

The Anatomy of Comfort

I walked this thin, thin line and kept my eyes on you the whole time. You lit a cigarette, and gave me that careless smile, inhaling and channeling some cowboy from the old west. Tucking your head close to the flame, and silently proclaiming that it was the only light you knew for sure was in your world. You wordlessly told me to be careful. You told me not to get too close, because I'd get burnt out or snuffed out and to keep my own balance, because you could barely keep your own. But we both knew you'd catch me. I still felt the ghosts of arms and hands and fingers from the last time I woke up from a nightmare, or a full-on body memory. This was the anatomy of comfort.

No one could ever reach you. Your mug shots showed fading innocence, reckless abandon, and then a hopeless case...a hardened heart and soulless eyes. But they didn't see the outline of your lips as you soothed me back to sleep or your ample lap where I curled my weary body. No one would have believed that you stayed awake until I was at peace, until every last muscle unclenched, and my fingers floated like a child's to your cheek. I'd toss and turn in the middle of the night, and always end up closer to your body than before.

There'd be a playful smack as I bent over the sink in the morning to brush my teeth, always running 15 minutes late. Always pouting and making a mess of the covers, as i burrowed under them like a sleep-worshipping hamster. I'd plead for 5 more minutes, 3 times, and then I'd roll

indignantly out of bed. Your name was etched in all the desks in detention hall. That leather jacket, that Swiss army knife; that watermelons lip gloss? You were always keeping everyone on their toes, making them wonder, or making them best friends with the antacid aisle. Always with the loud Pontiac sunfire, that smelled of lavender and endless cups of French vanilla coffee. There were mixtapes, roadmaps; life and death. Sometimes I saw such life in your eyes, other times I saw you slipping away. But i was just a kid and I still had a closed-eyes and ears approach. It just wasn't true. I ignored it all; the loose plank of wood in your room, the red in your eyes, the slow motion movements of your hands. The girl who had become my lifeline and my safe place in this world couldn't possibly be on such a self-destructive path.

You were a walking dichotomy. You didn't stop cutting class until i got detention for it, and you didn't stop throwing punches until I got a three day suspension. Our parents were suspended too, in a selfish haze of needles and spoons. All the more reason you tried to hide it from me. And you didn't stop smoking until you caught me lighting up in the bathroom. I didn't get dinner and a movie that night; I got the worst lecture of my life. I tuned most of it out, except for the tears you threatened back on the rim of those fierce brown eyes. I heard every word from that point. I didn't think you cared that much. I think you changed a little bit for me, from making sure i had everything i needed from Duane Reade, to making sure I had my homework done and grounding me for being an unholy brat.

I got used to it, the ebb and flow of nurture vs nudge. You had a reputation to uphold, anyway.

Now I sit in this car and light this cigarette, that you'd kick my ass for smoking. I remember riding the train down to NYC for this car. I had to have it. I needed a piece of you. I remember counting the raindrops to distract myself from angry tears that threatened to jump ship, angry because you weren't here. But I was in the Bronx, no less, and I swear, I felt your warm hand on my back; that 'leave her alone' glint in your eye, and the gleam of the knife in your back pocket. I watch the stars dance through their Act 1, but you're not here. I was supposed to be your guardian too. I should have seen temptation lurking in the background. But he spun you 'round, and played with your oxygen; and then you thought you could fly. You thought you could fly...you didn't beat the train. The EMT's all knew our story, and tried to restrain me; but I shoulder-checked my way to the fly car doors. I held your hand and sang 'sweet child of mine'. I screamed that you weren't allowed to leave. I wasn't a good girl yet. We hadn't broken in my wings. And I cried, and cried and cried.

I remember hours of pacing, packs of gum, and then sleep gripping me with its claws. Not restful sleep, not the kind I had with you: cold hospital, cotton shitty blank; with fucking CNN like a swarm of bees in my already splitting head. And finally, rocking back and forth to the songs you used to sing me. It was 2:30am when Dr. Hazelman came exhausted down the hall, covered in your blood; his sweat. Once again, tears were kept under a rusting lock and key. Tears were David and human nature was Goliath, and we were all out of stones. He embraced me and swore they'd done everything they could. I mumbled a thank you and stumbled back to the chairs for my jacket. I threw myself into the cold night air, and didn't care if I died or not. I still don't know if that's changed. Sometimes I swerve when no one's in the road, sometimes I take a few

more drinks than I should, and there's a xacto knife and bandages under the loose board now.

