

Isabel

By Arthur Klepchukov

05.17.2006 – 05.25.2006

Her ruby red tail lights began to blur in my eyes as I watched her crimson jeep distance itself from me. I lingered at the top of the hill, following her car down as it gently disappeared into the steep abyss. She coasted to a stop at a red light halfway down the road. The cold Tuesday night set in around me, meshing with the loneliness and the fog in my mind. Another car pulled up behind hers and hid her even more from me. I didn't think I'd miss her this much this soon. I didn't expect to hurt like this. May wasn't supposed to be this cold. My gaze briefly and sadly rose to the sky and by the time my eyes returned to the road Isabel's car had forever disappeared.

It was softly pouring outside, the type of summer rain that any soul can enjoy. The drops fell perfectly perpendicular to the ground and instead of jaggedly colliding, blended with any surface upon impact. She spun and twirled underneath the leaking sky. Her mother watched her from their doorstep with folded arms and a peaceful smile.

Her little body was dancing in the middle of the street. Her mother would have usually been worried but there were no cars at this time of day. The neighboring houses seemed empty, reflecting their inanimate groans in each puddle her daughter splashed through. The world quieted down, hid everyone from view, and put a little angel on center stage. She enjoyed these moments the two of them had.

The girl moved sporadically, making up moves as she went along. Her mother observed her, as always, leaning comfortably against the open door. She became somewhat swept away in the moment as she watched her daughter, soft echoes of childhood swimming in her eyes. She recalled doing this same routine when she was little. The puddles were a dynamic crowd for the little girl, as were the silent silver clouds. But the beautiful, young, liquid ballerina truly danced for an audience of none.

A cool early evening on a lost, mid-May Wednesday clung to me as I walked through the alley towards home. I stopped outside of Yogurt Park, its inviting glow and usual line of people drawing more attention from me than usual. I saw her smile at the prospect of frozen yogurt. My legs turned right and I went across the path to take a seat in Sufficient Grounds. Sadness met me at the entrance.

In the left corner I saw myself chatting up Isabel sometime in late winter.

"I don't get people around here," I continued, "I was really hoping for something different from the east coast, but they're just *not* that interesting."

Our eyes were still darting back and forth between our tiny cups of yogurt and each other. It was that slightly uncomfortable poking and prodding when two people are just getting acquainted, when they don't know just how much attention to pay to each other.

"I haven't made that many friends here either," she responded before taking a slow spoonful of yogurt and looking off to the right, causing her bangs to fall and mask her eye.

I looked up, surprised that someone with her looks could somehow not be the center of attention, drama, or controversy. She slowly brushed her hair back with her fingertips. My yogurt was melting in its cup. I looked away as I began to twirl my spoon.

“Well... maybe we can get to know each other better,” I asked with a piercing look in my eyes, my gaze now fixated on her. Her hair fell again.

I almost felt embarrassed for saying a line like that but to my surprise, she smiled and answered with a “yeah, definitely.” She looked straight at me before taking another spoonful. I reached out and gently moved her light locks out of her eye. Her smile grew.

I sighed, still stuck in the entrance of the coffee shop, and turned back around to Yogurt Park. No, I wasn't in the mood.

“You won't believe this,” I began with a smile.

Lauren looked at me with surprised and inquiring eyes, unaccustomed to one of my good moods.

“I met someone who also doesn't think this place is all that special.”

She laughed in response, “so is she a total pessimist like you?”

“Actually, no,” I said as I sat up. “We don't have much else in common.”

“So why doesn't she like this place?”

“Not for my reasons. She's always wanted to go to Columbia and this isn't exactly New York ya know?”

“Well,” Lauren began.

“...but she is blonde,” I interjected with another smile.

She exhaled and rolled her eyes, before predictably muttering, “You and your blondes.” I indulgently laughed at my own superficial vice.

“How is your relationship situation going, anyone new?”

“No, not really.” There was a look of friendly envy in how she looked away.

“Oh...and she's a writer.”

“Just like *you*,” Lauren added with a bite. That was her way of acknowledging that it was useless talking with me about anything else at the moment.

I looked off, smiling. She could plainly see “crush” painted on my forehead.

“And a dancer, or a former dancer, I'm not sure...”

“Obviously dancing circles around you!”

We both laughed.

“So, does she have a name?”

“Isabel,” I looked back at her with a grateful smile, “her name is Isabel.”

“Hmm, that's a pretty name.”

“That's what my mom said too.”

I felt Lauren looking back at me, gauging how wrapped up I was with this new girl. I paid no attention and didn't look back at her. I just kept smiling.

