hands, he snorted at the edelweiss pinned in the lapel of my uniform, probably thinking me green, pitiable, government-issued.

In any case, we met over coffee in the mess hall. He said, "I'm sure that on Earth, you call this moon New Laverne [as the colonists do], but I call this moon Cutter," and he sort of snuffled into his coffee, amused with himself, no doubt longing to be asked *Why do you call the moon Cutter?* I suspected his reason, but held my

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silence. He swirled his coffee in his mouth, and then leaned in as if sharing a dirty secret, saying, "I s'pose you've heard what they do to themselves out there. They're sadomasochists, you know."

I stiffened and did not reply. Macht carried on about the colonists being "chilly." Apparently, they prefer minimal interaction with him when he delivers supplies, and he has no complaints about that, indeed, but still he referred to them as freaky bleeders and spat into his empty coffee cup. As an envoy, I prefer to keep a fresh mind when meeting a new community; unfortunately Macht made this impossible.

There are only a few things to take care of at New Laverne. So few, I hardly know why I am here. It's a tiny speck of a moon out at the edge of known space and I am already tired of the remoteness. This is really a routine checkup, nothing more; whatever else one might say about the colonists, clearly they are content to keep to themselves, and I am eager to let them. I long to return to Earth. I can still see you dancing in the living room, working out a rhythm after breakfast, when you thought I was washing the dishes and not looking.

All my love,
Jerome

My Hiro,

We descended to the moon, lurch after lurch, like a marble dropping down a staircase. Macht revels in slipshod maneuvers. I felt sick, and despite my pride could do nothing but double over in my seat with my nose in my crotch. Meanwhile Macht took noisy sips of his coffee to demonstrate his non-affect, which is of course itself an affect.

After we cleared the clouds, I strained to see the colony, which resembles a warren, built out of solid basalt. It houses all twelve residents. The compound rests just within the dark side of the moon. New Laverne does not turn as it orbits, but rather keeps the same face sunward. The border between dark and light is only a mile away. The colonists live in twilight.

At the landing pad, I met Abbot Flores, the head of the colony. Hiro, I really thought I had prepared myself for the thing for which the colonists of New Laverne are famous, but upon coming to the moment, I realized I had not taken it to heart. Redness bloomed upon the abbot's hands, head, and feet, the gleaming jewel-like red of open wounds, oozing rosy fluid. Upon seeing this, my own heart bloomed with adrenaline; I would call it an animal intimacy, a shared pulse.

But strangely, once I saw past the blood, I felt an immediate warmth, for he felt like a favorite uncle. He is very tall, and his barrel-like torso draws up even as it seems to spread apart. He is of Spanish descent, so he has skin the color of old bronze, like sycamore leaves in autumn, and his beard is like a funnel of steel wool, moving stiffly with his chin. A pleasing contrast, the grey against olive. He has old-man arms: soft muscle with thin, flabby skin sliding over the sinews, and crows' feet radiating from his armpits. He wears a shift of rough black cloth, made from a single length and sewn along the sides — the armholes are cut as if with a knife, with stray fibers fluttering out like eyelashes.

Immediately, he pressed his hands together and bowed to me, bright eyes never blinking. He insisted I call him Miguel, and the colonists, brethren. I wish you could meet him, Hiro. Why a man of his character would dwell in such a far reach of space, I hardly know. He would be at home at a summer dinner party in the Basque countryside, not in this alien place.

My quarters are extraordinarily stark, though I have all I need. A black curtain, heavy as chainmail, draws across the threshold to make a "door," and my bed is simply a shelf carved out of rock, with one heavy black blanket. There is one iron sconce on every wall, and each holds a white candle that drips onto the floor. I passed another cell where huge piles of drippings had accumulated — reaching almost to the sconce itself; can you imagine? The spray of wax had made a beautiful pattern, rather like a pebble mosaic on a grotto floor. My candle is beginning to make its own pile, and I like watching it drip and spray, doing nothing to interfere with its slow art, which

unfolds according to its own mind without the slightest intention on my part.

