



ERIN DUNIGAN

Fading Away

a short story by JOSEPH BATHANTI

The instant Fritz sees her at Keith Gentile's party, it clicks: Claire Raffo. The pitiful little girl he knew way back at Saints Peter and Paul grade school, who sobbed herself sick every day over lunch while the gorgeous Sister Hyacinth smiled and banged the table with her yardstick and drilled Claire in her lovely soprano to *eat*. In the years since then, Claire has rarely crossed his mind, yet when he sees her now, the memory of those daily lunchroom scenes ratchets through his head.

Fritz is not in the habit of instigating conversation. He's usually more than willing to remain anonymous and keep to himself. But tonight he walks up to Claire Raffo, who's standing out on Keith's balcony, drinking wine from a coffee mug. A beautiful summer Saturday night. Music, stars, languor. The bravado of two pipes of opiated hash in the alley with Keith.

Fritz explains how they know each other. It's obvious Claire doesn't remember him, but she's friendly, and pretty in a soft yet durable way. Nothing like his mother and her cronies: hard,

smart-mouthed women with dyed hair and dresses too short to flatter their lumpy legs. As he looks into Claire's slightly amused face, he feels something a little like destiny. What are the odds of their reconnecting this way after all these years? This thought appeals to him: the romantic notion that perhaps there is an order to the universe, and that he and Claire have all along been situated together in its design.

"That was a long time ago," Claire says. Her smoky whisper hangs in the air between them. She looks him dead in the eye, as if there's nothing in the world that scares her.

Those scenes in the school cafeteria seem like a life that someone else lived, something he might have read about or dreamt: Claire's tiny, birdlike eyes, the color of aluminum; her plaid uniform hanging off her; how terrified she was of Hyacinth, in her sleek black habit, coming down with the yardstick on the table next to Claire, who sat, like the rest of them, on a folding mortuary chair with "DeRosa" stenciled on its back. She was starved looking, like one of the spindly African children they collected money for at Christmas and Easter. Before her sat the white tablet of untouched bread. She would lay one hand upon it as if swearing an oath.

"Pick up your sandwich, Miss Raffo," Sister Hyacinth would say in a measured voice, whacking the table with her stick. Claire would jump in her seat at each report. "Pick it *up*," hammering again until the little girl started to cry. With both hands Claire would hoist the sandwich to her mouth and peck at it, Hyacinth swooping in and out, pounding the table until Claire came apart, turquoise veins spiraling beneath her papery skin, her silently wailing mouth clotted with meat and bread, tears and drool dripping from her chin.

"Swallow, Miss Raffo." The thin wood slamming down, Claire quivering. "It's a sin to waste when so many pagan stomachs go unfilled day after day."

Fritz and Claire stand on the balcony, looking out over the alley: potholed asphalt; black chunks of rocky tar scored out of the roadbed by the harsh Pittsburgh winters; the distant, otherworldly lights of downtown. His hands rest on the wrought-iron balustrade. When he looks over the edge, it's too much like being on the scaffold he scales every day for a pittance, a hundred pounds of bricks stacked in a hod on his shoulder, the blinding sun, the skinny planks beneath his work boots checked and splintering. Keith's little patch of peppers and tomatoes seems to rush up at him, his vision clouds, and he begins to fall backward. When he comes to, he is sitting on the balcony, Claire next to him, Keith leaning down, a knot of people surrounding them. Claire's open hand rests on Fritz's arm. He clutches the balusters.

"You OK, buddy?" Keith asks.

"Yeah, I'm all right."

"That hash," Keith says. "It's like acid."

"I'm OK."

Claire says nothing, her hand white against his blue work shirt. There's the music and the party, the smell of grass and hash, the clink of bottles.

"I'm fine, you guys. Honest to God. I just got a little light-headed."

Claire doesn't move her hand, even after the others back away. She and Fritz sit side by side on the balcony. He looks at her face: pink bow lips, no lipstick. He knows that a door has opened. "I'm OK," he says, and he smiles, though he does not mean to.

"I know."

"I probably need to take a little walk."

"I probably need to come with you."

As they get to their feet, she removes her hand from his arm, and he instantly feels its absence.

They decide to go to Tootie's Diner for coffee. Cutting through the alley, they emerge onto Penn Avenue and the full thrum of lights and traffic. They turn to each other, as if this moment were mapped out long ago in the cafeteria of Saints Peter and Paul, and kiss. Music pours out of Keith's window: "I should've stayed on the farm / I should've listened to my old man." Claire takes Fritz's arm, and they walk the remaining half a block to the garish diner. No booths, just a counter. They perch on high stools and order coffee from Pam: front teeth only, no molars; netted, concrete-colored hair; pencil behind her ear; pale green uniform trimmed with white collar and short, white-cuffed sleeves. While they sip, Pam sits in a chair behind the counter and works a crossword, every so often singing out, "You good, Fritz?" and getting up, no matter Fritz's response, to top off their cups. One other customer: a fat black man with a Pirates cap and a burgundy gaucho; chili and a milkshake. The place is cruddy in a homey way, the fluorescent tubes coated with dust, grimy bowling trophies shelved above the grill.

Fritz wants to ask Claire what it was that kept her from eating her lunch all those years ago. Now that he's resurrected that mental picture, he can't erase it, as if she were some bleeding icon, or one of those leper kids waiting on Jesus in catechism coloring books. The question nagged him even back then: *Why won't she just eat? Then Hyacinth will shut her mouth and put that stick down.*

But instead he spills his guts about his job working for his Uncle Pat's bricklaying outfit, how he has to climb a scaffold carrying a hod, and it scares him to death, that even going up and down stairs now has him quivering. He has dreams about falling, or the scaffold imploding. There's an omen hanging over his head like a black nimbus, and he doesn't know what to do.