My door creaked open and I melodramatically stumbled in. I let my jacket slip out of my hands over my bed and sat down with a pessimistic sigh. I pulled my red sweater over my head and tossed it towards the closet. Because of the exaggerated mood I had put myself in it felt like my heart had painted the sweater that rich color. I didn't want

pampering but was hoping my roommate would notice my dissatisfaction and at least care to ask.

“How did it go?” Jack predictably inquired. Tracy was quiet; her eyes greeted me. I bitterly smiled and shot back, “how did *what* go?”

“Oh, I thought you were supposed to go out with your friend tonight?”

At first I got even angrier from being asked the question but then recalled that sarcasm didn’t always work with my roommate. Tracy looked sad and understood me before he did.

I turned left and looked out of the window towards Foothill, wondering how far Isabel was on her walk home.

“It didn’t happen,” I muttered as I looked up at them, sprawled out on the bed after what was probably a simple but very romantic Valentine’s Day dinner. On his computer screen, a movie I interrupted was tugging at their attention.

Before Jack could even mumble a sorry, I waved him away.

“She was *busy*. Had stuff to do.” I looked down, letting the lonely sting mix with the assumption of what those words usually meant. “How was your night?” I forced out the question whose answer I wanted as much as a slap in the face.

“It was good,” Tracy and Jack said in unison. They smiled and looked at each other. I offered a fake smile but by the time I could even muster up another bit of worthless conversation, their eyes were already back on their movie.

I did not immediately look away from the couple, letting the pain soak into myself. Tracy would sleep over again tonight; Jack stopped asking me if she could after he realized I did not noticeably care. He was right, an extra person in our small room did not bother me, only the daily reminder of my loneliness did.

Her feet hurt like her soul. She knew these moves, she knew them well, but she did not know if she was meant to do them. The moments when the world went quiet and a stage built itself around her were what she lived for in life.

The soft creaking sounds of her moving across the floorboards, the old, heavy swinging curtains framing her body’s playground, and the lights, illuminating the speckles of dust that rose up like a thousand faces in the audience, all these things flowed in harmony the way she did. Her toes twisting, moving as swiftly as fingers across a piano, her arms following along in rhythmic motions, her face complacent: her heart was at ease when she moved. It was different from singing, which had its own beauty but seemed so limited in how physical it could be. To her, the silence of motion was poetry unlike any other. Somehow, when she was out there, all the jagged pieces of life clicked together in a unison that just made a body want to dance.

But the music always had to stop. The lights could not stay lit all night, all her life, just for her. Reality always had to set in and it always brought doubt. Why? She never let me know.

“I just can’t wait for it to be over. I just want to go home, relax, feel safe...” She just told me her heart’s biggest worry as we had breakfast in Julie’s. The sun passed by above

us as we lingered in the mostly empty café. A crowd of empty chairs watched us but also gave us our space.

I kept stealing looks at her lips as they parted in honesty, paying attention but also wanting to kiss her. The early May afternoon shining through the sun roof made the sparkle of sadness on her mouth and in her words all the more vibrant. She told me she wanted to be a doctor. I said I couldn't picture her as one. I wanted to make her feel better, to heal her where she herself could not. What better way than....

I brought my fingers up to her lips and sweetly hushed her.

"Come here," I whispered.

I moved my chair closer to hers and she scooted a little closer to me. Her usual quiet echoed that she did not know what to expect.

"Relax."

Leaning in, I gently put her head on my shoulder. A part of both of us sighed on the inside. I kept holding her hand, cold, like always.

"*This is safe,*" I whispered into her hair before kissing it.

We sat there in silence for a few moments. When she sat up, her eyes looked at me with a tint of thankful relief that warmed me like the sun never could. I just reached up, brushed her hair out of her eye, and ...

"I kissed her."

"Oh, really?" Lauren looked at me in surprise. "When was this?"

"Yesterday."

Her eyebrows raised themselves, urging me to tell more. She rubbed her arms, trying to keep warm.

"Just on the cheek. I didn't know where we stood after the failed Valentine's thing but I felt like taking a chance. So, last night I walked up to Foothill while we spoke on the phone and ended up giving her a thank you kiss. She really made me feel better."

"And... how did she respond?" She exhaled a big breath that made itself visible in the winter air.

"Well, I mean it wasn't the passionately-fall-into-my-arms kind of thing I think I was hoping for, but I also didn't get slapped." I chuckled before pausing and looking at Lauren. "She blushed and gave me a kind smile. And we hugged afterwards."

"Aww," Lauren exclaimed, "you've got yourself a little girlfriend."

