

An Old Embrace

I sat down in a booth in the exhausted diner. It was one of those “breakfast only” places, sparsely populated, not with a modern touch of sixties esthetic but an earnest attempt to stay current with the decor of the times back in that era when it first opened. Fake plants, chrome trim, red vinyl upholstery booths worn and tearing in places from a series of “regulars” whose time came and went, three-by-eight foot window leading to the kitchen for patrons to catch a glimpse of a cook’s life, those sharp needle “paid bill” ticket holders, and a cash register with a yellow-stained plastic coating protecting the keys from aging beneath them. Pies and fresh-baked breads rested on shelves near the entrance, or exit depending on your level of fullness, to be sold for later use. The goods were branded with stickers, brandishing words like “Famous” and “Original”. Everything was old and covered in nearly fifty years’ worth of bacon grease that wafted through the open-concept interior for seven days a week since 1969.

I took a sip of water from my glass. I did not feel right. What was I doing here? They say if you are trying to get back with an ex you should never mention your intention to them. Keep it close to your chest like a gun or a passport, two things you need on the road after selling everything and appointing your alcoholic brother to manage your multi-family home in your absence. Would one hundred and fifty dollars a month be enough for him to take this duty seriously?

She entered that run down restaurant with such a hop in her step, the juxtaposition of which was palpable, like a vibrant bug zapper sparking among generations of dead mosquitos, and it filled my heart. Her hair was shorter than I remember but not short enough to escape those curls that she inherited. I must have looked like a baby bunny that had just eaten carrot cake for the first time, smiling in

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bliss and trapped in awe. Swiftly my thoughts shifted. “I would just bring her down like an anchor or an iceberg...” I attempted to talk myself out of this foolish plan, “...rigid, growing in dark waters without the warmth of her breath to melt away the numbness that wrapped me in layers of ice to be cast deeper within myself as I float there stagnant”. All these years I replayed how it all went wrong and my large part in the demise of the effortless empire that was once “us”. Reliving every “talk” we had after it ended and how I could have improved on it. So specific to our relationship that they would not serve another coupling, only would it strengthen the thousands of nuances that was the “one that got away” and me. I was doing it again. My therapist, Dr. Manne, said I need to stop thinking in such defeatist terms.

She took a seat a few tables away facing the door. The waitress put two menus down on the table in front of her and she ordered a coffee, perusing the menu as she waited for her boyfriend. This was my moment.

I wrangled the courage to get to my feet. All the words I had wanted to say swirled around in my head and I felt heavy, bogged down by the endless scenarios I ran through in daydreams but this was real. I skipped my medication this morning in hopes to keep a clear mind but it back-fired. The pain in my stomach gripped hard but I denied its wishes for me to sit back down. It would not control me for pain did not matter now. It was my institution from which I was about to receive another healthy dose. Besides, the butterflies seemed to placate it, giving a much more verbose sensation so much so that the sharpness turned dull. I walked the few paces to her table. Further than I have ever walked. More enduring than the Pilgrimage of Santiago, save I could not do it on my hands and knees for the pilled green carpet beneath me

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was covered in decades of grime that no doubt possessed unknown diseases, which I did not want to risk passing onto her provided things went in a direction of my more wishfully romantic scenarios.

I sat down in the booth across from her. I had just driven ten and a half hours and yet that booth was the most uncomfortable portion of the trip thus far. I had reached that impossible summit, eye level with my once “one-and-only”, the pangs migrated to my head and heart.

“Is this seat taken?” I asked boyishly, trying not to sound as rehearsed as it was.

I did not expect her reaction as much as she did not expect me. Her face told of a mild disgust steeped in indifference, a sort of violation of her privacy in a public place.

Was I that vile? Was my part in our relationship ending so evil that my mere presence distilled such vinegar from unharmonious grapes?

“What are you doing here?” she cut right to it.

“I heard they had great coffee and thought I’d make the trip,” I quipped, trying to keep it light and light years away from my intentions.

She was not amused. She did not care to waste her breath repeating a sincere question of repugnance on her road-exhausted, constipated, and clearly nervous visitor.

“I am on a road trip out West. I thought it’d be nice to stop by on the way and say hi.”

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“That is fair. I am unannounced.” I did not want to tell her my true reasons. ‘Never admit your true intentions.’ Poor advice for any attempt at a relationship.

