

Sputnik Café

by Christine Gumalal

On November 3, 1957, Russia launched the second spacecraft to orbit earth. Following its predecessor, Sputnik 2 contained the first living creature sentenced to a lifetime of isolation, a dog named Laika. It roamed around earth in a sealed cabin and heard nothing but its own bark and some casual beeps; sometimes its eyes dilated, witnessing the entire universe and the blinking of a million stars.

It is that picture that comes directly in mind whenever I get or send some postcards with a dog's face on it. The memory of Laika sent to outer space to circle our planet. At the back, a scribbled short note: *Hello, how have you been? I am doing great. Wish you were here.*

It seems everyone is always wishing for someone else to be with. Everyone is always trying to fill the void, the nothingness, the empty spaceship that each of us is confined in. And on a day to day basis, humanity tries to survive. Connections are made in wireless gadgets that occasionally beep with every notification, message, and like. Everyone wants to update the earth on the latest trend with heads bowed and fingers unceasingly tapping the screen, hitting that digital thumbs-up. And in a trance, everyone awaits for that beep, the absolute confirmation that someone is also out there.

But no one ever looks up to see the stars anymore.

In a café I see my generation conveniently accepting this digital reality. Oblivious to the face they are seated with and the aborted conversations. It doesn't even matter whether one comes in alone, or with a crowd since everyone is already in their own space.

I am not an exception. Seated in a corner with my laptop opened, a new word document waits for the first letter to move the cursor, to move it further and further until a successful *save as*, I struggle to fill this void with words. What makes it harder sometimes, is the presence of a muse. One ethereal creature is misplaced in a corner table, also alone. She mindlessly sips her coffee, scribbles a note, and puffs a half-done lipstick-stained cigarette. Her lips occasionally part, and the slightest opening allows a glimpse of the tongue playing with different shapes of smoke. Then the casual yet deadliest act, she fixes her hair with her fingers, revealing a nape for the consumption of the sun.

And I am lost, like Laika who was forever stuck in a loop. For no matter how I want to get back on track, the cursor now impatient, the document threatening, reminding me of a deadline, despite all these, nothing comes out of my mind save her face.

In that face a pair of thin lips slowly touching a coffee mug. Above these lips, a nose that curves all the way up to the eyes which I sometimes maliciously catch, and hold stare with, for a full three-second pause, pretending to be thinking, and then retract, still pretending to be thinking. Yet fully aware of her entire face. Storing it for safekeeping, I am a lens that captures her image, carefully developing the face that dares to intrude my thoughts, and puts her image in my memory card. Here I am searching for a connection. The classic flirting schemes that I have mastered over time are floating and crashing in my dreaming head.

I go over the different scenes that could take place, like staging a drama or directing a short film. I am my own heroine, out to begin her new quest of the day.

Scene 1.

I would stand, leave my table for a cigarette. I would make sure my pack of Pall Mall is visible when I head towards a table near her. Then, just as I pick a stick, maybe then I forget my lighter. *Could I have a light?* How convenient. She would smile, maybe answering with a *Sure*. Or maybe she would just mutely hand me her lighter. I'd make sure our hands would touch.

Scene 2.

Hey there, I was just wondering what lipstick shade you're wearing. I so love the color. Would this pass? Or would she be able to detect my move? She would be confused. As I, too, am wearing a different shade. She would respond, give me a cosmetic brand, or name a shade of pink that I haven't even heard of, the sort that is hard to spell.

We would start to talk. As it seems, words are birthed by the innate desire for an existence to be recognized. An ovulation that takes place in the mind. The umbilical cord connecting what is dreamt and what is real. The pain in the abdomen. Then a kick. And finally a successful delivery of utterance. It's a girl!

Real, actual, audible words are thrown, caught, passed over and under and sometimes into the net, like in a volleyball match. We would start to bake bricks of lies, hopelessly searching for familiarity in the stranger that is both us. As how it normally goes, words reveal different versions of truth. And this made-up conversation marks the end of an imaginary love affair.

Gravity would pull me back from space and crashes me into reality. It leaves me with nothing but my amniotic thoughts.

I am once again back in the café, in my corner, facing the indifferent screen of my laptop. My battery close to being drained, I resign to the weight of the blinking lights that unveil in the night and decide to leave. I linger in the alfresco and light a cigarette. I follow the trail of smoke that leaves my lungs. The hot air always rises. It leads me to a wall, then it swirls up the droopy head of a light post, and finally dissolves in the sky.

I continue to stare into open space, abandoning a burning stick between my fingers. I look for a different trail, one that has been going in circles for almost 60 years. My eyes scanning the newly born darkness, trying to distinguish the stars from the many things man has successfully launched in space. The Sputnik, could it still be blinking?

I finally give up. I take my last puff and flick the wasted cigarette into a bin. As I reapply my lipstick, I catch my reflection in the mirror. I see my dilated eyes, they contain the light coming from the café. I sit still waiting for another image to resurface. And then I see it. Looking back at me is Laika. She has been barking and howling inaudible cries.

She's been trying to tell me that planet earth is blue.