

Growing Pains

Trigger warning: This short story contains references to self-harm.

Dear autumn, I'd write. Why does my life feel like it's falling apart whenever you come around? It started with the death of my cat. The year after that, my mother's second divorce. Then, my father's heart attack. And now this. The epic implosion. I guess I should have expected it. Dear autumn, with your rains and winds and golden days. With your crunching leaves beneath hurrying boots, with your dooming darkness and creeping cold. With your loneliness that lasts forever, this year even longer than before. Dear autumn, none of it is your fault, but I wish you would stop chasing summer away, summer and its endless happiness.

I'd send these words to autumn if I could see the future. But it is still summer, and the world is fine.

The air smells of strawberry fields and freshly mowed grass, still heavy from the day's heat. I'm making my way through the fields, the excited beating of my heart like a steady metronome guiding the way. Of course, I'd even be able to find the way blindfolded, I'd know exactly when to turn a corner, I'd know how many steps to take. How many times did I walk these paths, how many times did I see its silhouette forming in front of the horizon, its outstretched branches like a greeting hand waving me closer. It is the first summer after we graduated high school, and we have nothing to do except fill the nights with endless life. Our friend group has only existed for a few months, a melting pot of characters who, on closer examination, aren't much alike. But somehow, we are making it work. When I arrive, they are all there – they greet me like the last time we saw each other was two years ago and not last night, and I try to match my high-pitched Hi's and How Are You's to their level of enthusiasm. I wish my tongue would allow my emotions to slip out together with my words as easily as other people's tongues seem to be able to. I wish I could find a way to let them know that this year is the happiest I have ever been, in spite of the state of the world, because I have found my world with them. The night begins, and as dusk grows darker around us, we seem to glow with the careless joyfulness of youth. We've had so many of these nights that I know the basic procedure by now. And yet, it is never boring. We are tides being pushed together and pulled apart, new constellations forming all through the night. There is the initial circle of small-talk, exchanging the newest gossip about everyone we've ever known and retelling stories we all heard a million times before. Then we remember we are there to drink, so bottles of cheap liquors are being passed around and being rated on a

scale of “The Worst Thing I’ve Ever Tasted” to “It Does The Job So I Won’t Complain”. Tonight’s drink does the job, and soon we share the kind of tipsy lightness I’ve been craving ever since the last time we met. Someone takes out their phone and we start posing, resulting in an array of shaky pictures capturing our drunken laughs and complaints about painfully bright flashes. As the night goes on, there are moments of calm in which I step away from the group and look up. My alcohol-induced brain works slower than usual and yet, as my eyes lethargically blink towards the sky, I can’t stop wondering at the sight of it. Who knows what’s out there. Maybe my whole future is written in between those blinking specks of light, scratched onto this satiny darkness surrounding us.

My father would visit me shortly after the move and would bring with him a toolbox for my flat. “Who knows, you might need it someday”. We would open it and I’d be giddily happy about every new tool I’d take into my hands. In these days I’d get excited about each little thing I had no use for until I’d start living on my own. Be it a single pan, a microwave oven, a set of cutleries, a towel for the kitchen sink, a broom, or a toolbox. Among the collection of hammers, screwdrivers, pliers, screws, and nails, there would lay a single craft knife with a set of replaceable blades. My heart would skip a beat and I’d realize, ashamed, that this tool would be the one I’d be most excited about. I’d grab it to inspect it further, trying to suppress the thought creeping up on me. I’d hear my father’s warning, always concerned about his youngest daughter, still seeing in me the little girl I used to be before my life began. “Be careful with that, it’s really sharp”. Yes, dad, I know that just too well.

I find myself sitting on the dilapidated bench right underneath the willow tree we designated as our meeting point. It has been here for as long as I can remember, overlooking the patchworked landscape of apple trees and strawberry fields. We like this spot because it is secluded enough for us to hang out without having to worry about bothering any parents or neighbours, and at the same time it’s close enough to civilisation for the occasional trip to the grocery store or the drunken walk home. Personally, I love it here because it holds so many special memories. Long walks with my father and our dog, stopping at this exact bench to have a snack. Biking with my sisters, pretending our brightly painted bikes were wild horses we’d tamed, stopping here to catch our breaths and let the horses rest. I’ve been here in winter, throwing snowballs at my brother, and in summer, trying to climb the tree’s branches. This old willow tree has been a landmark in my life; it has watched me grow up. It is possible that my drunken brain makes out of this something bigger than it actually is, but in this moment I can’t help but tear up. I feel the sudden urge to get up and hug the wrinkled trunk, to sink into the tree’s wooden core and stay

there forever, safe and secluded from the world. As I am about to get up, one of my friends sits down next to me, and I sink back onto the bench. We look at each other silently, smiling. Connected by summer nights under the willow and the unbearable feeling that all of this was meant to be, we start talking. Our conversation wraps around us like the most natural thing and a thought flashes through my mind – I already am encased in the willow, only that instead of its strong bark, it's these summer nights that keep me safe.