I wasn't sure if she was mocking me but for a minute I indulged in the friendly teasing and just laughed.

"I don't know... maybe." I paused and looked again at Lauren, "hopefully."

Isabel's hair fell down again. Her eyes were closed, waiting for me to give her something as I pretended to reach into my pocket. I leaned in and my lips barely grazed hers. She pulled back in silence and I retreated fully into my seat. The empty chairs said nothing. The sun seemed to turn away for a moment.

"I only need a friend right now," she whispered.

"I know," was all I could let out as I looked away. It had been over three months. I wouldn't even call that a kiss.

She stood at my window looking towards Foothill. I sat on my bed enamored with her eyes, noticing for the first time how brilliantly blue they were, accented by her denim jacket and her bright teal shirt. I enjoyed the moment; it felt comfortably familiar.

I reached for my camera and took a photo of Isabel: the only real one I would ever have. I thought I captured her eyes well. Naturally, she hated it but still let me keep it.

The door knob rumbled and groaned as it succumbed to a key, breaking our sweet silence. The door opened and the couple walked in.

“Isabel, Jack, Jack, Isabel,” I said as I rose.

They exchanged hi’s and polite smiles as they shook hands before Isabel introduced herself to Tracy.

While Isabel chatted up the couple, I kept looking out of the window. Occasionally, I glanced back at Jack and Tracy to see if they were surprised that she actually existed: this girl that I had been talking about since January but that they had not met until late April. They had often seen my lonely side and I was a bit eager to show them something more caring and warmer.

They would tell me that they thought she was really nice and she would say I was lucky to have a good roommate, or two, in this case. We did not stay for long. On the way out, I looked back at Jack and Tracy, wondering what it would be like to be in their position, to wake up to Isabel every morning.

I felt myself sinking deeper and deeper into one of the couches in my downstairs lounge. I had just told her my biggest secret but she took it well and once again, made me feel better. Pampered by the couch and her words, I sat there, a child of drama, wishing I could talk to her like this for hours. There is always more to say.

I progressively got closer and closer to her as the conversation ensued. Near the end, I thanked her for listening but really wanted to thank her in the way a romantic’s heart knows best. As if the world were giving us our space, no one came into the room while we were there, unusual for a regular Tuesday night. I explored her eyes. She might have sensed it coming. The moments of silence grew frequent but we were beyond mildly acquainted strangers. Something may have been there and maybe we were both trying to find it as we looked at each other more and more often. But in the end, she suggested frozen yogurt and I went upstairs to get my red sweater for her. The April night was honest and cold.

The flash of lightning slithered across the clouds at the speed of light. It was like a glowing sky snake that only existed in that moment up above and in the thousand reflections in the puddles on the ground. The little girl noticed the spark as it intruded on her concrete stage. Her mother’s eyes blinked hard in worry for her daughter. Just as she called out her name, the thunder came rolling in to mute everything out.

The future ballerina was not scared. She didn’t even hear her mother and after only a brief pause, continued dancing. The very rain drops seemed to get bigger as the rain came down with more force. Her reflection was no longer that clear in her puddle-audience. Her mother wanted to call her in but seeing her hardly unaffected, decided to wait. She

returned to her previous position at the door, still trying to enjoy this moment where the world seemed to craft itself just for her and her daughter.

Rain drops still gracefully spun off of the little girl, even though they came down at an angle now. Each tiny drop that hit the child seemed to willingly tangle itself into her dance, shooting off in a completely new direction, leaving its transparent friends on their old course. The water was a bit colder now as the mother had noticed when she reached out and felt the droplets meet her palm. She stepped forward once more, but then decided that another minute or two wouldn't hurt. The little girl moved differently, eyes now closed, not wanting to see the darkness inevitably brooding above.

My eyes tried to find Dwinelle in the sea of buildings I could see from my window. I knew I couldn't see it but I thought of her. She was somewhere inside, working hard. The clouds above looked like they might unleash liquid hell at any given second.

I had been walking outside just thirty minutes ago, enjoying what seemed to be the arrival of summer in mid-May. When she went in, the sun was still shining and a beautiful afternoon was coming to a close. It would have been a nice way for this place to say goodbye on her second-to-last day here.

The weather changed in parallel to my mood. I knew she had a lot to do that day but she had not called at all. In just over 24 hours she would be gone and I wanted to relish the time we had left. Having brooded around enough outside and being only more distraught by the weather, I retreated back to my room, the clouds mocking me with their moans.

