

# Petrichor

Tâm breathed deeply as he crossed the threshold into the grocery store and felt the doors close behind him. It was such a relief to no longer wear a mask; once again he could breathe in all the scents that surrounded him, each aisle its own palette of flavors and memory. The sharp freshness of the produce aisle, the pungent array in the dairy section, and even the cold breath of the ice cream freezers felt like a delight, especially after missing any semblance of smell for the long years of the pandemic. Tâm prided himself on being able to pick out the individual notes: kiwi and strawberry, the bakery's latest creation, the catch of the day.

Of course, he could have experienced this aromatic symphony in any store, but this store was special: this store had Sal. Sal was the reason Tâm came back to this small neighborhood shop, a little out of his usual path, in the hopes that they would be working that night, and that he might be able to make his way into their checkout lane without being too obvious about

it. Tonight, all the lanes were fairly empty, and just as he spotted Sal at the far end of the aisles, a burly fellow at the nearest register called out to him, “SIR! I can help you right here, sir!”

“I, uh... no thanks, um, actually,” Târn stammered, veering awkwardly back towards the aisles. As soon as the burly fellow had turned away to help another customer, Târn spun back and maneuvered into Sal’s lane. Sal was dressed in their usual uniform, an oversized, cozy-looking sweater over patterned tights, their short red hair perfectly arranged over their sharp features and dense freckles, a line of metal rings cascading down their left ear.

“Uh, hi Sal,” he said nervously, putting a solitary chocolate bar onto the conveyor belt.

Sal gave him a wry smile, used to Târn’s awkward attentions. “Hey there! So, having a big dinner tonight, huh?” they joked.

“Oh, uh, yeah, it’s just a little treat,” Târn said, laughing. Suddenly noticing Sal’s new nametag, he said, “Oh, you have a new nametag, with *they/them* on it, that’s cool!”

“Yeah, it’s great they support us sharing our pronouns, the store has really been proactive about us bringing our true selves to work, which I really appreciate,” Sal said. They flashed a coy smile at Târn, smiling again as they saw the redness creep over his olive-colored cheeks.

Tâm was racking his brain for anything that could continue the conversation, and went back to his usual topic. “They’re making that rosemary bread again, I just love that smell so much!” he said.

“Always with the rosemary bread,” Sal laughed. “You really like it, huh? How come you never buy it?”

“It’s weird, actually,” Tâm said, frowning. “I’ve looked and looked but can never find it in the bakery section,” he continued, tucking his glossy, shoulder length hair behind his ear with his index finger. Sal felt their cheeks getting warm. They sometimes wondered if they liked prodding Tâm just so he would make this gesture.

“Hmm, interesting,” Sal said, smiling to themselves. Seeing Tâm struggling for more conversation, they decided to help him out. “Doing anything fun tonight? You know, with all this chocolate?” they continued, gesturing at his meager purchase.

“Oh, uh,” Tâm stumbled, “probably just watching a show or something, I still haven’t been seeing friends in person that much yet.” He looked down towards his shoes, embarrassed at what must have seemed an unimaginably dull answer.

“Sounds like a nice evening, actually,” Sal said with sincerity. “You have a good one, OK?”

Tâm looked up and flashed a tiny smile before looking back down towards the conveyer belt, picking up his chocolate, and shuffling quickly out the door. Sal watched the automatic doors open and then close behind him, smiling to themselves and lightly shaking their head.

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“This is the day I’m finally going to ask Sal out,” Tâm thought to himself as he walked towards the store. He strode in the door with heart racing, full of determination. His head instantly reeled from all the scents, but he forced himself to walk past it all and straight to the checkout. To his dismay, Sal was nowhere to be seen.

The burly fellow from the day before called out to him again. “SIR, can I help you find something? Sir?”

“No, uh, thanks,” Tâm said hurriedly, taking a last, forlorn look through the aisles to see if Sal might be working there. His heart sank as he realized he would not find them today, and all of his resolve melted away. Despondently he headed towards the exit.

As he walked out of the store into the rainy evening, he saw a small figure leaning against the wall, looking intently at their

phone. Sal. His heart beat wildly in his chest, wanting to talk to them, but also suddenly as nervous as he always felt around them.

Just as he decided he would keep walking, Sal noticed the motion in their peripheral vision and looked up. “Hey!” they called out, “aren’t you going to say ‘Hi’?”

“Oh! Hi, Sal,” Târn said nervously, “I didn’t want to bother you.”