It would be late September and I'd sit in my flat, in *my* flat, blankly staring at the vermilion on my skin. *Be careful with that, it's really sharp.* The familiarity of it. The comfort of it. My head would be spinning with fears and doubts and grief, and I wouldn't be able to tell what was wrong. This would be what I wanted, right? Studying at university, living in a flat in the city? A further step into the vastness of adult life. So where would this feeling come from and where would it go, except into the cuts on my skin. Maybe it would be a natural reaction to my changing surroundings. Having lived my entire life in the house I grew up in, it would only be natural to feel out of place here. I would feel like I was brutally ripped out of my old life, my actual life, and placed into this fake one. No more peaceful family dinners ending in my little sister's vow to never talk to any of us again, no more Friday night visits to our father to cook and spend some quality time as the remnants of a broken family. No more early morning arguments over who gets to use the bathroom first. No more reminders to please do the laundry or please wash the dishes, this is the third time I'm asking. No more loud music to try and ignore mom's and stepdad-number-1's clamorous fights echoing through the house. No more nights spent in the company of the few people I thought I'd never lose. Instead: unbearable loneliness, painfully longing for the past and a sense that maybe things won't be alright. Every night without exception, I would jolt awake, expecting to wake up in my childhood room. And every night, it would take me a few confused seconds to realize where I was. That I would never wake up in my room again. Before this realisation would suffocate me, I'd be asleep again, and in the morning, there would only be a trace of the nightly incident, like a faint dream.

Slowly, the night comes to an end and it is time for our little ritual. We always play this specific song and drop down on the dusty ground, indifferent to pointy pebbles stabbing our backs and the cold of the night gradually creeping in on us, and then we look up to the sky. We stay like this for the duration of the song, not moving, not talking. We just are. Everyone is left to their own thoughts for those four minutes. No one remembers how or why it started, but we all agree that it is the best way to end the night. We joke about what a stranger would think of us if they saw us here, a group of teenagers lying on the ground in the middle of nowhere at two in the

morning with a spheric sound of music in the air. They'd probably take us for some kind of cult. "I love you guys, I'd totally start a cult with you" one of my friends says and the rest of us laugh and assure him we love him too and yes, we'd make a great cult. Somewhere I read about a new approach to stargazing and now, every time I happen to be outside at night, I think of it. Most of the time, people look up to the sky and perceive the stars as being above them, like lamps on a ceiling. But the sky is not 'above' the earth. There is no up or down in space. The notion of up and down is created by the earth's field of gravity. Rather, the sky surrounds the earth, it embraces it completely. So instead, as you are lying on the ground, try to convince yourself you are looking down. As if you are glued to the ceiling, gazing down to the floor. Only that instead of the floor, there is infinite, star-sprinkled darkness. It will give you an entirely new sense of nihilism. Whispering, I tell the friend next to me about this and she turns her head toward the sky. A few seconds pass, then she gasps. "I think I'm addicted to this feeling". Her gleaming face in the darkness, the tree's silhouette in front of us, the rest of the group slowly, tipsily getting up from the ground and stretching their numb limbs. I smile. "Me too".

It would have been weeks since I last saw them and I'd be incredibly excited to schedule a "revival" meeting with everyone for the weekend. I'd see everything in a blur, the train ride home, my mother picking me up from the station, the house that would look less and less like home every time I'd visit. I'd be too afraid to go up to my old room, for fear mom and stepdad-number-2 already renovated it. The sole thought of opening the door with the expectation to get a glimpse of the familiar sight of my childhood, but instead encountering an alien, almost hostile space with all the wrong furniture at all the wrong places and a horrid colour on the walls. I wouldn't be able to bear it, this final, irreversible loss of everything I knew. So, I would stay downstairs, impatiently counting down the minutes until our designated meeting. Finally, the moment would come. We would be together again and it would be just like summer. And there they'd be, at the willow, and we'd spend the night like we used to, and we'd fill each other in on everything that happened since we last talked. New flats, new friends, new clothes, new hobbies. And although we'd feel no different than in summer and although we would go through the same procedure as every time and although we would end the night lying on the ground looking at the stars and although we would say goodbye with the promise that we'll see each other soon – something would have shifted, and we wouldn't be the same as before. There would be two or three sporadic meetings like this and still no one would want to admit the obvious: that in the process of growing up, we'd have grown apart. Our group of friends, the

willow-dancers, the night-drinkers, the stargazers, the cult-starters, would implode into nothing. The endless happiness we felt in summer would be twisted into a strange autumnal solitude, and no one would ever really understand how it happened. Autumn would take them from me like it takes away the leaves from their trees. And I would never get them back, not like this, not the way we used to be.

But I don't know all this yet, because right now it is summer and I am completely, perfectly happy. The night sky stretches infinitely above me and on the ground next to me, my own little infinity.