

I gripped the steering wheel, the tore up leather under my fingers curling around them and caused my hands to perspire. I kept the windows rolled down, but the spike in temperature brought the sweat to my forehead and to the pit of my stomach. My body wasn't used to the heat.

I had lived most of my life here in North Carolina, enjoying the seasons changing and the comforting ideas of small town minds, but five years ago I moved to Chicago. A job opportunity and no real reason to stay here made my decision for me. I traded seasons for a parka.

"You are arriving at your destination," my GPS Lucy spoke up at me and I made the left turn in to the old parking lot. I already knew where I was going; five years couldn't deteriorate the memories of this place, but I let my ignorance enter the address and follow blindly.

I parked the car in my old spot, and attempted to make it as straight as possible, the white lines that were once there were only faded marks now. I put the car into park and sat for a while. I pulled my legs up into the seat with me and sat Indian style, a childish reaction to the place I had found myself at.

"You can do this," I breathed that mantra over and over, letting my feeble attempt at confidence overpower the growing sense of terror.

I stepped out of the car with hesitance and planted my old worn out sneakers on the asphalt. I could feel the heat rise through the shoes and through my socks, giving my feet the slight feeling they were on fire.

It was ironic really.

I walked slowly towards the remains, only there wasn't anything left remaining. The building that had once stood there was nothing but strewn bricks that were frayed on the corners and rotting pieces of wood that had managed to survive the past years impeccably well. I reached down and picked one of them up, the wood was lightweight and muddy. I ran my hand over the roughness of it and pleaded I wouldn't get a splinter.

This was all that was left of it.

I walked a little bit more; I was in the middle of what it had used to be. I was probably standing in one of the dining rooms, a place that I had spent most of my childhood running around in. Where I had played hide and seek with my younger sister in and managed to curl inside one of the booths so I couldn't be found. Only now, years later, there weren't any booths to hide under or any tables to run around, now there were weeds growing where I spent hours and days of my life growing up.

I sat down. I was able to surround myself with dull green plants that stopped me from being able to fully accept the remains of my old home away from home.

My phone beeped out a familiar ringtone and I answered with a deflated hello.

"Stella? Where are you?" my mother's maternal voice spoke through at me and I laughed. I was about to turn thirty in a few days and her worried tone made me feel like I was back in high school.

"The Boathouse..." I said with a lingering sound of disappointment.

"Stella, what are you doing there..." she said saddened. I could tell she fell into a chair after I said it.

"I miss it mom, I just don't..." I couldn't stutter out a word and ended up gripping the phone to my ear tighter.

“We all miss it, and I know the pain from losing it hasn’t left, but all you can do now is move on,” my mom said and I forced out a sigh. She continued, “Your father still thinks about it all the time though, and our conversations always go back to it, but I think he has finally found some closure. You need to find some too.”

She knew I was the child in the family that took the loss of the Boathouse the hardest; the place that my father had managed to build from the ground up, the place that he lost due to financial stability, and without the proper care was taken by a wildfire that had started in the forest behind the restaurant.

“I’m trying...” I said stoutly. I began glancing around the abandoned piece of land that had managed to look like a landfill instead of what it used to be, a place where I felt comfortable and a place where I felt like I belonged.

“Well take your time and say goodbye one last time, okay?” my mom said and I replied with a withered okay and I hung up the phone.

I sat for ten more minutes, letting the warm wind play with my hair and the tall grass that grew high around me tickle my ankles. This place felt different, the building that stood here before was all I used to know and now it was just a memory. The only thing that lets me know that the Boathouse was real is my fond memories I had being a kid and growing up.

I felt angry and ultimately ready to let it go, but this open space surrounding me suffocated every bone in my body.

I was never the tomboy kind of girl, I spent hours indoors while my younger sister climbed trees and burned holes in the soles of her shoes because she was chasing fireflies. I felt safe inside the comfort of my home or the comfort of the Boathouse. I always had

bad luck whenever I went outside anyways. I had poison ivy twice, poison oak three times, and I had to be rushed to the hospital because I had been stung by a swarm of wasps the first time I attempted to climb my first tree. I never went outside to play again. I enjoyed playing in the Boathouse more, the walls that shielded the harsh winds of winter, or blocked out the humidity of summer made me feel like nothing could ever hurt me again.

Now I was forced to sit in my most sacred and safest place while simultaneously being abused by the natural world surrounding me. The mosquitos biting my legs and the large trees whispering to one another as a small gust of wind blew between them. The only sounds that I could hear were the natural ones, no cars rushing by to come here to eat the town's best seafood or my father sitting in his office having a heated conversation on the phone with one of his vendors who forgot some ingredient to make the Boathouse's famous tarter sauce.

I lay back in the tall grass and in the remains of the old restaurant. After living in Chicago I had become even more indoor prone, barely walking outside because it wasn't called the windy city for no reason. I lay back in the tall grass and somehow, suddenly, it felt right. The once panic I used to feel when sitting in the grass without a blanket to shield me from the dirt underneath me dissipated quickly. I sprawled my long brown hair between the blades of the green weeds that socially unacceptable as flowers. Dandelions and violets were swaying in the wind. They were just as beautiful as any other rose or daisy you could overpay for at a market, and tickling my ears and piercing me with their powerful scent for free.

I focused on the blue sky above me and let it envelope me. The azure catching hold of my soul and letting my body remain languid in its swaying motion. No clouds were above me. The sun shined bright enough to bring out the freckles I had been hiding under toboggans all winter. I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds around me and embraced the natural sounds instead of the cars that used to drive by here or my father on the phone.

Crickets sang in unison around me and formed a beautiful melodic tone. The birds harped in with the crickets and formed a chorus of music that no music on the radio could capture.

I opened my eyes again. I felt it. I felt the way I used to when I sat in The Boathouse. I felt protected like I used to. The Boathouse was gone, the building, the foundation, and the place where my childhood began, but somehow it felt like it used to. The comfort of being indoors I used to have somehow had gone away and now I felt like I belonged out here. I belonged where the wind whistled through my hair and the hum of the world that went on inside seemed foreign and unwanted.

I stood up from the dirt that messed up my shorts and picked twigs from my hair that managed to resemble a believable nest. I felt like I was able to leave and finally let go of this unwanted fear of the outside world.

I walked nervously to my car and picked a few of the wildflowers scattered throughout the remains and tucked the flowers behind my ear. I then reached down and clutched a charred brick and cradled it in my arms before I put it in my trunk.

The closure that I was seeking had finally reached fruition. I was comfortable in the summer sun and comfortable in the old remains of a restaurant we owned years ago.

I was ready to move on. I got into the car and drove away without a single look back, but I still felt the Boathouse, I felt it whenever I saw a tree swaying in the wind or when I could see a freshly bloomed wildflower in my backyard.

I felt it always.