"Quit," Claire says.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"It's my uncle's company. My mother's brother. You know: disgrace."

"Death is worse than disgrace."

"What am I going to say: 'I'm scared'?"

Claire holds his hand as he talks. He wonders how she has made this leap: from that petrified little girl, so immobilized by fear that she couldn't even chew, to this self-assured young woman. She wears a gauzy white blouse that buttons to the neck and a red silk scarf. No barrettes or pins in her soft brown hair. Brown eyes. A bump of bone in the middle of her aquiline nose. Claire is good-looking in a way he can handle.

Above all, she seems even-tempered. Not like the other Italian girls he knows, not like his mother. None of that mouth, that streetwise swagger, that opera. His mother is crazy.

"Have you ever thought about talking to someone?" Claire asks.

"Like a psychiatrist?"

"A counselor."

"Same difference."

"Have you?" she asks.

"Not really. I'm too afraid to admit I'm afraid. If that makes any sense."

"At least you're honest about it."

"I'm not honest about anything."

She leans over from her stool and kisses him. The guy with the Pirates hat sleeps, head propped on his hand. Outside, dawn breaks: Sunday morning.

Claire has entwined herself around him on the blue stool. She kisses him again and tells him point-blank that she's falling for him. Fritz, for the time being, refuses to consider what this means. Pam looks up from her crossword and smiles at them, just those few teeth in front. Fritz pulls Claire to him and hangs on.

Though she's Fritz's age, eighteen, Claire is already in college. She graduated from Peabody High School a year early and enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh. She rents an apartment with money she's been saving for years, earned baby-sitting and working at her father's landscaping business. She also works part time at the university's day care. She left home mainly to get away from her father, a squat, powerful, overprotective immigrant who slapped his wife and daughters in the name of old-world propriety. When he fell into a rage, he would break furniture and put his fists through walls. After Claire moved out, he disowned her, but she finds opportunities to visit her mother and sisters when he's not around.

"He's an animal," Claire says.

Fritz has seen Claire's father watering the Raffos' tiny lawn in the early evening, his thick, naked torso matted in dark hair, a cigar hanging out of his mouth, his red pickup packed with lawn mowers and muddy tools parked at the curb.

Claire has a boyfriend named Allen Compton. He's not really her boyfriend, she explains; she's finished with him, but he refuses to acknowledge that it's over. She was emphatic: told Allen that he turns her stomach, that he desperately needs help, that she never wants to lay eyes on him again. But Allen didn't want to hear about it. He went to her bookshelf and started tearing books in half one by one, looking at her the entire time, smiling. She pleaded with him to stop but was afraid to protest too much, afraid he'd hit her. Once, her cat jumped on the table while he was eating, and Allen ripped a curtain rod off a window and chased the cat around her apartment. He ended up smashing her fishbowl, the Siamese fighting fish thrashing rhythmically on the hardwood floor, slower and slower, until

it died. When she threatened to call the police, he yanked the phone out of the wall.

Fritz went to school with Compton and knows all about him: a little guy who lifts weights. You can see it in the vein that pulses along his biceps like a garter snake, the bulging jaw muscle like a walnut as he chews gum. One of those guys who take pride in being a hood. Black leather jacket, black pants, black t-shirt, pointy black shoes that tie on the side, slick black hair slanted over his eyes. The practiced sneer. He drives a lime green four-barrel 442, jacked up in the rear, with mags and a Hurst shift. He's the kind of guy, if you crossed him — and you wouldn't even know you had crossed him — it would be like a curse. He'd pick the time and place. Everything might be fine for months, even a year. And then there he is. You've just finished a game of two-on-two, and you're sitting on the steps of the schoolyard, drinking Fanta grape and smoking cigarettes, your gray t-shirt dark with sweat, when up the block grinds the 442, petulant as a wild horse. Compton jerks it across a side street toward the school. That half-smiling face above the dashboard, Maltese cross dangling from the rearview. You drop the pop can and run back into the schoolyard, but Compton brings the car over the curb and up the first concrete step, then gears down and rides that 442 all the way up, the front bumper sparking off the lip of each stair.

Fritz clears his head. There's no point in thinking about Compton. As far as he's concerned, there is no Compton.

Claire's bed is a mattress on the floor surrounded by candles and covered in a blue batik spread, white doves outlined with gold sequins swooping across it. Huge, silky gold pillows fringed with tassels. Painted on the ceiling above the bed, in smoking red calligraphy, is "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" — lines from a poem written by Sylvia Plath not long before her suicide. Fritz has never heard of Plath, and those hovering red words unnerve him as he lies in bed with Claire. He'd like to erase them. Claire has read a few of Plath's poems to him. He doesn't entirely get them, but he understands enough to be scared. When Claire shows him a picture of the poet, though, he finds her lovely, not terribly unlike Claire: the soft, feminine looks; the contentment on her face; the snug cardigan about her shoulders; the long, girlish hair.

One vicious winter morning in London, Plath deposited outside her small children's bedrooms toast and mugs of milk, then stuck her head in the oven and turned on the gas. Claire tells Fritz this as if he'll understand the inevitability of it, as if there were a moral to this story so plain that it needn't be explained. Fritz feels for a moment the frigidity of that London flat, the unfathomable will of the woman who buttered the warm bread and poured the milk. If he allows himself another moment of introspection, he will see what Claire is trying to tell him. But he waves it away. It is a warm summer night, and he is, for the moment, blessedly safe.

(end of excerpt)