I scrolled through the millions of words I had imprinted in my mind on the trip down, before they mattered. But now what would I say to her? Jokes? Demands for love like a soap opera character or a romantic novel protagonist? I had imagined her perfect responses to my desires, all ending in an embrace. We were far from that thesis. My new demarcation for success was getting out of there without vomiting.

I gulped, just like in those old cartoons. Maybe there was some truth to animals fighting with anvils, gunpowder, and roadrunner seed. I wished I had brought my glass of water with me; That oasis from this dry desert of an encounter where nothing could survive, especially my dignity. If only I had a sip to lubricate my joints and naturalize my movements under such heavy scrutiny, like a bleached cow skull under the sun’s watch. I was there for a confession and it was going horribly.

She shook her head ever so subtly. Not wanting to waste a calorie on the sorry husk of a human that sat across from her. She read the menu, or pretended to read it, more of a glare as I look back on the moment. That innocent, laminated menu; safe from coffee spills and egg yolk coagulants but not from that crippling stare, burning the food descriptions into oblivion as it pierced right through the plastic coating.

“Look,” I stammered on. Reaching for her hand, not thinking of the venom my touch possessed as she recoiled as if it burned. I embodied the fire of Hell from which the Christians put forth in their stories.

I tried again. “I am here to say I’m sorry.” I’ve been exposed.

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“You’ve already said that. It’s fine. It’s been three years. I have moved on.” Had she been rehearsing for this moment as well?

“I know. I just...”

She glared at me for what felt like an eternity if not a second of Hell on Earth. Do not worry for Hell does not exist for me. For if it did I would be able to tolerate it after having survived this lowest moment of life. With all the tenderness, vulnerability, and for lack of a better word, love, with which I armed myself, she cut through it all with stoic disregard.

She was cold to me. Not caring for what I had to say. No longer holding any affection for my presence. I did not want to have to use such cheap tactics as the truth but I had no other option.

“I only have six months to live... Well maybe less, but likely no more.”

She put the menu down. “Are you trying to manufacture some semblance of emotion? Why would you say that?” She always used poetic statements when she was not tethered by ire, a result of her nightly reading in bed.

“Stomach cancer. The bad kind.” Is there a good kind? “I decided not to get chemo. I’d rather put the rest of my life in that van out there.” I pointed out the window, past the fake plants in a window box, to my travel van, feeling like Kerouac; untethered. I was one step closer to ultimate freedom. A ghost floating across the country four feet above the ground with my legs on the gas pedal and my hands outstretched wanting to grab it all and roll in the sands of each state, like a chinchilla cleaning myself for whatever came next. I knew it was nothingness but my inability to experience nothingness once I became it was strangely comforting. Why, most things were

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nothing. Those things you can't think of right now are nothing. Those new inventions that haven't been invented are nothing. To you, I am nothing until the very moment you picked up this conscious text. I am sorry to force myself into your world - you know my intentions now - a sad way to start a one way relationship, much as I tried to reinsert myself into her heart one last time. A heart that was full with her new life with her new boyfriend.

What happened next was unexpected based on the events as they unfolded thus far. Her eyes welled up. I will admit this was one of the possibilities I ran through in my daydreams, but one I did not practice with much earnest since it was one of the rarer prospects. I felt my hand stiffen. Or was that her hands? A touch I had not felt in many years. A warmth, and dare I say tenderness, embraced my hand. I wished it could have been my whole body. Baby steps. A baby with half a year left to even dream of such things.

At this point what more could I expect? She runs away with me and within weeks I turn for the worse and she would be left to care for me as I am inevitably reduced to nothing? My uncle had died of pancreatic cancer which spread to his intestines before the weeds of tumors tangled around the rest of his organs. I knew endless pain was coming for me. You Christians would be happy to know this heathen would get his due. Perhaps this was a great transition from a mildly depressed life to an agony incarnate. My mind's eye quickly turned to the vistas I would taste on the road. A veritable series of last meals for my eyes since actual food hurt to digest. The high-calorie shakes I endeavored to consume, the mealtime pain taking my breath away, were not of an agreeable flavor; rotten banana it seemed.

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“Is it true?” she gushed, expressing the first emotion toward me in those many years since.