I have to keep it together. There's a girl that needs me. Her name is Rachael. Her hair isn't naturally black, and her nature isn't naturally closed up and shut down. Her hands shake most days, but I'm going to rescue her. We'll take route 9 to the Henry Hudson Parkway, and stop for McDonald's along the way. I'll play that cd of lullabies and sing her back to sleep in the back of the car. I'll give her the blanket you gave me, crumpled with tight fingers and cold bodies. We'll count the raindrops and ride the wind, until we pull into that hidden driveway. A house full of the best and worst life has to offer. I'll make her hot cocoa and help her settle in. I'll get her a good counselor, and show her love where she'd only found hate. I wonder where I get these great ideas. I just hope you're still here to save me, because baby; I think I'm slipping.

I remember the night you rescued me from despair. It was after my dad left for third shift. You pulled in, and i was all jumpy; thinking he had forgotten something. We got a quarter of the way to the highway, and turned back for my teddy bear. That bear was as beat up on the outside, as i was on the inside. You tapped your fingers to smashing pumpkins, in your Caffeine pants, and curve-kissing wife beater. It was a sweltering night, but i couldn't stop shaking. You gave me your stash of blankets, and I put the front seat down and curled up tight. You pulled over and rubbed my back 'til i fell asleep. I had never known hands of good intentions. I woke up a few more times, but more peacefully; almost in a haze. My eyes absorbed the stoplights and your soft whispers in my ear until i fell asleep again. McDonald's and many mixtapes later, we pulled into

a hidden driveway; or so said the sign. We went inside and it was a mess of schoolbooks, cigarettes, mixtapes, and an acoustic guitar. It was a place only you could navigate and i could tell you were used to living alone. Although, no matter how messed up and selfish your mom was, i guessed there were some good memories buried in that mess you maintained; a child-like treasure hunt. "Make yourself at home." you said. The bed was already made, and clean as a whistle. I sighed, and sunk into sleep. Home. I was finally home. Despite your own delinquency, i promised not to cut class all term, and what a reward: warm arms, safe place, plenty of food. you made me hot cocoa and put me to bed. You even did a load of laundry before you joined me.

You know, coming from a place where i came from, you lose your sense of what's real half the time. But, if there were ever angels, they stepped in; because it was real. With more truth than I had ever known. I remember our first kiss. It was you and me, and the swirls of smoke from your cigarette and your can of coke, that tiny orange light warming up this cold.

I had always been told that light and love fade away, incinerate to ashes. I was told that no one ever stays, and that i just wasn't worth it. But all i felt were ghosts of touch; arms and hands and fingers. I wrapped my arm around your waist and let that first kiss linger.

I didn't tell you I knew what was under the floorboard. I made a vague, but heavily-hinted promise that we'd get through it; the storms and hurricane. I felt like a big kid, indeed.

Now that you're gone, I don't know. I truly didn't think i could be any more depressed than I was before i knew you; when i was still a prisoner of my house. Now that you're gone, i think I'm slightly off my hinge and I've gone a little bit insane. I walk around town aimlessly sometimes, and I've had phone numbers pressed into my hands, with looks that said, "Don't be afraid to ask for help." But the lack of that of that kind of love will surely drive anybody off kilter. You saw the clarity though, the voice i never raised. It was like learning to walk again. I needed to be praised and reassured, and i felt guilty so many times about that. My socks always fell down and my hair was always out of place. I remember you compared me to Pippi Longstocking once, in jest.

But all you saw was a pretty face. You held it in your hands and made the voices fade, even faster than they had descended upon me. Love appears to be a game, but I'm glad I played it. People who are depressed often say they're broken and in pieces. But for me, there's a double edged truth to that. On the one hand, your 'pieces' fit so many others. But on the other hand, yours were the only pieces i wanted to fit. We had two years of this amazing, miraculous love. I drowned out all the scary truths that were adding up to no good, and i wonder now if i ever would have had it any other way. I miss you even more on days the sun won't shine. But you're one of my lucky stars, and we were unstoppable. So, some nights i let the headlights swallow me. I've moved on to bigger lights, but i still need your touch. It's almost a physical ache. I know you'd want the best for me, so her I am in a group therapy environment, trying to be on my best behavior. Love is bittersweet. That's such a cliché, but i never realized how true it was. I think my happiest time was with you, and nothing will quite compare. I'll always feel that sting, and

not always be able to fight off those tears. I guess all I'd have to do is remember those hands on my lower back, and those lips on mine.