Given the late hour, I was brought cold water, a bit of warm bread on a plate, and some butter in a tin, all arranged on a tray. The woman who brought it was dressed the same as Miguel, in a rough black shift. She did not speak, but bowed to me, smiling broadly and with incredible kindness. Her pierced hands had ceased bleeding for the moment, and showed the beaded yellow crystals of first healing. I understand that the wounds never in fact heal, but renew themselves daily; the brethren make no move to cover, slow, or absorb the flow.

They are quite poor, of course — the brethren have taken a vow of poverty. I opened the tin and spread the butter on the bread. Comfort is comfort. I am grateful.

Though, Hiro, my heart is uneasy. There is nothing here but the black of the basalt, the white of the candles, and the red of their blood. It is so strange to be here on this moon after saying goodbye to you in Bern. The climes are opposite — one all brightness and space, the other all darkness and form. Soon the mission will be over, and the report filed. I cannot wait to return home.

All my love,
Jerome

Dearest Hiro,

Late this morning, I was led to the common room, a long, low space with no decoration save for a waterfall at the far end. The water comes from a hot spring that the brethren use for their water supply. The waterfall is no peaceful Zen curtain, but an erratic, spouting, burbling stream; it forces itself out of the rock and coats everything in reach with a fine gossamer mist, which condenses into tears that stream down the walls.

The twelve brethren were all gracious and welcoming. We sat down at the common table, a long rectangular slab of basalt leveled on the top for a smooth surface. Setting our elbows upon it, we

discussed business: I made sure that their voting apparatus was operational, that their emergency beacon was working, that their taxes were up-to-date. They are exemplary citizens, really.

After the formalities, we set to lunch, which was a simple but delicious meal of bread and soup. It reminded me of your “big soups,” with big chunks of everything in it, dumplings and carrots and onions. The vegetables are grown in dark volcanic soil, which gives them the surprisingly pleasant sulphuric taste of good eggs. They make me full, but leave me thirsty.

One of the brethren is named Dominic, a very pale man with a small round face like a potato, whose eyebrows curve down, following the dome of his head. He remarked that I was handling myself with considerable composure among them; most visitors are visibly alarmed or disgusted by their wounds. I was startled by his candor, and seeing those twelve faces turn to me with curious and open expressions, I realized that I was expected to reply with equal candor. I explained that I had been trained as a government envoy, which meant that I was prepared for every permutation of human nature; these eccentricities were hardly more strange than those found on a street corner in Mumbai. This point they all seemed to appreciate, and turned back to their soup, satisfied.

However, Miguel held my eye with a look that seemed to say, Ask, ask, ask more! So emboldened, I asked how they had come into their wounds. I stumbled on the language a bit, trusting in the innocence of my ignorance; a few raised their heads with a bemused expression. A fellow named Tam closed his eyes with a look of concentration — he had the look of ancient Tibet. He said he had lit a votive in the shrine of Saint Francis in Old Laverne, just as a plain tourist, then felt his chest welling with compassion. When he opened his eyes, his hands and feet and chest were welling with blood.

Not all came into their wounds through affiliation with the ancient Christ. A blonde Scandinavian woman named Frieda said she had been standing in a crowded elevator at her accounting job in Stockholm when blood began to drip on the floor and bloom through

her expensive pantsuit, creating a terribly awkward situation for all present. (Smiles alighted on the faces around the table; it was a familiar story among them.) Another woman named Ciatta, tall and quiet with radiant blue-black skin, said simply that she did not bleed until she “came to sunlight” — a simple statement that was met with silence and, I perceived, reverence.

Miguel leaned forward eagerly at the other end of the table, gesturing with his saggy elbows, encouraging my curiosity. “Yes,” he said, “there are many paths to bleeding, but we have all come here because we do. And we are present to one another.”

“Forgive me,” I said, “but the trader Macht implied that these wounds are self-inflicted.” At this, Frieda tensed; perhaps she had been accused of such. I continued quickly, “I understand that this is not the case. I have observed it firsthand. I was wrong to give him credence.”

