

Paper Heart by Federica Franceschelli

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I wake up and my eyelids are sticky, thick with black clots of sleep.

I remain motionless for a moment, trying to pry them open, but I struggle in vain and give up.

I remain motionless for a moment, hoping the world will do the same. But the clock reminds me with its goddamned ticking that everything moves on and I'm the only thing that is still. I grab my pillow, holding it tightly in my arms. I stretch out an arm in search of the covers that are all balled up at the foot of the bed. I find them and I spread them out as best as I can, pulling them up to my nose because I'm cold. I bend my legs and I bring my knees to my chest, trying to curl myself up into a little ball.

I've been doing this since I was a little girl, maybe because of the cold, or just to feel safe, protected.

I stay in this warm comforting position for a long, long time. I lose all sense of reality.

It comes back to me in the bathroom as I'm bending over the sink. The water runs hard, crashing against the white surface. The freezing cold splashes scratch my face and I shiver. It's so cold that I realize I'm frozen stiff and unable to move. I grit my teeth because I know that sooner or later it will pass. I reach out a purplish hand to the faucet and turn it, blocking the viciously icy stream. I slowly collapse to the ground and drag myself for a few meters trying to reach the bathtub. I turn on the hot water tap and when it's about half full, I slip in, still wearing my panties and bra. The water is boiling hot and I scream. My skin

reddens, but I feel better. I close my eyes and my mouth, I rock back and forth, still all curled up. I just wait for the pain to stop and my senses to abandon me.

It's so nice when everything goes black.

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As I look out of the window, everything is immaculately white. There's not a single thing out of place: barren tree branches scrape the sky, the grass is frozen and it crunches under the children's feet. The sky is gray, sad but beautiful. It's snowing. The temperature has dropped but the landscape looks like something out of a toy box. It endures the cold stoically. And I hate it. I loathe it. It saddens me endlessly. It's like being inside one of those snow globes that people buy at Christmas time, the ones you can turn over and the snow comes down, all with perfectly organized, schematic landscapes with trees, houses, a snowman; and for a little extra they even have a warm, happy family inside, and a child ice-skating down an icy path. Those reproductions are so perfect. As I look out of the window, I feel as if I were imprisoned in one of those globes myself. A sense of nausea grows inside me and my stomach cramps. I feel as if I were suffocating.

The Christmas ornaments are shut inside their boxes and are staring at me from a corner of the living room. I stare back with superiority. The tree is fake and wrapped up in cellophane; I look down upon it with a satisfied smirk. Compared to the tree I feel free. My gaze slips once again beyond the windowpane. I see the snow, the perfect landscape, and my stomach cramps again. My eyes are burning and I can feel the tears welling up; I'm not free. I walk up to the tree, I kick it, and the tears start running down. I open the boxes and take out all the golden balls, the red stars, and beautiful hand-painted angels. I throw them to the ground, I hurl them all over the living room, screaming. I move quickly about the house, looking for the Nativity scene. I take the figurines and I throw them, laughing as I see them shatter into a thousand pieces. I take the baby Jesus from its cradle and I throw it out of the window. I follow it with my eyes as it darts among the snowflakes until it falls into all that whiteness with a heavy thump. Only its head sticks out and continues to fix me with its angelic gaze.

I hate Christmas.

[...]

Federica Franceschelli was born in Bologna in 1989 and lives in Rome where she studies Education Science. She has won two editions of a writing competition.

This is the beginning of an unpublished story.