

August by Tadhg McCullough

2,000 words.

Amal is in love with a city. All of it - streets and steps and steeples, roofs and rooms and routes, doors and domes and distances - is printed on her mind like the face of an old friend. Amal loves the cool, clear river which cuts through Munich. The river holds islands peppered with smooth stones. When it's hot, she wades through the current, spreads a blanket and reads in the sun, her body turning a richer shade of brown with each passing day. Pleasure is warmth and water and words.

Figs and coffee for breakfast. Figs are a remarkably lusty fruit, Amal thinks as she bites into the soft flesh. It's her last full day in the city. This morning she cast the kitchen windows open and let the breeze kiss her face. And now she sits, takes a sip of coffee, turns the page of her book, places the mug on the table where it rests, heavy and white, a clean tooth.

The apartment is small and functional. Each year Amal considers booking a different place but finds it impossible. This is the home she rented during her year abroad, the first time she lived on her own, the door she shut every morning before descending the stairs and throwing herself into the arms of another day spent studying at the university, drinking lemonade in the English Garden or reading by the riverbank. A routine she repeats now, turning the key in the lock three times.

Mariahilfplatz is emptier than she has ever seen it. Shopkeepers doze on stools by their wares: bread and eggs, baskets filled with root vegetables, fat wheels of cheese, sausages strung up like traitors. The air is scented by the breeze rippling past a stall selling flowers: pinks and dahlias, zinnias and cosmos and bee balm all held together with brightly coloured ribbons. Amal bends and smells as a butterfly lands to rest its wings on the pistil of an orchid.

The glass front of the Neue Pinakothek glitters in the sun. Amal purchases a ticket from the attendant, who is handsome in a clumsy manner, the bridge of his nose broken into a kink. The museum is almost empty. A private viewing. No need for a map, Amal treads the familiar course to a painting she has seen countless times, a painting which has become part of a personal ritual, part of her own body. A vase catches the light and holds sunflowers, their heads heavy with gold. Princes unable to bear the weight of the crown, bodies on the verge of collapse. Ochre, brass, honey: the brush strokes euphoric and violent, threatening to burst open, to break every boundary, to smash the thin line of the vase, to blur petal and stem, to gash the canvas and spill out, marking the frame, the wall, the air. Uncontainable joy. A fleeting blush of summer forever in full bloom. Never wilting, never fading.

The flowers are inked on her skin. Each night, as she strips to wash, Amal catches sight of the tattoo on her thigh, no more than an outline, a spray of petals sustaining her until she stands in front of the painting again, until she brims with a feeling whose name she dare not speak for fear of it being ridiculed, for fear of trying to enclose that which is so vital, so without limits: *ecstasy*.

Guilt swells in her chest. Is this so important? Would it hurt to resist her annual pilgrimage this once? Well, it might not be 'this once'. Who knows what the coming months might bring? When the first news of coronavirus broke, Amal - a firm believer in the twin virtues of optimism and practicality - thought the disease would die out before reaching England. Surely no worse than bird flu or swine

flu or all the other beasts of burden the tabloids used to stoke panic and sell papers. When the schools closed, she tackled the issue head-on, ensuring all St. Ambrose students had access to digital lessons. This, she overheard her mother shout down the phone, was “the kind of behaviour that will lead my daughter to be the youngest Muslim headteacher in England, inshallah”. When the politicians introduced last-minute rules and left Amal alone during Eid, she grimaced and capitulated, tears hitting the mat as she said her prayers.

Everything taken, everything lost. And so a fortnight ago, with Germany listed on the travel corridor, she booked her flights and rang Mrs Hoffmann about the apartment.

Amal shakes her head. She’s vowed to leave all thoughts of the virus at home. A week without worries. Waking, eating, reading, bathing, sleeping; alone. No mother asking about the latest changes to the regulations. No students claiming a bad connection at the precise moment she mentions their homework is overdue. No friends repeating how “lucky you are to have so much time off” before she drives home to plan lessons, mark assignments and host meetings with parents asking what, exactly, their fees are being spent on if the building remains shut and the clubs cancelled. Not that the building ever shut, a skeleton staff remained to care for the children of essential workers.

The heat outside appears like a memory. Everything blue and green and blossoming. How the city transformed her. As a young woman, Amal felt the need to fasten characteristics to herself like rosettes, to announce her qualities, to have hard, definite edges. She frequently refused the opportunity to strike out, fearing she would betray this flinty sense of self. But, as fruit ripens, time brings softness. Loosed from England and rid of her own expectations, Munich allowed Amal to become a constellation of interests: some bright, some long dead, their faded light appearing through the flicker of memory. She used the city as a telescope to view her life at home, enjoyed the vagaries of distance, the ability to be multiple and contradictory and undecided. Now resting, now dancing.

