

Under the Frangipani Tree

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It's been raining most of the day and has finally stopped. A thin, tired girl hangs up her apron, signs off and says a hurried goodbye to her workmates. One of them is reading aloud the card on a large bouquet, giggling to the others, who cram around a single restroom mirror, fixing their hair. Preoccupied, they toss her a casual wave and resume their excited chatter.

Outside, the city streets are awash with people – shoppers moving in chaotic herds, commuters rushing for trains, clusters of self-conscious teens...and couples, already unnecessarily close for so early in the evening. She dodges her way through the crowd, escapes down a quiet side alley, then climbs the slippery stone steps to the city gardens.

At the top is a frangipani grove. She stands beneath and looks down.

The scene is postcard perfect. Skyscrapers and city streets sparkle, wet and brilliant beneath the darkening sky. Raindrops bejewel every surface, reflecting the coloured lights of the city like a kaleidoscope. They tumble and blur together against the muffled soundtrack of peak-hour traffic, like a distant fairground – a world away.

It is still. There is not the smallest breeze to shift a blade of grass, and in the safety of this solitude she finally lets out a jagged breath. It is the evening of Valentine's Day, and she has the most romantic spot in the city...

All to herself.

Her tired arms weaken to a self-soothing embrace and she can let tears fall now without shame. Why was it so easy for the other girls? Affection for her has always come at a cost. At just twenty-one, she feels worn and used.

'What's wrong with me? Why can't I be loved?'

It's a broken part of a prayer spoken into the heartless beauty of the night, and the sound of her own voice startles her. She turns to make certain there is no one to hear.

'Dear God...'

Her grievance sounds so petty, such a silly thing-

'...everyone got flowers but me.'

There is no sudden breeze, no voice in return, but then in reply...

Above her in the branches she hears a snap, and a single frangipani falls onto her open palm, followed by two more...then what looks like hundreds shower down around her. Surreally, they seem to float down as though in slow motion – deep pink with golden centres – their rain-drenched petals glistening with coloured light. When they finally stop falling, she is standing in the centre of a sparkling carpet of pink and gold. It's Disney princess perfect. She is frozen in the spell of the moment, holding her breath, and when she finally gasps to breathe in, the air is exquisite with perfume. She wraps her arms around herself and cries.

It is not a grand miracle. The world is not turned upside down and there is no life or death crisis. Only one girl's pain and loneliness, answered in a simple, profound moment of beauty

– when God gives a Valentine.