

Bittersweet Honey

by Jewel Swe

You didn't expect to see her again. You didn't even expect to be back in Fremantle again, the wind-blown, salty-aired place of your childhood. Not after what happened that summer, in the sweltering January heat.

But here you are and here she is, as round-cheeked and freckled as you remember. Both of you standing in front of the Honey Shack in the markets, stock still as you blink at each other.

"Amy?" she says, just as surprised as you are. Her thick brown hair is longer now, reaching past her waist. She's taller than you, unexpectedly. You always adored her small stature. You were a lanky giant next to her.

"Yeah," you say. You swallow, remembering the summer when you threw caution to the wind. More than you should have. You're surprised she didn't just ignore you now. "It's been years."

"What have you been up to all this time?" She's smiling. It's that same smile that made you realise you weren't going to get married in a church or be the perfect daughter your parents thought you were. But the effect is different now. You're just relieved that she's smiling at you at all.

"I'm at Curtin University," you tell her. "Studying illustration and animation."

"You always did like to draw," she laughs. There's an echo of a long lost feeling at the thought that she actually remembers. "Are you doing anything today? We should have lunch together."

"Sure, I'm free," you say, but it's a product of the same self-sabotage tendency that ruined your friendship with her. Some things are best left untouched. Back then, you thought your friendship could weather anything, that she would accept you even if you had to hide yourself from your parents for the rest of your life. But you were wrong.

You go to the café across the road from the markets, each with a bucket of honey. She always drank her lemonade with a dollop of honey. She'd make one for you too and you'd endure the sour-sweet tang in the back of your throat.

Her cheeks dimple when she grins. But it doesn't make your stomach lurch pleasantly like it used to. The terrible, wonderful buzz that hung in the air whenever she was near has now become a low hum.

"About last time," she starts. You look down at the table, at her fingers tapping against her plate. "I'm sorry. I didn't—didn't understand and my parents, you know."

"I know," you say quickly, just so this conversation can be over.

You recall the sweat sticky on your skin, the two of you having a picnic by Manning Lake with seagulls squawking for scraps and a black swan basking in the warm water. She was leaning into your side, the place where

your shoulders touch stark in your awareness. You thought maybe there had been *something* there. A possibility. So you told her.

And then she avoided you for the rest of the summer.

You've never felt as small as you did then. Never felt so inadequate, so different. You'd known it was something the adults didn't like, that the television always showed as bad, but you hadn't realised it was so bad that even *she* couldn't stand you.

Now you're more comfortable in your skin, free to acknowledge that it was always girls for you. University is a more accepting environment. But the white hot shame at the time, the feeling that something was wrong with you, remains a shadow that returns from time to time.

"You moved away so soon after," she's saying. "I thought about it a lot. How I never got to apologise and how even if I'm not—not *like that*, you were still my best friend. So I'm glad I got to see you again. I really am sorry."

"Thanks." You smile back. You would have longed to hear this when you were fourteen, but it's not so bad hearing it now, after you've smoothed out your own life like the honey she so loves. "It means a lot."

She leaves you with her email address. An olive branch, a chance to reconnect.

You watch her walk down the cobblestone street, bucket of honey swinging in her hand and heels clacking with each step.

Perhaps her words were just to assuage her own guilt but the harrowing, sun-drenched heat of that long-ago moment cools down a little. It's just a memory now. Bittersweet.