

The Art of Losing

I like to pretend that these yearly homecomings are owed to a feeling of obligation towards my mother. I had watched our silences grow like stubborn weeds. Even as she became more frail, our worst moments were superimposed on her face like a filter on a camera lens, making me wonder whether we can ever truly *see* the people who mean something to us – see them for what they are.

I tell myself that I come back for her, when really, it is your face that haunts me. I see it watching me, phantom-like, through the dust-streaked windows of the inn. The sign has read „Everland“ – in cursive, plum letters on light grey – ever since the „N“ of the „Never“ faded into oblivion. Heart fluttering, I slip into one of the raddled leather booths, nodding to Iris, the owner, who is wiping down the counter. Other than her, there's only a fatigued, doe-eyed little boy sitting on his knees at the opposite table. I tell myself that I hadn't *really* expected to find you here, but that is a lie.

Apart from its former name that it has never quite lived up to, given that its regular clientele consists of malcontent retirees, the inn had also lost most of its original, rustic coziness. The pine wood paneling had, in places, taken on a dirty, ashen tint, and the tables had become landmarks to sloppily eaten cheese nachos, spilled beer and unattended sodas. The decline had started when I was a teenager. After the coal mines shut down, there was a desperate scramble to turn the town into a tourist attraction – an enterprise doomed to fail in a place where the air was stale and limy and the roads riddled with potholes. They even ventured building a small amusement park just outside of town, close to the old railway, that remained unfinished, an empty husk slumbering next to a dead-end road. It was there that I talked to you for the first time.

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We were barely adults. Fresh out of high school, I was spending the evening, as I often did, at the park. The ferris wheel was my favorite motif to capture with my brother's ten year old Canon. With vines embracing its metal spine, the spokes rusted and frail and gondolas covered in poorly done graffiti, it made for hauntingly beautiful photographs. I knelt in the tall grass, made dry and flaxen by the unrelenting sun, so concentrated on getting the shot right that I didn't see you approach. It was only as you moved, grabbing two low metal spokes like pull-up bars and swinging back and forth, that I looked up. „Take my picture“, you said. Rounded vowels, harsh consonants.

Tousled hair like a black cloud framed your face against the setting sun. Your T-Shirt, adorned with a triple moon symbol in yellow neon print, had ridden up enough to expose your belly button, next to which there was a small tattoo of a semicolon. It struck me as odd, back then. As soon as I had pressed the trigger, you darted forward to look over my shoulder. A small bottle, half-filled with an orange liquid, that sat on the other side of the tracks caught the sun and made your face sparkle as you said: „Alexis.“ Slow to register that this was supposed to be an introduction, I stammered my own name a few seconds later. You had retrieved the bottle and pushed it into my hand. „I don't

really drink“, I said. – „What are you, Amish? It's Bourbon. Just a sip.“

I wasn't going to remark that the Amish, to my knowledge, did in fact drink alcohol, so I just pretended to take a sip. A golden piercing on your nostril moved upwards as you smiled and your face became less angular. There was a harshness to those cheekbones, to those upturned onyx eyes. You were like a Hispanic version of the statue of Artemis, the huntress, perched on a rock, one hand reaching backwards to pull an arrow from her quiver. „Wait“, I said, „don't you work at the Neverland?“ – „Yeah. You?“ – „I'm...still living with my Mom. I work half-time at her book shop.“ – „You're lucky.“ I frowned. „How'd you figure that?“

„You know, cause, you got somebody looking out for you.”

“Actually, most of the time, it's the other way around. She has IPF. Scarred lungs. Most days, I'm in charge of the shop, carrying her oxygen machine, getting her prescriptions...” *Dying a little during FaceTime calls with Dad to ask for money...*

“Shit”, you said, “sounds fun to be you.” Your sober tone made me smile despite myself.

“Tell you what, why don't we make it a game?” Before I could answer, you launched into your next sentence. It was a habit of yours, to talk as if you were afraid of someone taking away your words. “Ever played Truth or Dare? Way more interesting if more shitty things happened to you, I swear.” I couldn't tell if you were being sarcastic or not, but the proposition intrigued me, even if only for its lack of precedence.

„So try me“, I said. You raised an eyebrow. „But if we're gonna do this, we're doing it right.“

'Doing it right' meant, apparently, sitting on top of the ferris wheel in one of the rickety, open gondolas that could only be reached by climbing up the outer rim of the structure, which had been partly eaten by rust. The bottom platform was covered in cigarette buds and old chewing gum.