And so I stood there, at my window, knowing I couldn't see Dwinelle, knowing she wouldn't be done for another two hours, feeling like the Pacific was about to pour forth from the skies, yet still stubbornly looking on. I wanted to be out there with an umbrella, to surprise her, to shelter her, to walk with her through my emotional puddles, but she hadn't called all day. I stayed inside. It did not rain; the storm saved itself for after she was gone, just for me.

Our journey always started from Yogurt Park or Michelle's or somewhere else near my place on south side. It then crawled up the hill via Durant or Bancroft and took a sharp left on College, always making me wonder why we never had coffee at Café Strada as we passed it by. We then walked north along the eastern side of town, just before the looming hills heaved up like waves of land flowing away from the bay. After a few obscure passage ways, parking lots, and stairs, we'd be there.

That was the walk to Foothill that I took with her almost every time. It was the walk I'd find myself on more than once after she was gone, relishing whatever bits of conversation passed between us and my feeble attempts at trying to get her to stay out longer. We would always drift up to her door and usually share a hug just before she went inside. When I made the journey on my own, the large, black gate at her complex kept me from going all the way.

She had taken a liking to my red sweater and had worn it several times on the way home. I remember trying to put my arm around her to keep her warm and to feel less lonely in the moments before she had to leave for the night. She was usually

unresponsive, or worse yet, pulled back in a polite but clear “no, thank you.” My sweater wrapped its arms around her longer than I ever did. I leaned against the Foothill gate, wishing she’d open herself for me.

“I don’t know what you see in her,” Lauren began, “from what you tell me, she doesn’t seem like your type of person at all.”

“I don’t know, we don’t have a lot in common but there is something,” I weakly argued. For a moment I gave up, “You think I’m just lonely and this is how I’m trying to deal with it?”

“Pretty much.”

That hurt, but even more so because I wasn’t sure if she was right.

“It’s the little things,” I started.

I could feel Lauren groan at my attempted defense.

“I mean she has some peculiarities but that’s what interests me about her. She’s not like most of the predictable bags of flesh around here.”

“Oh so we’re back to that, this place sucks huh?”

“Hey, I never said I changed my mind about it.”

“Too bad, I thought she was your reason for staying.”

“I still have no real reason.”

“But I thought you cared about her?”

“Of course I do!” I exclaimed. “But what does that have to do with this place?”

“Nothing, nothing at all...” Lauren passively replied.

“Besides, she might leave anyways. She’s applied to a few schools.”

“Like where?”

“I don’t remember but I know Columbia is one of them. And if she gets in there, I know she’s gone.”

“Maybe she cares enough about you to stay here.”

“Oh, please.” She was trying to be optimistic with a pessimist. “I don’t get you, first you don’t understand why I like her, then you try to push her on me as a reason to stay, and now you’re screwing with my naïve hopes with this?”

“I’m just trying to understand her, and you.” She wasn’t lying.

“Heh, me too.”

I leaned forward and held my head in my hands.

“I mean it’s not even that big of deal really ... I’d just like to know where we are and where this is going.” I looked up at the sky, wondering if it would rain. “You know she wrote this story with these great scenes of a little girl and her mom in the rain, the piece as a whole struck me as very genuine.” I wearily brought my eyes down. “It’s called ‘Lost to the Thunder.’ I think I know what she meant by that.”

“Maybe she’s just insecure and doesn’t know how to express what she feels for you, whatever that may be.”

“Or maybe it’s just another case of me chasing something that’s not gonna happen,” I barked back. “Maybe, maybe, maybe, I’m sick of maybes.”

I hung up the phone, with a firm and annoyed click.

“How often are messages actually good?” I thought to myself.

Isabel called me and left one while on her drive home, telling me that she was going to be unavailable this weekend and would see me next week, probably Tuesday. It was the second week in a row I hoped to see her during the weekend and this happened. Both times her voice was noticeably cheery, but I attributed that to her being excited to get away for a few days and relax in a familiar place. I did not envy that luxury, something I couldn't afford being almost 3,000 miles away from home.

Her car was her freedom. What would take me a long trip to the airport and one or two flights, she could afford to do almost every weekend. Considering how much we were both dissatisfied with this place, I did not blame her for taking advantage of those opportunities. I just wanted to spend more time with her, my sweet listening escape from this world. I just wanted that February to be less lonely.

I shoved the phone in my pocket in disappointment and walked into my room.

“How did your date go?” Jack asked.

“Fine, just fine.”

Isabel sat straight across from me, her spoon swimming around in her tiny cup of yogurt. I slowly nibbled away at the slouching piece of cake I ordered because she didn't want to eat alone. I wasn't hungry, neither for food nor anything else.

“Things have changed so much over the last few months,” she spoke, gazing off to the side.