“It’s no bother,” Sal said with a smile. “I’m just on break, killing a little time before the rest of my shift. A drizzly night for a walk, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I actually love it,” Târn said, relaxing a bit. “The smell of the rain is so intoxicating to me – I think there’s a name for it, *petri*-something-or-other.”

“*Petri-chor*,” Sal said confidently. “It’s a pretty cool phenomena, actually. It comes from droplets of water hitting porous surfaces in the soil, forming tiny bubbles of aerosols. That smell you’re noticing is mostly from *geosmin*, a byproduct of bacteria in the soil. Ironically, the softer the rain, the more effective this process is.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that, it’s only the gentle rains when you really smell it,” Târn replied, his eyes widening in wonder at Sal’s detailed explanation. “How do you know all this?”

“Well, there’s more to me than the grocery store,” Sal said with a smirk. “I’m actually studying for a degree in biochemistry.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to imply...” Tām stuttered.

“I know, I know, I’m just messing with you,” Sal said, smiling. “Your name is Tom, right?”

“*Tām*, actually,” Tām said, emphasizing the long ‘ah’ sound, and relieved to get past his gaffe. “It’s Vietnamese. My parents actually named me *Tām*,” he said with a rising pitch, “which means ‘eight,’ a very lucky number in my culture. I guess they expected me to be some kind of rich businessman or doctor and instead they got this,” he continued, pointing sarcastically at himself.

“Aw, you seem all right to me, Tām,” Sal said, careful to pronounce his name the way he had demonstrated. “But why the different pronunciation?”

“Ah,” Tām smiled, pulling his hair behind his ear. “As a kid, Tām was very hard for other kids to pronounce right, and they would make fun of it because it sounded kind of like a question, you know? So I decided to pronounce it ‘Tām,’ which means ‘heart,’ and also has the benefit of sounding like the English name ‘Tom.’”

“Oh, *heart*, I like that, I like that a lot,” Sal said.

“My parents certainly didn’t,” Tãm chuckled. “‘Tãm is a *girl’s* name, a *girl’s* name!’, they kept saying. To this day they won’t pronounce it the way I do.”

“I can relate to that,” Sal said, nodding their head. “My dad still won’t use my pronouns. Says it’s a *phase*.”

“Ugh, that’s awful,” Tãm said.

“It’s OK,” Sal said, in a steely tone, looking to the side. “I’m used to having to make my own way. Thus this job,” they continued, gesturing to the building behind them. “Gotta pay for college somehow.”

“Oh, yeah,” Tãm said, looking down. A deep silence hung in the air between them, and they both looked towards the ground for what felt like minutes. Tãm was excited to be having a meaningful conversation with Sal, but things had ventured into heavier territory, and he was now completely unsure of his footing, let alone having any idea how to ask them out. Maybe another time, he thought to himself, and feeling awkward again, decided it was best to leave before he said something stupid.

“Well, it was great to see you, Sal,” he said as brightly as he could, turning his body towards them to wave goodbye as he headed for the street.

Just as he reached the curb, Sal reached out and grabbed his jacket, pulling him back to the sidewalk, surprising him with their strength. As they did, a truck hurtled by on the street, grazing the curb where Tãm had been about to step, so close he could feel the wake of its wind rush against his hair. Sal let go of his jacket and leaned back against the wall as if nothing had happened.

“Um, thanks for, uh, saving my life,” Tãm said, completely flustered.

Sal smiled. “Well, I can’t have my number one chocolate customer getting vaporized, can I?”

Tãm laughed. “No, I guess not.” Shaken and exhilarated by the close call, he felt like he might as well try again. Now or never, he thought to himself.

“So, uh, are there any nights where, uh, you aren’t working?” he asked timidly.

Sal smiled again, shook their head a bit, and looked at their watch. Tãm reddened, fully expecting that they were about to shut down his question. Instead, Sal said, “Okay Tãm, my break ends in one minute, so if you’re going to ask me out, you’d better do it quickly.”

“Oh, I uh, you know, I uh, I didn’t mean to, uh...” Tãm stammered, turning a bright red.



“Let me make it easy for you,” Sal said. “Just suggest anything but drinks or coffee. I can’t do any more cliché dates, you know?”

Tâm was stuck; cliché dates were all he knew. “Well... um... I’m... really into making kefir right now, maybe you’d be interested in, uh, trying some?” he said hesitantly.

