

Rhi

There was something beautiful about being in a motel, room for eight, with my friend laying in the bunk bed in front of me. Mustard curtains covered most of her body. Next to her, was a small window that faced what seemed like a dumpster and an alley. I could hear the city awake. The sounds of people floated through the half-closed wood window and into the room. From the inside dark room, you could see silhouettes. Maybe they were alcoholics finding a place for the night. Maybe tourists or young teenagers walking by, or lovers holding hands smoking. Perhaps, my friend and I were some of those people the night we first arrived.

That night Rhi had helped me carry my suitcase twice her body weight to the second floor. The motel was ordinary, lost in between buildings in a busy tourist area. It had an old sign on the glass door that received you with spiral stairs as you walked in. No elevator, but breakfast was included. The remaining six strangers that shared our room were, in essence, a reflection of ourselves. Different fonts for the same word: young. We were “alive twenty-somethings” holding the ambition that might as well have created humanity’s greatest inventions. Too old to be considered teenagers and too young to be proper adults. Each of us with a different purpose for our stay in this city.

Rhi had bought us tickets for a concert and I had paid for the bus seats from our small college town. It felt good to be in an unknown city, in a different country, yet close enough to recognize the East Coast atmosphere.

At the time, I was unaware of the mindset that brought me peace every night. I thought I was resilient to everything, and therefore, any experience was worth the risk. I felt safe in the unknown. Almost free. As I walked in the streets there were people around, people I will never see again, and I loved being unrecognizable, completely lost in the crowd.

“You got two choices, buddy,” said the security guard in the store a few blocks away from our motel, “You go inside and pay that now or I call the police.” The security guard firmly raised his voice at the man who had just been caught shoplifting. The snacks in his bag stood still but the man’s eyes could not stop scanning every inch of his possessions.

“Do you want water?” A homeless man said as he approached a teenage girl, homeless too, laying on a carton on the floor. She poured the man a cup of water from a plastic bottle and then proceeded to give the remaining liquid to the dog in her lap. She did not drink a sip, showing loyalty to friendship more than ownership.

All of this occurred within meters of us. There was an enormous amount of action going on, and as soon as this realization hit us, there was no room left for self-consciousness. The overwhelming movement gave me a sense of meaninglessness. I could do anything and nobody would care, not even me. Almost freeing.

Rhi and I were both the only people of colour in this whitewashed city. We knew we were seen differently. On our way there ICE did a routine bus search. My very first ICE encounter. We were both naive and filled with curiosity. It was bigger than our fear of what would happen if something went wrong. I kept holding on to the feeling of being young and able to do things. Believing I was capable of achieving whatever excited my heart, made me

physically capable of doing it. The youthful instinct that *everything will be okay* because experience so far has proven it to be. Even if things seemed bad at first, there was an implied hunch, or knowledge, that in the end, everything will be alright.

Rhi seemed to have the same kind of illusion in her head. I could tell by the way she held a stranger's gaze as he stuttered words in a foreign language and yelled to the void. She was fiercely determined to prove she was strong enough to avoid looking away and staring at the floor.

She liked wine, and smelling fruits. She had stolen a traffic cone and put it in her living room as decoration. She was younger than me but seemed older and yet, she was much much wiser. Her dad was a banker and her mom was a teacher. She never talked about anyone in her family, just about the things she loved like hockey and fruits. Her words would form an animated picture. I would hear her equate oranges to flaky men and be compelled by her description. "You can never trust them. Sometimes they are sweet and then the next bite is the sourest shit I've ever had."

I would smile and let her talk for a long time, even if I particularly did not dislike oranges. We were the stereotypical introvert/extrovert friendship, except she looked like an introvert in a group of extroverts.

When we got to the venue Rhi had an instant connection with the bass player. "You're worth a million light candles." The lyrics of our favourite song came from his mouth and made me blush. His eyes remained open while he sang and focused on Rhi's nose piercing.

I remember we talked about it on our ride home. The stillness in our thoughts contrasted with the bumpy roads and gloomy lights. There was so much unsaid but I could tell we were both feeling the same. We held hands in the back of the car and admired the tall buildings with silent excitement. Pondering after the performance was refreshing and frightening. As an afterthought, I said *Goodnight*. We both knew we were done with the city in the morning.

When we left, I could have sworn I saw my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I was really happy. The motel was nice to us. The whole experience used to be buried deep in my memory but now is resurrected by the voices in the songs of the artists I once went to see. Now, whenever I listen to their music, it is almost too painful.

“I can tell you’re happy but hey.. the bathroom didn’t have a mirror.” Rhi laughed at me on our way back from our special adventure to our mundane routine in the small town we knew too well. I think the drugs and alcohol blurred our whole weekend trip as if it had been one sole day mixing glorious memories with daydreams. Nevertheless, beautiful.

I think it was the drugs.

The night of the concert we took two glasses of ‘God’s know what’ with ‘God’s know who’ and then woke up the next morning, as we did every other morning: tired. Except, months later on a different morning Rhi did not wake up.

When I look at her grave I think about the suggestion I made to go to another of the band’s concerts when the next album comes out. As she smiled, her light freckles would appear and

give her away. She looked genuinely kind, as a child. I never thought I would stop seeing her express joy.

I am guilty. I did not feel the “it should have been me” sensation I kept hearing about after she passed away. I did not feel anything for endless weeks.

“We were so young and innocent, Rhi” I whispered as I left flowers.

Here lies Rhi. We were friends. She liked me, I liked her. We shared sandwiches and drinks, occasionally. And here lies my innocence. Rhi and I were young non-adults that often followed the feeling of being unstoppable and unreachable by death. I now dread the thought that I once acted like I was invincible.

I have always been suspicious of everyone, concealing myself, and not opening up quickly to people. However, when I was with Rhi, I was welcoming enough to walk into other people’s worlds and inquire about them. I wanted to know people enough to be able to write a poem about the experience. The thought of not doing enough paralyzed me.

As I look back now, I realize, unlike Rhi, I am unable to hold a gaze when I feel threatened. Sometimes I still dream of Rhi. The room would be filled with noise buffered by distance, creating a certain white noise of uncanny sounds coming from people outside. We would dance. Just the two of us. Fall asleep and wake up early to return home.