“Yes but it’s not important. I want you to know you were, are, the only person I ever really loved. I still care about you even though we haven’t really talked in a long time. I really am sorry for everything I put you through. There were things I needed to work through but didn’t. I am glad you found happiness.” It wasn’t suave but it was practical. I kept my proclamations vague enough to avoid opening any old wounds unnecessarily so that she could apply the medicinal statements like skeleton keys to any negative memory she may have had of me if she ever did revisit the padded room of our heartache.

The door clanged open and caught my attention. Looking back over my shoulder, a middle-aged man, with a scruffy beard of the times, tall in stature and just as skinny with a jean jacket covering his thin frame, entered from behind me. He approached the table. He saw his girlfriend in tears with a strange man, also with a beard of the times, road-weary, disheveled, sitting across from her.

“Are you alright?” He scowled, not sure what to make of a scene nearing its end.

I got up out of the booth. “I was just leaving.” I turned to her and said goodbye, not smoothly but with a waiver in my throat. I was able to hold off the tears I thought I would undoubtedly spill on that thin carpet. Perhaps I cried out all my liquids on the trip down there. Maybe my ‘fight or flight’ mechanism shut off my eyes and my sadness, well at least my eyes. I gave my back to them and stepped out of the diner. When I got to the van I breathed out deeply. The dam had burst and tears poured from me compelled by uncontrollable sobs. I no longer cared what people saw or thought of

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me, one perk to six months left in which to experience these things. I hunched over with my hands on my knees and straddling a candy wrapper and a faded cigarette butt in the parking lot, I tried to regain some composure. With my feet on the white line of my parking space, I noticed that I could have backed the van in a bit straighter. Too busy thinking about my quick getaway exit to care much for parking perfection.

I found the keys in my hand. Have they been there all along? Another thing that didn't matter anymore. I opened the door and felt a comforting touch on my shoulder. She must have come for me. The one outcome I had secretly hoped for, a kiss perhaps. All in an instant I planted the seeds of hope and nurtured them. I turned around but was met with a figure so foreign to me. It was not her. How could it not be her? What was the meaning of this? I did not have much time to contemplate or file a proper complaint with the Universe when I received a fist to my left orbital. A white light flashed through my whole body. If only I could send that blast to the tumors in my belly and let them know what I thought of their presence. I could not help but realize that I was the tumor here. She had a great life and I came to mess it up. To dredge up things from the past that may have floated calmly on top of the salty waters of the psyche like a manageable oil slick while life happened around it. I came to their home and splashed the toxic sludge right in their faces.

I got to my feet as the brute returned inside the nicest restaurant in that small town with the clanging of a bell. The round was over. The order of justice served. I climbed into my van. What a fool I was to think any sort of goodness would befall me before my end. Just stick to the terminal plan. Beautiful vistas, soul-filling vistas, finding peace surrounded by a thin air of sadness, accustomed sadness. I put the car

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in drive, relishing in the five to ten seconds I saved myself by backing it in. Glad to diminish the mental agility I no longer possessed to maneuver such a beastly vehicle.

I followed the GPS with blind obedience. “You arrived at your destination,” and I couldn’t recall any specifics of the roads I took to get to that superstore. Stop lights I’m sure. Traffic. People signaling. Road rage. People drinking sodas while checking their rearviews. Anticipating their evenings before they even got there. Contemplating leaving it all behind to travel across the country like it was their last day on Earth or close to it.

People entered and exited the giant store. I pulled into the furthest spot away and put the van in park. I inspected the bruise that engulfed my left eye and caught a glimpse of the time. Realizing it was only ten thirty in the morning, I could not just sleep the events of that day away. Many years of neuronal focus had finally come to fruition, unsuccessfully I would venture. I needed to celebrate the successful failure. I needed to go for a hike.

I followed the commands of the GPS again. Adhering to every direction like a zealot bending and swerving to the will of the god of cartography. I arrived at a trailhead near the edge of town and put the van in park. I breathed out and caressed the steering wheel with my forehead. I was tired. Very tired.