“Perfect!” Sal said, cutting him off. “How about bringing some of your kefir to my place, Friday, say 7 o’clock?” With a quick smile, Sal brushed past Tâm, the sliding doors opening in front of them.

“Wait, uh, where do you live?” Tâm managed to blurt out just as they were about to disappear into the store.

“Oh, the Evergreen apartments, just down the street,” Sal said, over their shoulder. “Just look for Sal in the directory.”

“OK!” Tâm said with a smile. Relieved but now already growing anxious about the date ahead, Tâm headed for the curb again, this time watching carefully for traffic.

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Tâm arrived at Sal’s building with a large bottle of his latest kefir. In addition to his usual anxieties for a date, now he had

his kefir to worry about too. It was too strong for many of his friends, and he wondered what Sal would think about it. Nervously, he scanned the directory for their name, and upon finding it, hesitated a moment before pressing the button. Gathering up his courage, he gave it a tentative push. He heard a phone ringing through the crackle of the intercom, and then almost immediately the friendly sound of Sal's voice.

"Hey, c'mon up, I'm on the second floor. 210," Sal said, and pressed the buzzer, unlocking the front door.

Tâm pulled open the door and went up the stairs slowly, trying to keep his breathing and heart rate in check. Sal's door was just at the top of the steps, and before he could even knock, it opened in front of him to reveal a smiling Sal in their trademark sweater and tights.

"Hi there," Sal said brightly. "Won't you come in?" they said, bowing with a theatrical gesture.

"Thank you," Tâm smiled, a little more at ease. "I brought the kefir," he said, gesturing at the bottle.

"I can see that!" Sal said. "Let's try it out!"

Tâm walked inside, closing the door behind him, and seeing Sal's shoes arranged by the door, took off his shoes as well. Sal's place was small but very cozy – what must have been a conventional studio had been transformed into an indoor

garden, with nearly every flat surface beyond the kitchen covered with plants of all kinds, many of which he could make out with his sensitive nose alone. Between sections of plants there were green carpeted pathways lined with stones and tiny lights that seemed to twinkle and shift slightly in color. The bed was a soft island in the center of it all, glowing from below from the lights, and covered with plant-shaped pillows. The lights extended to a tiny metal balcony, from which he could hear the soft *ping* of sparse raindrops in the night sky. As soon as the door closed, a familiar and favorite scent filled his nostrils.

“Your place is so magical,” he said sincerely, “and you managed to get that incredible rosemary bread from the store I can never find!”

Sal giggled. “Well, I did bring rosemary,” they said with a coy smile. “And thank you, it’s been a labor of love; at first, it was just plants I was studying in class, but as they began to take over my apartment, I decided to just roll with it.”

“It’s wonderful,” Târn said. “and the lights... just wow.”

“Well let’s try out this kefir of yours,” Sal said, changing the subject and pulling some glasses from a cabinet. They opened his container and took a deep breath before Târn could stop them; he held his breath for their reaction.

“Ooooooh, so much *lactobacillus*,” Sal said with a smile. “Do you always make it this strong?”

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Tâm said, visibly relaxing. “It’s too much for a lot of people, but I love the smell, it always feels so *alive* to me.”

“Really! That’s good to know,” Sal continued with a wink. “Well, *lactobacillus* is a wonderful guest in the human body too, you know, it helps with digestion and protects against infection – it’s all over our digestive and urinary tracts.”

“It is?” Tâm said with wonder, again realizing how little he knew about biology.

Handing him a glass, Sal said, “A toast, then – to us?”

“Yes,” Tâm said, relaxing again. “To us.”

“This is wonderful, so tangy,” Sal said, then put their glass down and squinted at him. “But Tâm, I have to ask you. Are you really interested in me?”

“Um, of course I am, yeah,” Tâm stammered, all of his nervousness coming back again.

“Well,” Sal said with the slightest edge of shyness to their voice, “you haven’t even given me a hug yet, so I was just wondering, you know?”

“Oh,” Târn said, turning bright red, and pulling his hair behind his ear as Sal knew he would. “Well, um, could I hug you now?”

Sal pretended to think about it for a moment, looking off towards the ceiling, then laughed loudly, releasing the tension. “Of course you can,” they said.

Târn reached towards them and embraced Sal gingerly, not wanting to overstep their boundaries, and was again surprised by their strength when their arms drew him in tightly. Though firm, there was a wonderful feeling of security and intimacy, and Târn let his head fall into Sal’s neck, breathing deeply as he had wanted to do since the first time he saw them. Suddenly his eyes grew wide.