I tiredly groaned in response, the bottom of my throat impolitely asking, “Oh?”

“I've changed so much from who I used to be.”

I nodded and stared blankly at my cake.

“Life was so much simpler and easier then, predictable, but...”

“Comforting?” I weakly interrupted.

“Yeah.” She looked at me for the first time in a while. I pushed my unfinished cake away from me.

“Well I'd say things are pretty damn predictable these days,” I muttered, implying more than she caught on to.

Her hair fell across her right eye. “But its different somehow isn't it?” She brushed it back.

“Of course, but I can't say I've enjoyed either my past or this present.”

“I had a good experience growing up back home.”

“Heh, I didn't even have a real home,” I achingly interjected, my eyes fixated on the spot on the table where the cake had been.

“You don't miss the past at all?” she asked, her eyebrows ever so slightly rising in concerned surprise.

I frowned even more before muttering “no.”

“Well I do, every weekend I can't wait to go back and visit.”

I sighed and lifted my head, trying not to look up at her. “I was different back then too, in many ways.”

“Oh, you wouldn't even recognize me the way I used to be.”

“You’d probably hate me or think I was ‘scary,’” I said, mockingly making quotation marks with my fingers. I chuckled at my own expense, assuming that she wasn’t all that fond of me as I was now. What was left of the cake fell on its side. Her hair came down again and I brushed it back for her, almost automatically. She returned a weak smile.

“Actually,” she began in a solemn tone, “I don’t think you’d have liked me much either.”

I stood teetering in front of Wheeler, tired, disenchanted, letting my hair fall in my face, and watching Isabel walk away from me. As she disappeared up the hill, I looked at my phone. Lauren hadn’t called. There went my Tuesday night. I sighed and closed my eyes, letting the weight of my bag momentarily pull me back. I stumbled into a dark lamppost.

Looking up, I saw the same moody sky I had always seen as I leaned against that post and waited for Isabel each Tuesday night. I felt like patiently standing there, hoping she’d come out and we’d go have frozen yogurt or share a kiss or just talk quietly. But her thin frame wouldn’t push open that door; she wouldn’t greet me with those eyes that I could never quite figure out. Lauren wouldn’t call either, not to listen to my lonely ramblings or to just talk about whatever heavy thoughts drifted through common ground in our minds.

I should have been used to it by then: Tuesday night was the loneliest night of the week. It was usually the only time I saw Isabel. Tuesday was when I could always count on to predictably watch her fade away at the end of the night. Yet that night was a little colder than most others. I wasn’t used to her leaving so early.

Michelle’s was a plain little dessert place, tucked between the entrance to a menacing, four-story red parking garage and a flower shop that always had orchids on sale. It stood across from Yogurt Park like a lonely outsider in a dark maroon jacket, hiding something from the masses that waited for their sugar rush across the street. The place saw few customers but in April, Isabel and I began to drift over there.

They never quite had her flavor of frozen yogurt. She’d chat up the friendly, older Asian man who usually worked the counter, asking what flavors they’d have and when. We’d return another night, only to never get exactly what she wanted. The clerk was a little perplexed with how Isabel could care so much about what was in her yogurt, while I always quietly stood next to her and watched as she scanned the ingredients with a tiger’s eye. It was one of the few times I could peacefully observe her for longer than a few seconds without her looking up and making me feel like I was tripping on the boundaries of our friendship.

By that point, I had stopped eating frozen yogurt and diverted my tastes to ice cream. It’s hard to say exactly when or why I gave up the tiny cups I had only tried in January for the first time. It could have been the fact that Michelle’s rainbow sherbet was delicious. Maybe it was that Yogurt Park didn’t bother with ice cream while the kind clerk across the street always handed me my wholesome cone with a smile. Deep down, it was probably the feeling that if I can’t have one thing, I might as well accept it, and try to taste, and chase, something else.

In late March, I had a smile called Isabel.

At that point our relationship was still somewhere pleasantly mysterious, not lost in my pessimism or hidden like her eye behind a soft wall of hair that insisted on coming down no matter how many times I brushed it back. We would talk and still poke and prod to discover a little more about each other, smiling at eccentricities and sharing with each other the snippets of our lives that we typically show to others we're inviting into our individual worlds.

I bumped into her one Friday afternoon. She was coming up the hill towards East Gate; I was heading down. We softly collided and set each other off course by about an hour. But what a difference an hour can make on a cloudy day. Even the harsh spring shower that came down on us almost as soon as we said hello did not dampen a thing. She had an umbrella ready.

We drifted up to her room. It was longer than mine and with a much more pleasing view from halfway up the hills. The sunset must have been gorgeous from there. The soft purples and sweet oranges of the sky I was imagining in my mind blended into a picture on her wall.