Miguel nodded. “Naked suffering is not a thing easily borne, either by those who suffer or by those who see them suffer. Suffering takes a thousand forms, clad in every sort of disguise: arrogance, ambition, achievement. People bury their pain and busy themselves, blind to everything; they only hurtle through space, accomplishing things.”

Miguel spread his hands wide as he said this, and bowed his neck forward: “But we simply accept that we suffer, nakedly, and we dwell together.”

“But why suffer at all? Can we not avoid it?” I said, and the urgency in my voice startled me. I felt embarrassed, but the brethren turned to me with brows knitted in understanding.

Miguel said gently, “It is not a choice of whether to suffer. It is simply a choice of how to bear it.”

After lunch, I wandered down dark corridors, lost in my thoughts. I do not know if I seek comfort in community or solitude; I suppose I would be troubled in either case. I feel as though Miguel’s words have been writ across my chest. They are a band that belabors my breathing. I wish you were here so we could talk about it, and

you could make fun of me in all my seriousness, and then you could tell me your silly stories about Genji the doggie and his friend Cherry Blossom Bush. And I would say, Hiro, cherry blossoms do not come on bushes; and you would say, in my story they do!, and push me off the bed, and tell me to stay there.

Hiro, I miss you with all my heart.

All my love,

Jerome

My love Hiro,

Last night I found myself in a subterranean chapel, the lowest point in this warren, where all the salt and vapors, blood and tears of this place come to settle. Like everything here, the room was carved from solid basalt. It is just large enough for a short bench positioned before a small altar — surely intended for solitary contemplation. And solitary I was, though in body only. I longed for you, I missed you terribly, and your absence accompanied me wherever I walked, wherever I rested. Here, too, at this little altar. Two milky candles bled all over the sides, free to bleed as surely as wounds.

I sat down on the bench, and suddenly, like a knife in my gut, I recalled your body: your hip bones torquing as you danced, sliding beneath brown-eggshell skin, the muscles in your belly tightening as you leapt up, rippling in hushed air, wholly unbound, unmoored, unmade. This memory became a knot that tightened with each passing second until my entire awareness was focused on its pull, and I did not know how to do anything but be consumed by it.

In this moment Miguel spoke suddenly behind me. I was so glad to see him. Warmth came back to my pale, sweaty face, and I gestured for him to sit, remembering to behave like a government envoy.

Miguel sat with his body turned towards me. Again, I noticed the trails of blood wending their way down his temples, and my heart pulsed in empathy. He looked at me kindly, saying nothing, and I gestured to the altar, stammering about the cozy space,

something inane. But Miguel met me where I was, nodding and agreeing, saying, "Yes, I remember when we dug this place. It is a nice little salty womb to come down to, when one feels the need for quietness." Though in saying this, he seemed to understand that I had needed companionship. I had not even known it myself, much less dared to ask for it. He said, "Jerome, come meet with me in the morning. I have something to show you."

So Hiro, I must remain in suspense. But in the meantime, I feel I will sleep well, as the day has exhausted all my adrenals, and therefore my whole body. I feel a momentary peace because I will be meeting Miguel in the morning. I am curling up, as I do every night I have been here, clutching my blanket in my fist. I wish I were curled around your body, as you always sleep so soundly, and that oblivion suffuses into my body like wine into a sponge, and I take in your peace, your slow untroubled breaths. I miss you.

All my love,
Jerome

My Hiro,

I slept deeply. Upon waking, I shared breakfast at the common table, after which Miguel bade me walk with him. We walked up stairs that tunneled through the rock. At the top, a door opened to a rocky plateau that spread to the horizon, across which a paler blue could be discerned, paler than the blue-black overhead. Miguel said, "Dawn is a mile's walk. Will you join me?" He produced two heavy walking sticks of smooth black wood.

So we set out, first speaking of small and faraway things. I told him about President Cuaron's new continent, and small wars burning themselves out, and the rebellious colonies, which have created headaches for those of my ilk — not a mission for such a junior officer as myself, I said. But as I spoke these words they vanished at once. This felt strange. Usually after I speak words and silence follows, the words echo in my mind. These words did not echo, but were forgotten as soon as spoken. The silence was so hungry it ate them up at once.