You were merciless. When you saw that I had trouble looking down, you made me stand at the edge of the platform on one leg. I probably did it because I wanted to impress you so badly. In an act of retribution, I made you chug the rest of the liquor. Not that it seemed to faze you much.

The way you dressed in your casual T-Shirt and green corduroys made me self-conscious about my flimsy lavender dress, somehow performative. I flinched with every flash of your black eyes.

We went down to the park a lot that summer. Sometimes we even slept there, behind one of the wooden booths, in your tent, which was already frayed at the seams. And if it started raining and the wind turned, the drops would punch against the black nylon, like someone insisting that we get out. You would read your favorite poems to me by the light of a propane lantern.

The art of losing isn't hard to master. / I lost two cities, lovely names. And, vaster, / some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent. / I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster..

I would watch your mouth gently embrace every syllable; hung on to every sigh, every chortle, every flutter of an eyelid – learning you by heart. For a long time, there was an unspoken agreement

to leave it at a promise, to not disturb the beautiful illusion of those summer nights – the allure of your heated breath on the nape of my neck, your fingertip tracing the shape of my collarbone, my lips staining the concave bend of your midriff. Our hands intertwined while we found our way home along overgrown, weather-beaten trails, sauntering to the steady choir of crickets.

But you were restless. One night, the air was heavy with a threat of imminent thunderstorms. I was only half asleep, twisting and turning, unwittingly kicking away my sleeping bag, when you sat up with a jerk, startled. „I missed it...I really...I missed it...” The fear in your voice woke me up.

„What's going on?“, I mumbled, reluctantly lifting my head. – „The fucking train! Didn't you hear?“

„It's only distant thunder.“ I could hear you exhaling the weight of a thought left unsaid, but paid it no mind. I just gave you a cigarette to calm you down.

But it kept happening more and more. Over and over again, you would wake to the sound of a ghost train. „I swear I can hear it“, you'd insist. „Wheels beating against the tracks, a low rumble at first, then loud enough to split through my skull. I tell you, it makes my teeth rattle. Then the distant sound of a whistle, like a call.“

„The railway's been shut down. There haven't been any trains going through here for years.“

„I know, I know, I'm not crazy.“ You paused. “But maybe it's a sign.” – “Of what?”, I laughed.

“Haven't you ever felt like you've never actually *lived*? And maybe you might not get to if you didn't get up, if you didn't change?” – “I think everyone feels like that when they're young.”

“Yeah, but...no, that's not what I'm getting at. I mean: why are we still hanging out in this dingy little spot of earth as if we were tied to it? Why not go, right now, you and me. We would find a place of our own, I know we could.” Your cheeks were colored with excitement. We would invariably have that same talk, and every time I would dismiss it as a silly flight of fancy, a wantonness born out of an intimacy that can only be felt in the dark.

I wanted to hold on to your elusiveness. But in time, we both knew we had to move beyond this transient bond we'd created. People were starting to catch on. They called you a slut because you wore short skirts to work on Saturday nights to increase the tips from all those horny old men who'd gather to watch football (allegedly). “They seem to like the black imitation leather best”, you'd joke. “Dirty bastards.” – “I happen to agree”, I'd say then, and kiss your nose. I'd heard them call you every name under the sun – to be fair though, some, like Trudy, had a reason. At the general store, I sometimes saw you slip a flat bread or a can of beans under your shirt when she had her back turned. You got angry with me when I offered to pay for you. The worst offense, however, appeared to be that you were living in a trailer at the edge of town with “this Brett guy” who “everyone knows does cocaine or something”, as my mother eloquently put it. – “He's a friend”, you said, when I asked you about it, and shrugged in that way people do when they don't want to answer a question. No matter how much I tried not to care, whenever I felt people's stares burn into my back

like tiny, red-hot needles, I would let your hand go. I would fall silent.

But you were only ever afraid of becoming material to me. You wanted to remain the wood nymph, the bare-footed wraith donning a crown of ivy on top of her shaggy curls. One day, I came to the trailer unannounced and refused to stop knocking. Through the window, I saw you furiously pulling shut a heavy brown curtain that separated the bedroom from the living area. A high-pitched sound, like the wailing of an infant, was drowned out by the tweed fabric. I thought I caught a glimpse of a red-headed man I presumed to be Brett smoking by a window, before I stumbled backward. You'd torn the door open, letting it slam against the side of the trailer.