"I really like this," I said pointing to the colored pencil drawing of her ballerina figure.

"Oh, yeah me too, my ex-boyfriend drew it for me."

A sting of adolescent jealousy flashed through my mind. I briefly thought of drawing her as soon as I got home only to realize that I had nothing of hers to even go by. I brushed off the feeling and returned to admiring the drawing.

"Your wall is nice; it reminds me of the type of thing I did with my pictures in my room back home."

"Thanks," she replied, eyeing it proudly, "it reminds me of the good times."

"C'mon this place isn't *that* bad. Even I'll admit that from time to time."

She smiled. "I know. It's just... different."

We paused, both tasting our dissatisfaction with present. Even though she stood behind me, I could see nostalgia tickle her. I let her indulge.

"Do you wanna see some photos?" she finally asked.

"Sure."

I sat down on her bed and she pulled out a worn but pleasant photo album. The visual whirlwind of her life, coupled with her bits of stories and smiles made the rest of our hour together flow like soothing hot chocolate.

Among those aging pages was a life where she smiled more, kissed more, and looked a little less seriously upon the grim reality that surrounds all of us. I eyed her boyfriends with a sad envy, not for the affection they received from her but for the *her* they were lucky enough to see.

Then I looked up at Isabel and in a blink realized all over again what pulled me to her, the way she was now. She sat there next to me, the album changing hands between us, her eyes darting back and forth between the pictures, the stories, and me. In the way she spoke about her past I saw a shining butterfly wing emerge from the cocoon. The mystery of Isabel teased me again as she showed me a delicious slice of heart.

Early in May, a dream was fulfilled.

“She got into Columbia.”

Lauren looked up at me and grew quiet.

“Meaning... she’s gone.”

It hit like a gun shot you hear late at night while cozily trying to get to sleep. The sound is unmistakable; you know exactly what it was, just like you *feel* like it had to have killed someone. It wasn’t fatal, but I bled.

“Well good for her,” Lauren exclaimed.

I stared back at her in silence, my lips firmly pressed together.

“Aren’t you happy for her?”

I sharply turned away. “Of course I am, it’s her dream, but...”

She didn’t dare finish my thought although she knew exactly what I was going to say.

“...I’m gonna miss her.”

“Well, I’ll be gone for a few months soon too, are ya gonna miss me?” she inquired.

“Damn it that’s not the point! You’ll be back, she won’t.”

“I know, sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, that’s the last thing I need to hear right now.”

“Ok then, I’m not sorry.”

I looked back at her, my eyes trying to burn her skin, closing in disappointment.

“I know it’s been weird,” I began with a sigh, “but I do care about her whether you believe me or not.”

“Ok, but what are you gonna do about it now?”

I remained quiet, letting all hope of any consolation slip away.

“I believe you that you care about her but maybe it’s good that she’s going, so you can move on.”

“Move on from what? Getting nowhere!?”

“Well you’re friends aren’t you?”

I cocked my head back and groaned, “Well if it isn’t my favorite word in the world, *friendship*.”

“What’s wrong with friendship?”

“...it’s just not what I want.”

“What do you want?”

My mouth opened but I no longer felt like answering. I just wanted her to stay.

She began to mouth the words to the song as the music danced around my room. I swiftly got up from my bed and turned off the lights. I walked over the window and rummaged through a few drawers in my desk. Exhaling in slight disappointment, I went back over to the bed and sat down next to her.

“What were you looking for?” her eyes said.

“Candles,” my mind replied.

The long song approached its middle.

Jack and Tracy had walked in on us watching a movie but politely disappeared for a while. Afterwards, I decided to share with Isabel my very soul-fuel: the motivating rhythms of my music.

I enjoyed the music and our silence. Our eyes were both focused in the same direction, towards the window. The world out there could not touch or invade those moments. Our bodies were very close but did not touch.

“Are you cold?” my heart asked.

Her soul had no reply but just kept listening.

“If you ever are, I’ll wrap a blanket of me around you.”

I imagined some part of her smiling as if to say thanks.

“I wonder why your hands are that way all the time. There are plenty of reasons to distance yourself from the world, but why from me?”

My soul blinked. I sighed.

“Why, Isabel, why?”

My eyes rested on her hands, wanting to lift them and exhale a warm hello into their pale palms.

“Can you not even imagine that I could make you warm? Do you even want to be?”

The familiar chorus approached us.

“No words, no talk, we’ll go dreeeaaming...”

She sang in a voice softer than anything I ever thought would come out of her.

