

Laura-Grisselle Aguayo  
Catalyst Prize Submission  
“New In Town” – London in 8 Short Stories

(1)

Against the glare of light shining through the kitchen window, the heat waves slowly steaming from the toaster are suddenly visible.

“Oh my god... Oh my god! Open the windows now!”

Like a military drill, my flat-mates jump into action. I leap across the kitchen sink to open the nearest window. Jen strategically opens the doors leading from the kitchen to the living room. Jess and Markie prop open the vast living room windows. The push of the magic button and two slices of blackened white bread pop up before settling into the toaster again. I think about this nearly daily ritual and wonder: why does the idea of the smoke alarm ringing deafly into my ear scare me more than venturing outside my front door? After all, I’ve made toast a thousand times, but I know nothing about London.

(2)

I can’t stop staring at the woman sitting across from me. The fluffy faux fur on her oversized jacket distracts me as the train bobs through the tunnels of the London Underground. Her leopard print shoes are about four inches tall. Her tight black leggings have a shiny finish to them. Her bright purple purse has more gold embellishments than I can count and her sparkly blue eye shadow tells me she’s going out. But she seems so at ease with herself that when she accidentally bumps her foot against mine, I am the one that feels embarrassed. I don’t have to hear this woman’s accent to know that she’s been here for some time. Maybe she was even raised in London. She takes out a bottle of red nail polish to cover the chip on her pointer fingernail.

The man in the indistinct business suit eats his sandwich quietly. The 20-something hipster is focused on the music blaring from his headphones. The group at the end of the car try to balance themselves between their suitcases as the train comes to a stop. Most everyone is wearing some variation of black or grey. But definitely not the stranger sitting across from me.

I watch the woman gather her things as she stands up and works her way out of the train and into the crowd. The Underground sign reads Oxford Circus. I only have two more stops to go.

(3)

Louisiana, 1938. Daisy's grandmother's Southern drawl is as thick as it is humid on a New Orleans summer day. "So when does Brad Pitt get hot?" asks one of my flat-mates. Before I can answer, the TV screen skips again and we miss the first words Benjamin Button ever says to the love of his life.

Among the many perks of our flat is a Sky Network box, which boasts over 20 free movies we can watch at any time. But the London rain has other plans for our movie night. The noise of the rain tap dancing on our window grows louder and we realize that the Sky signal will only become worse as the night goes on.

"Give it an hour!" I say. "When he's in his late 40s he is smoking hot," That said, the girls tune out the rain and tune in to endure the sound of Brad Pitt's voice skipping like a scratched disk. The rain keeps dancing on the window and the screen freezes, stops and quakes whenever London sees fit.

(4)

A hot chocolate and the occasional croissant is an event. What I once pegged to be a French tradition has quickly become my London tradition. It's now my secret habit I can't give up.

Upon entering Prêt, the smell of food wafts through the door. It's a faint smell, but I think I always smell chocolate in anticipation of what's to come. I eye the row of flaky pastries- French butter, chocolate and almond flavored croissants- and prepare to appear as cultured and at home as possible. As soon as I open my mouth, the jig is up.

"Hi! Can I please get a hot chocolate and a chocolate croissant to take away?"

I think that by saying, "to take away" instead of "to go" I sound like a London native. This is akin to the "sorry" effect. I tend to accidentally-on-purpose mutter "sorry" in a British accent when I bump into someone, hoping to blend in rather than risk seeming like I don't know my way around. The effect only lasts a second.

"You like chocolate, eh?" proclaims the man behind the counter with a smile on his face.

As I laugh and agree with his statement, I seamlessly pick the right amount of change from my wallet. He hands me my croissant and hot chocolate without flinching. I then realize that is the first time I didn't think about which oddly shaped coin to select. I guess I know my way around better than I thought.

(5)

As I stare at the wine glass in front of me, I imagine the waiter swiftly taking it away. It doesn't fit in the picture. But when the waiter arrives to take our drink order, the glass stays. For the first time in my life, dinner with a friend is unrestricted. I fumble for the wine menu and put my game face on. Can he tell?

“We'll have the... Zinfandel Rosè?”

“I'm sorry, ma'am. We are out of the Zinfandel.”

I distract myself with the bright bulbs on the string of lights intertwined in the fake tree by the door. What now?