The place was tiny, but tidier than expected. The kitchen had beige, 1970s style diamond-patterned tiles and cabinets in dark maroon, from which the color was chipping. I sat down at the camping table, doing my best to seem nonchalant. Pots and pans rattled in accusation as you rummaged through the cabinets. I spotted instant noodles wrapped in cellophane, canned vegetables, and, to my surprise, a tin of formula. You banged a glass of clear liquor on the table hard enough to make it spill down the plastic table legs. A pungent odor permeated the small room, but I didn't dare open the window. As we sat in silence for a while, I was scratching the skin of my fingernails.

“Can't you just talk to me?”

“'bout what?” Your eyes gleamed like arrowheads.

“Why do you shut me out like that? I mean, I feel like I don't know anything about you.”

“Why are you embarrassed of me?”

I gaped at your furrowed brows. “Come on, it's not a hard question.”

“Why would you think that?”, I said, “It's not you. Just...people stressing me out.”

“Then don't fucking listen to them. Or just...I mean, what's keeping you here anyway? You're an adult. You wanna be your mother's caretaker all your life? Fuck that. She'd keep you here forever, if she could. And you don't even like her.”

“Not everyone can leave their family in a ditch just because they feel like it.”

“You think that's what happened?” Your features settled into stone.

“That's the point!”, I yelled. “I don't *know*. I don't know because you never *tell* me anything!”

You took a huge gulp from the glass that glistened with drops of alcohol running down the rim.

“You wanna know about my family? Fine. My Mom left me with my stepdad when I was seven. He remarried two years ago, this WASP lawyer lady. I fooled around with her daughter Marie. She outed me to her Mom, who's, in case you were wondering, also a homophobic bitch. Like my stepdad, basically – so I got the hell out of there.” You paused. “I think that's the gist of it. And don't look at me like that, Marie was twenty-four, like me, and we'd only known each other for a year.” I only noticed then that I'd started pacing. “I'm not judging you, I'm just...sorry.”

“Yeah, well, save it, princess.” I watched your dark lips twist as you turned away, but I pulled you

towards me by your elbow, pressing my face against your neck, breathing in a scent of soggy grass laced with a tinge of sweat, alcohol and lavender detergent. You stiffened at first, then let it happen. Behind your back, the man, looking docile, but concerned, peeked through the curtain. Before he realized his mistake and let it fall back into place, I'd already seen it. The child in his arms, its soulful black eyes looking right at me with an intensity that felt undeniably familiar.

We stood for what felt like an eternity. Your fingers absentmindedly combed through my hair, loosening the braids one by one. "So what now?", you whispered with your left hand resting on my skull. "You wanna marry a farmer boy, have three kids and bury your frustration in your back yard?" – "Why do you need to leave so badly?", I asked.

"Because I don't wanna raise...", you caught yourself. "Because I can't be stuck in this place forever." Your eyes wandered around the room. "I feel like I can't even...*breathe* anymore."

"But I'm not like you."

I squinted towards the curtain to what you could not, would not tell me. That you were tied to someone already and it wasn't me. I refused to look at you again when I exited the trailer; I was far too anxious that it would make me change my mind. You had slipped into my life like a specter, appearing out of thin air, never quite taking shape – and that is how you slipped out of it, vanishing days after our last conversation. I talked to Brett at the trailer, who was a nervous wreck, thinking you'd done something to yourself. I told him that I didn't believe that, especially since you'd taken the child, whose name, as I learnt, was Eli.

I thought about our fight the day I found the letter in my mother's bedroom drawer: an opened envelope, dated from a month ago, emblazoned with the image of a bucking horse and rider. The logo of Wyoming University. As I feverishly flipped through the pages, I found the words I was looking for. "...*we are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into the Wyoming Hathaway Scholarship program based on your Federal Student Aid application...*"

The fact that my mother would rather use me to mitigate her loneliness, her fear of death, than let me have a life of my own was a hard pill to swallow. What bothered me even more, however, was how long I had already allowed her to do so without realizing it.

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I exit the inn in a rush. Leaves drift along the empty street, following me towards the edge of town. How curious it is, that little glimmer of hope, sparking again and again, no matter how often it is doused. I can feel it surge again with every brush of my soles against the tall grass.

My feet come to a halt before I realize I'm there. The ferris wheel remains, abandoned, quietly creaking in the wind. As I stand in its shadow, the words of the poem you loved echo in my mind.

...The art of losing isn't hard to master / so many things seem filled with the intent / to be lost that their loss is no disaster... And I can almost convince myself that I believe them.

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Bishop, Elizabeth. "One Art." *The New Yorker*, 26 April 1976, p. 40,

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1976/04/26/one-art>. Accessed 30 May 2022.