“No pain, no hurt, we’ll go dreeeaaming...”

I joined her in making the motions with my lips, but tried not to add to the soothing sound.

I turned to her like a flower to the sun. My soul warmed its hands by her aural flame. I indulged in one of the most genuine smiles of my life as she turned to me.

“I used to sing.”

My pupils just whispered wow. The stars outside peeked out from behind the clouds to catch an envious glimpse of our enchanted room. Every inch of me wanted to grab her and hold on to that moment and ignore tomorrow’s separation.

She undid a few of the buttons on her long white jacket and let out a sigh of relief as she leaned against her desk. Her tired and heavy head tilted back and she looked up at the ceiling, eyes squinting as the silent silver fan exhaled refreshing air upon her. Eventually she closed her eyes, pretending to fall into the deep sleep she so desperately needed.

A nurse rushed by her room, almost knocking over a cart of supplies. She snapped out of her momentary, self-imposed trance and walked over to the door, gently slamming it shut. Her feet carried her to the window, where she stood for a few minutes and explored the tiny world twenty-seven stories below. She would never admit it, especially not now, but she was still searching for that innocently graceful sense of fulfillment. She had done nearly everything she wanted but life was still just a way of keeping herself busy.

She took a step towards the thick glass and tilted her head further down, causing her hair to fall into her right eye. At first it annoyed her, like one of the many little things tugging at her at the moment. Then, her eyelids eased up and drifted down. She brushed her hair back, the way he used to, and almost smiled.

An abrupt knock resonated through the room. Without waiting for a reply, the heavy door swiftly opened.

“Doctor? Your next patient is ready.”

The rain seemed to let up a bit, coming down slower and softer once more. The mother watched her little girl tire herself out. As the liquid routine drew to a close, she was relieved and reached into the house for something with which to cover the child. When she looked back out into the street, she paused in surprise.

A red sweater was lying next to the little girl, who had now stopped and was gazing at the wickedly drenched thing. She sat down closer to the ground and reached out with her hand to caress the rugged fabric. It was still a little fuzzy to the touch despite being soaked.

The mother promptly walked out of the house and hurriedly to her daughter. She covered her with her favorite rain coat. The child was slightly trembling. The mother kneeled down and hugged her daughter, worried that she was cold but then realized that she was sobbing. Somehow the tears stood out from the rain drops on the girl's face. They reflected more than the rain ever could.

"Honey? Isabel? Are you ok?"

The little girl looked back at the sweater and started to pick it up.

"We can take it home and wash it if you want to keep it," the mother said as she began to rise. Isabel stopped her.

"No... no, mom, it's my *dream*, I'm going to Columbia."

I drifted towards the Golden Bear Café on a solitary Wednesday night. May almost upset me with how chilly it was or was that just my heart? I tugged at my leather jacket, wrapping it tightly around me.

My pace slowed as I got closer and closer to the simple eatery. I had passed it twice a day for the last four months, never caring to give it a second of my attention unless I was there with Isabel. The place was closed now. Its doors usually shut early but the lights always remained on, illuminating a very empty and well-stocked inside. It dared the hungry soul to break in.

I walked up to the door and looked inside, imagining Isabel making herself a cup of green tea and myself ordering a smoothie or following her speedy figure as it zigzagged through the isles. I turned right and moved on.

The white metal swamp of chairs and tables that comprised the patio called out to me. The bright and mostly clean outside furniture stood out in the night. It was peculiar to see a person ever sitting there in the dark, like a panther painted onto a snowy canvas.

"Take a seat, relax your heart," the night said.

I complied and walked over to the middle table on the far right. With a deliberate sadness, my body descended into the seat facing east. The echo of Isabel sipped her tea across from me. This was the same table we had sat at just yesterday, having our last lunch and dinner together. I had no appetite the whole day but imagining her there within my reach, felt a shred of fulfillment.

"So where is she?" Lauren asked.

"There," I nodded my head toward Peet's while not looking at her, "Inside."

She turned around to take a look but couldn't make anything out through the reflection of the front glass wall of the coffee shop. I couldn't see Isabel either.

"I'm going home Thursday," she said as she turned around.

"Oh?" I tried not to look surprised but was saddened on the inside.

"Yeah," she exclaimed, "can't wait to get out of here, go back to the beach, relax..."

"And I'll just stay here and work full-time. Thanks for reminding me of that." It wasn't so much her excitement that pinched me as much as my approaching loneliness. I was still looking away.

"I'll probably come back to visit for a week or so."

I tilted my eyebrows upward and exhaled, the best gesture of pleasant surprise I could muster.

"I need to visit my friend Sarah," she added.