“The rosemary smell... it’s *you*! It’s been you all along!” he said, bewildered.

Sal laughed, still holding him tightly. “Yup, it’s all me,” they said. “Ever since I was a baby, I’ve had this unique scent. That’s even where my name comes from – ‘Sal’ is short for *salvia rosmarinus*, the scientific name for rosemary. My parents were big biology nerds too.”

Târn was suddenly embarrassed that he had never realized this; all of his comments about the ‘bread’ now seemed potentially insulting.

“I... I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize, I just loved that smell – *your* smell – so much, and...” he started to say.

“Actually, don’t be sorry,” Sal said, interrupting him, “I was really drawn to your sense of smell. I’ve seen the way you sniff the air as you walk through the aisles, how you draw in your breath just a second after someone attractive walks by, just to catch the wake of their scent.”

“You – you noticed all that?” Tãm said, reddening again.

“Oh, don’t be embarrassed – I do it too,” Sal said, letting Tãm relax. “Scents are really important to me too, and it’s rare to find some as sensitive as you.”

“So that’s what you liked about me?” Tãm asked.

“Well, it wasn’t your smooth conversational skills,” Sal retorted.

“Fair enough,” Tãm said, and they both laughed.

Sal tilted their head a bit and asked, “So, Tãm, would you be willing to try something with me?”

“What do you have in mind,” Tãm replied, getting anxious again.

“Well, it would require getting on the bed,” Sal said matter-of-factly.

“Oh, well, I don’t know, um, you know, this being our first date and all...” Târn said timidly.

“Oh not *that*,” Sal said. “But you would have to wear a blind-fold. I promise I won’t hurt you, but you don’t know me that well, so I’ll totally understand if you don’t have that level of trust with me yet.”

“Oh,” Târn said, smiling, “but you saved my life the other day when you pulled me back from that curb – I think I can I trust you not to hurt me!”

“But maybe I saved you from the truck just so I could harvest your organs later,” Sal said coyly, and they both laughed again.

“Well, as long as you promise not to do *that*, I’m game,” Târn said.

“All right,” Sal said, with a mysterious smile. They took his hand and gently led him to the bed. “Just lie back and get comfortable.”

The bed was larger than it had looked from the entrance, and Târn settled into the middle of it as Sal moved some of the plant pillows out of the way. They pulled a soft, padded blind-fold from a drawer, and gently but firmly tied it over his eyes, blocking all light.

“Is that too tight?” Sal asked.

“No, it’s quite comfortable, thank you for checking,” Târn said. With his vision blocked, he became more attuned to his other senses. He could hear drawers opening and closing and what sounded like clothes moving over the surface of Sal’s skin. The scent of rosemary grew stronger and thicker in the air, now mixing with a range of other scents he couldn’t yet place. The sounds continued for what felt like many minutes, but Târn was content to wait patiently for whatever was coming next.

“Okay, are you ready?” Sal said, startling Târn.

“Uh, I think so, yes,” Târn said, not quite sure what he was to be ready for.

“Okay then,” Sal said. Suddenly Târn felt Sal’s body moving on the bed, and the rich scent of rosemary mixed in with the warm, comforting smell of taking a hat off in the winter. “What do you smell, Târn?”

“It’s the top of your head, isn’t it?” Târn said. Sal laughed, “yes, I thought I’d start with an easy one. How does it make you feel?”

Târn thought for a moment and reflected on the feelings in his body. “Calm and relaxed, actually,” he said finally.

“Interesting,” Sal said. “So we produce this volatile compound called *hexadecanal*, or *hex* for short, from the top of our



heads. Babies have it in spades. It's been found to reduce aggression in men and increase it in women."

"Oh, wow," Tâm said, fascinated. Scent had always been intuitive to him; he had never even considered the science behind the sensations he was feeling. Suddenly he felt Sal's body moving on the bed again, this time feeling what he thought were their hands near his head, and the warmth of their now familiar scent coming close.

"How about now," Sal said. Tâm breathed deeply, inhaling the full, warm richness of their scent, now less inhibited and taking in as much as his lungs would allow. He exhaled slowly. "It's your neck again, isn't it?"

"That's two for two," Sal said. "Clearly you need more of a challenge. Tâm felt them getting up from the bed and maneuvering nearby, opening and closing a drawer.

