THE OCTOPUS

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

There is a photo of you pinned to my fridge with a couple of those tacky souvenir magnets from family holidays. Every so often I pause to look at it and feel a tug of something in my gut – grief, regret, maybe even shame? You're wearing a red flowery summer dress and your dark curls are tumbling over your bare shoulders. Surrounded by a group of friends, you're sitting on the ground, leaning on one arm, and your head is thrown slightly back with laughter. Behind you, a redhead whose name I've forgotten is playing a guitar. I still remember the day it was taken. It was your 23rd birthday picnic by the river and you were beautiful. Life was beautiful.

It comes in waves, this melancholic nostalgia. I am haunted both by a longing for the way things used to be and by my inability to escape it. I'll manage for a time, when I am distracted by the business of life, like a work deadline or a problem with the car. And then, after the wave passes, in that momentary lull before the next swell, the waters recede and there it is. There you are. You are a memory that is at once comforting and uncomfortable. You come to me as you were in that photo. Your hair bouncing, your skin smooth and your eyes shining. Idealistic, hopeful and excited.

Sometimes I wonder how I got here, so far away from you. Looking back, I see my life as a series of chapters in a book or acts in a play. Each phase seems distinct, yet I can't pinpoint the exact moment one ends and the next begins. There's no curtain that comes down to let us know. A life is just a series of yesterdays and tomorrows – each still connected by mere hours to the ones before and after it. We don't visibly change from one day to the next, but somehow the tiny transformations add up until they can't be ignored.

Yes, I know nothing is constant, but I wish I hadn't changed quite so much. I used to be headstrong, wilful. I had 'serious' ambitions for myself and a naïve, smug scorn for those women who give up their dreams to prioritise their families. And yet, somehow it happened. I found myself locked in a gilded cage that I had willingly walked into. Outside its bars I could see the life I used to have, but could no longer touch it. You and I parted ways and I lost you.

You wouldn't recognise me now. I'm a middle-aged menopausal mum with a minivan. I stopped wearing my signature lipstick and live in jeans and oversized jumpers, with my hair pulled back carelessly. Function over form. You'd accuse me of 'letting myself go'. Strange expression. Where did I go? Yes, motherhood is a precious privilege and I am incredibly grateful for my children. But I read something recently that I can't get out of my head. I read that an octopus mother focuses all her energy on caring for her young and, as a result, she neglects herself and eventually dies of starvation. My spirit animal, I thought. I have loved my children so intensely and exclusively that I stopped loving myself. And now that they are almost grown, I am slowly fading away.

So, I decided to take up drumming. Don't laugh – I thought it would be therapeutic and invigorating. Banging on drums and cymbals, making loud crashing sounds to vent my frustration and anger. The teacher I found said I had a natural talent and I started thinking it was something I might pursue, maybe even get good enough to start a girl band. Well, an old girl band. We'd play covers of 80s songs at weddings and 50th birthday parties. And I started to feel ever so slightly alive again. But I didn't tell anyone – it was my giddy little secret.

Then one day, when Layla and I were in the car, AC/DC's 'Back in Black' came on the radio. It was a song I had learned to play. Stopped at a red light, I started banging my air

drums and she asked me what on Earth I was doing. I said, 'Can't you imagine your old mum playing drums?' And she laughed. No, she didn't just laugh but she kind of scoffed and rolled her eyes, in a mean-girl way, as if the idea was so ridiculous it was unworthy of consideration. In that instant, my bubble popped and I saw myself as she did – not a cool chick who could start a band but a sad old woman having a midlife crisis. I never went back for another drum lesson after that.

But you wouldn't have laughed, would you? I remember you once saw a grey-haired gal driving a motorcycle, with a slash of red lipstick and a long foulard flapping in the wind and you shouted, 'Good for her!' And you always said you would be like the lady in that poem when you grew old, the one who would spit and swear and wear purple with red hats. The one your mother used to want to age into but never got the chance. You swore you would do it for both of you.

Yes, the more I indulge this nostalgia, the more I can picture the woman you once aspired to be. And I realise that it's your voice I should be listening to now, not my children's. That, more than just missing you, I need you back in my life. I want desperately to see you, not stuck to the fridge, frozen in time, but living and breathing and smiling back at me in the mirror. Oh, maybe not the smooth skin or the bouncy hair – I accept those are long gone – but the shiny eyes and the self-worth. I want those back. I want to be you again.

As a freelance writer, Nadia has made a career out of writing for clients and only recently began sharing her personal work. The predominant theme in her creative writing is the question of identity, both individual and collective, likely an echo of her mixed heritage and nomadic childhood.