Miguel became silent as well. We spoke with the thuds of our walking sticks. I followed him down hollows and over ridges. As we walked, the horizon swelled with light, fuller each minute, a cornflower blue that gave way to marigold.

At last, many meters away, I could discern a hazy separation between shadow and light: the photic border of this still moon. It ran like a curtain across the terrain. Where we stood, the sun was still barely beneath the horizon — used as I am to sunrises on Earth, I was expecting that the sun would come to me. But this is a still moon, so I had to come to the sun.

Miguel turned to me at just the moment I halted, and I halted because a terrible fear had come over me, a nameless apprehension that became all the more terrible for its senselessness. Miguel did not look alarmed. Instead, his face was filled with compassion, as if he knew exactly what I felt.

He said that these final steps are the hardest, that always the darkest hour is before dawn, whether the moon be still or turning, and that we might rest and talk if I wished.

I said, “Miguel, I feel afraid but I don’t know why. There is no reason for me to fear. But I cannot walk into the sunlight and I cannot sit on this rock. I cannot take a step further and I cannot go back. My thoughts turn to ash.”

“Look up,” he said. “Look up.”

I looked up, and there were a few stars in the sky, near and bright; I did not know their names.

“What am I looking for?” I said.

Miguel answered, “The next moment.”

I rested my eyes in the sky. And then I felt that I could go on.

Miguel gestured that I leave my walking stick against a boulder, next to his; there they rested together, templing at the top. I felt his palm on my shoulder blade, urging me on. Beneath my feet, light cast sharp shadows on the stones. I looked up. The sun shot over the horizon, blinding me with glorious hot light. I had been so long at the edge of darkness, and now I emerged, blinking, the earth

around me transformed. My eyes swept across the landscape to meet Miguel's, and he called me by name, saying "Jerome, Jerome! Look at your hands."

My hands flowed with blood. As I watched, the wounds welled and surged over, pools rising up, swelling and then bursting, rivulets coursing down my wrist, wrapping swiftly around the broad of my forearm and dripping onto rock with hot splashes. In astonishment, I regarded my other hand, producing the same, and my feet blossoming too, and a warmth through my side, and streams down my temples, and burns across my back. There was nothing at all I could do. There was nothing at all I wanted to do.

"We have seen your wounds, from the moment you arrived," said Miguel. "You could not. Often one cannot. You needed to be shown." His leaden beard was touched in gold, and he said in the most beautiful voice: "We know your loss."

I did not comprehend him, Hiro, though my animal self knew. It was pulsing with blood.

Miguel said, "Jerome, your beloved is dead."

I said, "I know."

I know.

I spent every moment by your bedside, in that room in Bern, with the window looking out upon the city tumbling down the mountainsides, telling you everything, everything, until your breathing became slower, after which I told you to let go, be free of me, though my heart longed for nothing but that you should stay, beyond all reason, but then there was only silence in the room, and your forehead was still warm when I kissed it. But I am still telling you everything. Even about the window at the way station. And the butter on my bread. And this bright dawn. I am still telling you everything, Hiro. It is all I can do.

Again, I shared supper with the brethren tonight. There was no need to speak of my walk to the dawn. We spoke of ancient saints and new moons. The others smiled at me broadly, not masking their love, feeding me rare sweets. Comfort is comfort. The candle in my

cell is slowly re-forming itself on the floor, a mound of drippings, and pinpricks of wax spattered around it. Time melts and courses.

I am going to stay here awhile, Hiro. Will you stay with me?



Five Letters from New Laverne — **Monica Byrne** is a writer, playwright and actor living on a farm in beautiful Chatham County, North Carolina. She is a graduate of Wellesley, MIT and Clarion 2008, and has another story forthcoming in *Gargoyle Magazine*. She loves thunderstorms, rollercoasters and playing with blocks. You can check out her family's blog at byrne.typepad.com.





World Tree

Shawn Kavanaugh

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