

## **A Potted Cactus**   Anna Paquier - Translated by Wendy Cross

A sharp, piercing sound reached his ears. It was a continuous beep, a stabbing sound that took up all the space in his brain. There was a flash of white light.

"Good morning," said a voice in front of him. "Good morning," he replied to the woman.

She was sitting up straight at an immaculate desk, and observing him with a bored expression. Her white gown showed off the olive tones of her skin to great effect.

"Welcome to Paradise," she continued.

"What? I'm dead?" "Well, yes. Don't you remember?"

"Er, I was busy doing my Christmas shopping. I was reading an email on my phone... The truck..."

"Exactly. You should be a bit more careful when you're crossing the road."

He shook himself and looked around him. Everything was white.

"There's been a mistake, I can't die."

"Why not?" "Who's going to look after my daughter?"

"You don't have a daughter." "How do you know?"

"It's in your file. 'Unmarried, no children, no pets, one potted cactus'."

"Who's going to look after my potted cactus?"

"Very funny. Your death will be officially announced in one minute."

"I'm twenty-six. I don't want to die in a stupid road accident! I still have far too many things to do."

"I'm sorry, I..."

"I've never been to South America, I still haven't met the love of my life, I've not yet built a Lego tower that reaches the ceiling! I'm sorry, but I can't die today, it's just not possible."

"Listen, I only deal with admissions. If you want to make a comment, you'll have to speak to my line manager."

Before he had time to reply, the beep suddenly changed into a succession of short and rapid but regular signals.

"Oh, you're in luck, you won't even have to fill in a complaint form. You will be able to go back to your potted cactus."

There was another flash of lightning.

He opened his eyes, and terrible pain swept through his body. The sky was dark and illuminated by Christmas decorations. A head swam into his field of vision.

"We've got him back."

"What's happening? I hurt everywhere."

"He's conscious. You've been knocked down by a truck. We're taking you to the hospital."

"You looked pretty in the white gown."

"What did he say?"

"It's the pain, making him delirious. Put him in the ambulance, 10 milligrams of morphine, straightaway."

He closed his eyes again and allowed himself to savor the pain coursing through him. Life was indeed much more painful than death. Much more thorny. Much more interesting, too.

I must buy some Legos, he said to himself.