

Story #1 - The Veins of the City

(in the style of Shirley Jackson)

(Nicosia, late September, 2025)

The elevator sighed open on the seventh floor, releasing a breath of perfume and sea bass. Elena Morán stepped into air that was almost cool. The worst of the summer heat had gone; the evening held its own kind of mercy.

The rooftop restaurant glowed the colour of diluted wine. Beyond the glass balustrade, **Nicosia shimmered—stone domes, cranes, and, cutting through the centre, the pale scar of the Buffer Zone. Europe's last divided capital.** From this height the wound looked decorative, a thin vein of light drawn across the dark.

A hostess guided her to the west rail. “The Foundation table, Ms Morán. Best view in the city.”

Each place was laid with perfect linen and a framed photograph of a child no one could name. The wind tilted the frames so that the faces seemed to breathe.

At her table the conversation flowed easily—grants, mentorship, resilience. A woman in coral confessed she had *always felt connected* to displaced people; her family had once lost a holiday villa. A man in linen said compassion should be tax-deductible. They laughed together, voices blending like a choir rehearsing goodwill.

Elena smiled when spoken to, nodding a half-second late. Her throat ached from politeness.

“Is it true,” someone asked, “that you began painting *inside* the camp?”

“Yes.”

“How extraordinary—to turn pain into beauty.”

“I didn’t,” she said. “It was already there.”

They laughed again, assuming charm. The waiter brought bread and small saucers of crimson oil; no one touched them.

The host arrived—silver hair, a tan curated for diplomacy. “Elena Morán! Our guest of honour.” He bent, kiss near cheek, breath scented with mint and something metallic.

“We’re thrilled you could join us,” he said. “Your story—art from tragedy—proves that hope is scalable.”

“Scalable?”

He smiled. “A finance term. Forgive me.” He raised her menu as though reading scripture. “Tomorrow’s headline: *‘Survivor-Artist Leads Renewal.’* Beautiful symmetry, isn’t it?”

She looked out across the terrace. The city’s arteries of light were beginning to pulse awake: traffic streams, window grids, the slow illumination of neighbourhoods that still hadn’t learned to sleep.

Dinner unfolded with bureaucratic grace—salad, fish, speeches, applause.
Behind Elena, a projector cast her drawings onto plaster: children in charcoal, eyes lifted toward something unseen. Her signature had been trimmed away.

The host tapped his glass. “Friends, we gather to celebrate resilience embodied in one remarkable woman.”

Her name glowed on the wall—misspelled.
Applause rose: measured, precise, rhythmic—*thump ... thump ... thump*—a single heartbeat multiplied.
Elena stood because everyone watched.

“Tell us,” the host said, “what gives you hope?”

“The weather,” she said.

Soft laughter.

“I mean, this evening. It’s the first night one can breathe again.”

“Indeed,” the host said. “A perfect metaphor for renewal.”

“No,” she said quietly. “Just the air cooling.”

For a moment the candles wavered, their flames drawing inward as if the night itself had inhaled. Then the applause resumed, louder, generous, endless. The air tasted faintly of iron.

Guests drifted to the rail for photographs with the divided city behind them.
The barbed wire shimmered like tinsel; champagne caught the light like diluted blood.
From across the border came a trace of music, low and insistent, mingling with the quartet’s polite waltz until both melodies shared a single pulse.

Elena stood apart, glass in hand.
“You should be proud,” the host said beside her. “They loved you.”

Across the divide the broken dome she’d painted once gleamed briefly, as if remembering light.
“I worked there,” she said. “The people you honour tonight still live around it.”

He smiled without turning his head. “We’re exploring cross-border initiatives.”

“Then begin,” she said, “by learning their names.”

He laughed, uncertain. “You artists—always poetic.”

“Always literal,” she said.

When he turned back to the terrace, she noticed how the veins in his temple pulsed faintly in the candlelight, as though the city’s rhythm ran beneath his skin.

A gust rose from the valley, scattering napkins.
One photograph toppled, glass cracking neatly across the eyes.
No one noticed; the photographer was already arranging the group for a final shot.

“Ms Morán—centre, please!”

She stepped forward. Flash. Another. Another.

In the terrace window she saw her reflection clearly, the others washed pale by light.

When the camera lowered, the projected image remained on the wall: a crowd of shining faces, the skyline behind them, Elena’s form diffused to brightness.

The quartet packed away their instruments.

Waiters stacked plates streaked with red berry glaze shaped like careful hearts.

The guests turned toward the bar, their laughter brief and bright. For an instant every throat on the terrace caught the light, each pulse visible under the skin like a thin line of fire.

Elena slipped through the service door and down a stairwell that smelled of metal and thyme. At street level the air was heavier, truer. The drainage channels gleamed from the recent washing of rain; beneath the pavement the traffic murmured and flowed.

She looked up once more. The city’s lights spread outward in branching lines, bright and trembling—**the veins of a divided city**, carrying heat, money, and stories from one side to the other but never quite crossing. A single drop fell from the terrace above—perhaps wine, perhaps rain—dark against the marble before it disappeared.

High above, the recorded applause looped for the Foundation’s highlight reel: measured, ceaseless, beating like a practiced heart long after the chair she had occupied was empty.