"Sarah, not me, right?" I shot back.

Isabel walked up to us. I turned to her and opened my mouth to make the introduction.

"Hi, I'm Lauren," she interrupted me, extending her hand.

"I'm Isabel," she replied with a polite shake.

"I've heard a lot about you."

"I've heard a lot about you too."

They both turned to me, each in their own way. I smiled and leaned back in my seat, not saying a thing.

"I read one of your stories," Lauren added, "I really enjoyed it."

"Oh, thank you." Isabel glanced at me with a surprised smile.

They continued chatting, while I sat back and observed. Isabel remained standing. At first I wanted to offer her a seat, but then got sidetracked with my own cruel anticipation. Which one was going to disapprove of the other first? Who would shoot the first disappointed look at the other? I was waiting for them to clash, yet it never happened. After a few minutes I grew mute on their words and began to feel like a pathetic little child trying to indulge in unrealistic drama. A touch of disgust set in.

"Well, I need to get going," Isabel's voice crawled back into my ears, "I still have some packing to do."

"Oh, you're leaving today?" Lauren asked, pretending she didn't know.

"Yeah." Isabel turned to me, "It's a shame you didn't introduce us earlier."

"Why didn't you?" Lauren added.

I exhaled, forced a smile, and looked away from both of them as I silently rose from my seat.

"Bye Lauren," I mumbled with a wave, "call me if you need help moving your stuff."

"Will do."

Isabel and I took a few steps away and she said, "She seems really nice, but really, why didn't you introduce us before?"

"Everything's in the car," I said, walking into Isabel's empty room, "you're all set."

She looked up at me, grateful. She had been standing between her bed and the shelf, maybe looking out of the window. Her eyes had a hint of sadness, although I knew she

would be much happier just a day from then or even that night, when she arrived home. I walked up to her.

“Thank you,” she said, almost in a whisper.

I sat down on her desk while she started to get her purse and the few things that remained in her room. I smiled, realizing she had forgotten. She approached the door.

“Hold on.”

“What?” Isabel looked at me.

“Come here,” I playfully motioned with my finger, “Remember? I wanted to show you something.”

“Oh yeah, what is it?”

“Come closer.”

She took two steps toward me.

“Sit down.”

She hesitated.

“Just sit.”

I was hoping she would sit in front of me so I could hug her from behind but she chose the spot on the table next to me. I smiled anyways.

“There’s a tradition I’ve done every time I moved,” I began.

“What is it?” her eyes almost met mine.

I paused and looked away for a brief moment. She waited for an answer. I let the silence sink in.

My mouth slowly opened, stretching out my response.

“This... this is it.”

Our eyes met.

“We would sit down,” I continued, “just for a little while, right before we left. Just to look around and quietly say goodbye to a place. And for good luck.”

Her eyes wandered around the room, appreciating what it had been for her the past year. They stopped in places where important things or events or people had been. I just peacefully admired her. She slowly nodded and faintly smiled. On our last Tuesday together, Isabel understood.

Monday’s eyelids sank to a close as I stood at my window at midnight. Something inside of me was stirring, pulling me towards Foothill. My eyes wouldn’t let go of it through the glass. A snuffle broke the silence in my room.

It was cold, I was probably getting sick.

Jack looked up from his computer, “Are you ok?”

“She’s gone tomorrow... gone.”

I looked over at my bed and thought of lying down to listen to my favorite song. I wanted to imagine she was singing the chorus to me, like she had just done an hour earlier.

“Maybe she’ll come visit.”

That was his attempt at consolation. I had no will to reply.

Jack got out of bed and stood next to me, looking out of the window. He looked back at Tracy, sleeping in his bed.

“She should have just spent the night,” he softly stated.

I nodded and in those simple motions it dawned upon me just how hard tomorrow might be.

Still on top of that hill, my mind ever so slowly grazing through today, yesterday, and every tiny moment we had, I finally let out a tear. The breeze set it off its course. I didn't dare show her how much those last moments hurt. I looked down the hill, still trying to raise my hand in a farewell wave, still failing. Her car was long gone.

I finally moved forward and began the very long walk home, not bothering to look back at Foothill, not ever wanting to again. I turned and followed the same route I had for the last few months, only now walking it for the last time. A few dreary blocks later I stopped and whispered to myself, "A story, I'll write a story." Sweet thoughts rose to my internal surface as I weakly smiled at the idea.

I shivered in the middle of that cold May night. "Shoulda worn my sweater," I thought to myself. "No, New York *is* cold, she'll need it more."

The late breeze followed me home. A part of my heart followed Isabel to hers.