“We have a similar Rosè. A little bit more crisp, fruity,”

“That sounds great,”

The waiter saves the day and I share a smile with Rachel. This is not the glass of lemonade we ordered when we were 15. This is not the Starbucks coffee we shared gossip over at 10:00 pm on a school night. This is Rosè. Dignified. Classy, even. I take in everything in that moment the waiter sets down the crystal glass with its rose-colored liquid freedom inside. No ID, no questions asked. I take a sip. Crisp and fruity, just like he promised. I'm as excited as a kid.

(6)

My hand frantically dives into my purse in search of my cell phone. I run my fingers along the hard plastic cover of my notebook and under I run into the zipper pull on my wallet. Finally I feel a screen and my hand wraps around the lightweight black phone. 13:48. Thank God. As I reach the top of the Holborn station escalator, I am relieved at the prospect of walking, not running, the block and a half to class.

As I swipe my Oyster card and walk through the metal turnstile, I see a girl with long blond hair flowing from under a black Russian fur hat. She turns around and for split second I admire how pretty she is. Then I realize I know her. She quickly rushes over and gives me a kiss on either cheek, in typical French fashion. She starts to speak and her French accent seems stronger than I remembered it in high school. But then again all I can remember is her artwork.

I walked into the high school art room and the smell of fresh paint was overwhelming. Nope. I didn't see Rachel. But before I turn around I heard the faint hum of music from headphones and I saw the back of a girl with long blonde hair, cocking her head to one side. She turns around and notices me. She smiles and waves before turning back around and effortlessly waves a paintbrush around. I can only see the corner of the canvas, but

the woman she's painting is beautiful, even though I can only see her eyes through the slit in her headpiece.

"So we should meet up!" she says cracking a smile. I snap back from my memory in time to realize what a coincidence this really is. Yep. Her accent was definitely just as strong. I sidestep to avoid a man hurrying out of the station and into the crosswalk. "That sounds great! Just give me a call."

I lost track of time. My hand frantically dives into my purse until I realize I put my phone in an outside pocket so I could find it faster. I locate the tiny black phone. 13:57. I kiss her on either cheek for good measure and sprint the block and half to class.

(7)

"My name is Laura-Grisselle Aguayo and I am an addict."

As I push my way through the bronzed revolving doors of Selfridges, I imagine my first Shoppers Anonymous meeting. This place will surely be the death of me. I shuffle and dance through the throngs of shoppers until I reach my Mecca. My feet come to a halt on the marble floor. It's impossible to take in the heart-stopping view before me.

To my left I see myself strutting down Oxford Street in those black leather pointed flats, fully embellished with studs. To my right, I envision myself out to dinner in the silk organza top with lace trim. In front of me the All Saints sign blinks above a completely fabulous faux fur coat. With a vintage belt around the waist, it would be perfection.

I walk around in awe of a place that can only inspire envy. They're just things, but they're beautiful things. Beautiful London things. I glide over to a jewelry display and appreciate the pearls, lace, and chains artfully crafted into cuffs and statement necklaces. I pick up a pair of gold flower studs and turn the tag around. £8. Doable.

I shuffle and dance my way through throngs of shoppers and push my way through the bronzed revolving doors, back into to the real world. My fingers wrap around the handle of a tiny yellow bag, and I fall into step with the rest of the London crowd, a piece of Mecca in my left hand.

(8)

I close my eyes and I'm at home. The red border around my ID photo says 'UNDER 21' and I sigh with disappointment. My state issued piece of plastic dashes any hopes of going out for the night.

I open my eyes.

The strobe light flashes recklessly. The bass pounding from the speakers dictates the pattern of my heartbeat. A man bumps into me as he tries to pass by, and the foam from his beer flows over the rim of the glass and goes splat on my shoulder. Great. Stiletto heels hammer silently on the dance floor and the smell of perfume, booze, and sweat wafts through the air. As the sea of club-goers flows and ebbs around me, Markie's hand reaches out for mine. Finally! An anchor.

Two crystal shot glasses await us at the bar. The golden liquid sits waiting with a slice of lime on top.

"To London and the best semester of our lives!" Markie announces. I smile and put the shot glass to my lips. The tequila burns as it goes down my throat. The lime quickly douses the sensation, and now I'm ready. As we head back into the crowd, our high heels hammer silently on the dance floor. The sequins on my dress twinkle as I move my back and forth to the sound of the club's heartbeat. Is this what it means to grow up? The strobe light flashes recklessly and I close my eyes. I don't know, but this is exactly where I'm supposed to be.