"How about this," Sal said.

Tâm took a deep breath and immediately wrinkled his nose; this was not what he was expecting at all. "Oh, it's um, er, interesting, uh..." he said, trying to sound neutral.

"Ha ha, I can see you don't like it from your face," Sal laughed. "It's actually not me, that's one of my partners' t-shirts."

"Oh," Tâm said, relieved this wasn't a scent coming from Sal's body.

“You know there’s this famous t-shirt study where they gave people shirts that potential mates had sweated into. The scents they preferred most came from people with complementary MHC types,” Sal said.

“MHC types?” Tâm asked. “What are those?”

“Oh, sorry,” Sal said, “it stands for *Major Histocompatibility Complex*. It’s kind of like the genome for your immune system. Having complementary MHC types means that those people’s genes, when put together, would be more robust to a wider range of diseases. So their kids, for instance, would be more likely to survive.”

“That’s incredible,” Tâm said, “all of that just from smelling a t-shirt?”

“Yeah, exactly,” Sal laughed. “Turns out our sense of smell is pretty biologically important. And I’m guessing from your reaction you might not get along super-well with this particular partner of mine, at least in an intimate sense. But that’s not required.”

Tâm blushed a bit at the implication. Feeling braver than he had before, he said, “If you don’t mind, I’d like to experience more of *your* scents.”

Sal laughed again. “Okay, I’m done messing with you. Give me another moment.” Tâm felt Sal shifting around again, but still

not on the bed. In a few moments he could smell their scent again, but now mixed with an earthier tone, a little sharper than before.

“I’m... I’m not sure,” Târn said, trying to decode this familiar yet different scent.

Sal giggled. “Let me give you a hint. Can I have permission to touch your face?”

“Of course,” Târn said, unsure of how this would help. Suddenly, he felt two soft palms gently caress the contours of his face, from outside his eyes, down his cheeks, and then resting gently on his lips.

“Oh, your feet,” he said, more aroused than he expected to be.

“So your body is telling me you like feet,” Sal said. “You see, *I* don’t have a blindfold on.”

Târn reddened again. “Oh, sorry, I, uh...”

“Don’t be sorry,” Sal said gently. “I appreciate the honesty of your body. Let’s move on to the next one.” Târn felt one of Sal’s arms on the bed again, now shifting themselves to stretch over him. Again he felt the sharper scent of their body, this time with a more familiar warmth he knew well from his own scents.

“Mmmmm, your armpit,” he said, unable to hide his pleasure.

Sal giggled. “Yes, would you like to have another moment with my armpit?”

“I would,” Târn said softly, taking a deep breath again.

“Oh, I love the look on your face when you do that,” Sal said.

“It’s so amazing that your sweat can smell so good,” Târn said, sighing.

“Well, it’s not sweat, exactly,” Sal said in a thoughtful voice. “We actually have two kinds of glands for what people think of as sweat: *eccrine* and *apocrine*. The eccrine glands keep you cool and are all over your body. The apocrine glands are just in a few... special places,” they continued with a smile in their voice.

“Like the armpits?” Târn asked.

“Like *especially* the armpits. But also the mons pubis, and a little bit in the ear canals and even the eyelids,” Sal said. “Sorry if I’m turning this into an impromptu science lesson,” they continued, laughing.

“No, I love it, I’m learning so much from you about the body’s scents, this is incredible,” Târn said sincerely.

“Okay then! We’re not done, though, I’ve got one last one for you.” Târn felt them maneuvering around the bed, much longer than before. Even before they stopped moving, he

could feel the warmth emanating from the length of their body along his torso. “How about now?” Sal said, their voice coming from towards his feet.

He knew what was coming but was still not entirely prepared. He breathed in slowly, the rosemary scent now widening in his senses to a forest of intoxicatingly alluring aromas, the deep intimacy of Sal’s body so close to his, warming both his senses and his heart, knowing they trusted him enough to be this close. Amongst the many scents he caught a hint of something from earlier in the evening.

“Apocrine glands... and... Lacto... bacillus?” he said questioningly.

Sal laughed, making their body move even closer to him. “Well if I couldn’t see you were so turned on, I might have been a little insulted if that was the only thing you had to say.”

“Oh, sorry, I just meant...” Târn stammered.

“Oh Târn, you should know by now I’m just giving you a hard time. Quite literally, it seems,” Sal said, chuckling.