Munich became a nuptial. The meeting between one moment and another. The point at which Amal realised life could be transcendent. Throughout her teenage years, she knuckled down, showed a steely commitment to success. At university, she never stopped: editor of the student newspaper, head of the netball team, a standout debater. Her own sculptor, carving the future from stone. And then came Munich, the empty days bringing different rewards, knowledge not found in books or prizes, a new understanding. The surfeit of time taught her abundance.

People in wetsuits are surfing the Eisbach. As it passes under the bridge, the fast channel ploughs into a recess and creates a standing wave, information given to her by Amelia all those years ago as they finished the ice creams melting over their hands. Amelia, placed beside Amal thanks to their closeness in the register. Amelia, with her confident stride and long blonde braid. Amelia, introducing her to running and receiving an education in photography by means of a trade. Amelia, hugging her at the airport and insisting she visit Vermont. Amelia, who she never spoke to again. That’s what people become: a collection of memories. Amal stands and watches the surfers jump off the bank and hover over the water.

Fresh sheets on the bed. New linen for her last night, a custom developed over time. The shutters on the balcony are open, allowing the summer air to come and go as it pleases. Amal imagines her

older self wandering the streets of the city, heading nowhere in particular, greeting neighbours, deepening the lines which riddle her face, collecting around her eyes and mouth, a reminder of each laugh, of each smile, of each happy day. Her body is thicker, ringed by time like an oak tree, a plentiful vigil.

In the morning, the bed sits blank, a page awaiting ink. Amal smooths the creases and stares at the emptiness. The suitcase lies open in the hallway. Clothes are folded in neat squares and weighed down with books. She checks under the bed, behind the sofa, in the fridge for any part of herself which has come loose and tucked itself away, desperate to stay. The apartment is bare and clear, a body fresh from the bath.

Airports are uncanny places. Entry points to cities bleached of all character. Amal sits by the long window and pecks at a sandwich purchased more for amusement than sustenance. Planes rattle along the runway and take off with a start as if lifted by the invisible hand of a child. The number for her gate is called and she makes her way across the flat escalator. At security, she is passed a tray by the guard who repeats instructions over and over. She pictures herself a doll with its accessories laid out: sunglasses, belt and earrings, phone, passport, wallet, even her shoes.

The plane is half-empty and yet she has a neighbour. An eager Canadian using the aisle seat as a footrest as she shows Amal her phone, swiping through photo after photo of her travels - the same lone face in front of the Louvre, the Colosseum, the Brandenburg Gate. How lucky she is to take the trip, her cousin's wedding cancelled twice, her brother not allowed in for the birth of his first child, if only the government had acted like New Zealand. Amal tries her best to express interest from behind her mask: raises her eyebrows, cocks her head, gives a thumbs up and feels ridiculous.

England, so sure of itself, hasn't changed. Piles of tourists disembark and wait for their luggage at the carousel, craning their necks as each case appears from the shoot, straining to see if they have lost the roulette. Flush with sun and wearing matching t-shirts, a group of men whoop as their bags arrive, slapping each other on the back and performing swaggering dances. Amal stands until the head of her case crowns.

A welcome silence clutches the train. She stares out as the country ticks by and looks at the evening sky latticed with soft clouds. The holiday is over, from tomorrow reality will resume. She opens her bag, retrieves the remaining sandwich (now a kind of souvenir) and chews to pass the time.

Before the pandemic, home meant freedom. The house liberated Amal, allowed her to sing, dance, eat spaghetti straight from the copper-bottomed pan. Free from having to put her best foot forward, from having to set an example, from having to praise, chastise, step in, mitigate, resolve, explain, respond, make her point clear. The virus changed matters. She found the front room invaded by litters of children peering at her through the screen and by anxious parents seeking reassurance that Tom, Iris, Charlie, Holly, Rojin wouldn't fall behind. How little she saw of the outside world, confined to the regular route of her run or an occasional coffee, all the while hoping she wouldn't bump into a mother or father demanding that she transform herself there and then, that she pause her shopping, that she lay down her first name and personality and attend to their every thought about handwriting, exams, the rugby league.

Left fallow, the flat has recaptured some of its old magic. The spell enters Amal as she leans against the door. In the kitchen, she lights incense and puts the radio on. A few hours until the languor dissipates, enjoyed slowly, the taste of coffee at the end of a meal. The crevices between her fingers are cracking again, dried out by sanitisation. She takes a bottle of moisturiser from her bag and massages it across the skin, leaving her palms slick and cold. Replacing the bottle, she finds a round white stone taken from the riverbank, holds it level against her hand to appreciate the fine grain, rubs it between her fingers, generating a pleasant warmth. An ordinary stone, gathered without a second thought, now bringing tears to her eyes; flowing, like the future yet to come.