Târn reddened again but couldn’t help but laugh as well. “Okay, that’s fair,” he said.

“You’re right, though,” Sal said, “*lactobacillus* is right there in the urinary tract, fighting off infection. That’s why I was glad

to see that you like your kefir strong. My, um, scent is a little too much for some people.”

“I... love it,” Târn said quietly.

“Yes, I can see that,” Sal replied, “My face is right over your, er, *excitement*,” laughing again. “Okay, give me a moment.”

Târn was disappointed to feel Sal’s body move off the bed and what sounded like the drawers and fabric moving again. He felt their hands gently taking the blindfold off his face, and he blinked as he adjusted to the dim light in the room. Sal had turned off the main lights, keeping only the tiny colored lights along the path. They were fully clothed again, sitting next to him on the bed.

“What’s next?” Târn asked, hoping there was more to come.

“That’s it!” Sal laughed. “Actually, I have no idea. Nobody has ever gotten this far.”

“What do you mean?” Târn asked.

“Well, I haven’t really been close with a lot of people, and scent is really important to me. Most people don’t smell quite right to me, like that t-shirt was for you. And most of the people I’ve tried this with got too weirded out almost as soon as I put on the blindfold.”

“But what about me, do I smell okay?” Târn said, suddenly self-conscious.

“You smell *wonderful*, Târn,” Sal said, smiling and leaning towards him to let their shoulder lightly touch his. “It’s the first thing I noticed about you. And I knew it wasn’t some *bread* you were carrying.”

Târn laughed sheepishly. “Okay, I deserved that one.”

“So...,” Sal said, suddenly shy, “You could say I don’t really know where to go from here.”

Târn could feel the moment passing, and looked out the window at the rain. “I have an idea,” he said brightly.

Sal looked up at him. “What are you thinking?”

“How about we go out to your balcony and smell the rain together?” he said.

“Oh,” Sal said, thinking, “Yes. Yes, I like that idea.” They jumped up from the bed and started stripping off their clothes.

“Wait, uh, what are you doing?” Târn said anxiously, his boldness gone.

“Oh, c’mon Târn, I was naked and on top of you just a few moments ago! It doesn’t make any sense for us to get our clothes all wet, does it?”

“No....,” Tãm said sheepishly, “I guess it doesn’t.” He gingerly started to take his clothes off, but Sal was already completely naked.

“Here, can I help?” Sal asked impatiently, and Tãm nodded. Sal pulled Tãm’s top upwards, stretching their body to its full height to pull it over his head. Even in the dim light of the garden paths, Tãm could see two elaborate rosemary branches tattooed just below Sal’s well-developed pectoral muscles.

“*Salvia... Rosmarinus*,” Tãm said softly.

“Oh yeah,” Sal said, smiling. “I got those as soon as the scars from my top surgery had healed. I wanted it to be a *celebration* of my transformation rather than a blemish, you know?”

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” Tãm said, staring at Sal’s smooth and muscular chest.

“Thank you,” Sal said, turning away slightly. “I don’t usually like people commenting on my body, but, um, it’s different when you say it,” they continued shyly.

Before Tãm could respond, Sal had grabbed him with one hand and pulled open the sliding door with the other. “C’mon, before we lose our nerve!” they yelled.

They slipped onto the balcony and Sal closed the door behind them. Despite how warm they had been inside, the cold hit their bare skin with an intensity they were not expecting. Tãm



saw Sal beginning to shiver and shyly offered his arm to hold their shoulder.

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Sal said with a little smile, and quickly folded their body into Tâm’s before he could say a word. Slowly Tâm let his other arm fall, drawing Sal closer to him. “Um, sorry I didn’t ask, it just looked so warm in there – is this okay?” Sal asked.

“Oh, yes, this is better than okay,” Tâm said softly. He held onto them for a long moment, feeling the warmth of their body, the light sting of the raindrops, and the scent of new earth all combining together in the February night.

“So, um, I think this is the part where you’re supposed to kiss me,” Sal said, with the lightest touch of anxiety in their voice.

Tâm nodded and they gently parted their lips to meet in the middle, softly tasting each other together as they felt the rivulets of rain roll down the exposed contours of their faces. After everything they had experienced that night, Tâm had not known what to expect from their first kiss, but it too was a surprise. Sal tasted the way the rain had always smelled to him: soft and insistent, full of life, a promise of things to come.

“*Petrichor*,” he murmured, before losing himself again to the kiss.