I crawled up to the sleeping space that ascended from the ceiling of the van, splitting the cargo space in two. Below, all my Earthly belongings; a canister of methane, a lighter, a small pot primarily for macaroni, a titanium camping spork, two five gallon jugs of water, a sleeping bag, books - more than I could possibly read in six months time. Unfortunately my death sentence did not bless me with super reading

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powers or anything special really, just the ability to let go of some of the things that no longer mattered - dirty clothes, and an empty sketch book with a shading pencil kit. I packed rather hastily, especially for someone with undiagnosed OCD. I'm not talking about the suspect and typically self-proclaimed, "I need things to look perfect" OCD. I'm talking repeating the numbers "2" and "4" when I hear something bad or see something unpleasant. When I leave a mirror not making the perfect face I must return to it until "getting it right". For an atheist, I sure did hold some irrational superstitions contained in those three little letters, OCD. When the second doctor, a young oncologist with a much-too-tight, white lab coat verified my diagnosis I did not repeat my "2"s or my "4"s. In fact, I broke with all routine. All those enslaving rituals that had gripped me by the god of compulsions, the curse of fastidious vigilance, had fallen away almost immediately. I was not sure if this particular exchange of afflictions was worthwhile. It was definitely not an upgrade. No medical journal would care to hear my findings on the cure for OCD.

I closed my eyes. I dreamt what I always dreamt about; being with my friends that had moved away, doing things rather innocuous like renting an airbnb in an oceanside town and needing to move my rental car every ten minutes to avoid a parking ticket. My most frightening dreams incorporated her in any configuration blended among our former mutual friends. I say former not because they were no longer our friends, but they were no longer "our" friends. We split time with them which was easy since everyone lived in their own state. Needless to say I had been grinding my teeth when I slept. It started about a month before the trip, while the cancer grew more comfortable in my body. My jaw radiated in the mornings or after naps. I

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wondered for a moment, as I drifted off, if 'grinding teeth' was one of the "tell tale" signs that you are mother to a healthy tumor; congratulations, it's sextuplets. Maybe if I noticed and told them sooner about the ground teeth they could have cured me. Likely I would have still chosen the road and the unknown to the definite; get chemo, maybe go into remission, have it return full force, all the while too tired to live life as I wanted to live it. They say your body knows best. Maybe powdered teeth was some sort of cure-all and my sore jaw in the morning was actually a sign of progress for me and a detriment to my destructive baby. Ignorance was full of possibilities, all equally as valid.

I quit smoking once I received the unpleasant diagnosis as a gift to my parents. Better late than never. Of course I would miss them. I would rather spare them seeing me wither. I knew that was selfish of me, truly, but I was always stubborn and I couldn't quit that so easily. They knew I would have been "gone" had I stayed.

Just as I exited my tent in the Alps covered in purple snow - with my buddies Jay, who was a squirrel made of vinyl siding but I knew it was him, Kay a fox wearing a blueberry branch as a crown with purple-stained paws, Dee as a fastidious saw whet owl preparing a pot of coffee for everyone, and Joe a bespeckled heron staring at the sun because everyone told him it could not be done; In the distance I saw Justin, an origami bear who had been folded many times in life, trying out many different selves until eventually becoming a conglomeration of them all, he was many-sided. I felt another presence somewhere in the woods, likely surrounded by curly black mold and a fence of garlic, approaching. I bent down to zip the tent back up, it was black fly season after all and I wasn't wearing a shirt. - I awoke to a banging at the door of my van.

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A South Carolina police officer told me I had to move my vehicle. That I parked too close to the trailhead and families with strollers were concerned about getting ticks as they were forced to cut through the tall grass to reach the parking lot. I told her, 'my van must have edged forward with anticipatory excitement for our first hike in her lovely state. Ain't life a peach?' That all may have come out as, "Sorry, I'll move it right away, ma'am" with my eyes focused on her left shoulder, but the subtext was there and she was an officer trained in discerning the details. With six months left until the Great Nothing and I was still a pushover. As I checked my mirrors I wondered with how months remaining that I would drop the polite pretenses. I pacified the chastisement in my mind with the fact that this police officer would likely go on living well beyond our encounter and beyond me, and there was no sense in putting absurd vibes in the world. Pushover.

In the cabin of the van I changed into something more breathable for the hike and opened the rear doors. It was 95 degrees outside and I was glistening with sweat. It had become very noticeable that I had not showered in the past four days as my radius of stink had grown at least another foot since the last time I noticed it and that park officer did cringe when I rolled the window down. The details. I hoped there was a body of water somewhere along the trail. I pocketed my small, all-purpose camp soap just in case the opportunity to lather arose. I sat on the edge of the back bumper to tie my laces. My full brim hat, seven inches of solar-stopping opacity, circumscribed my head, blocking out the sun and the other cars - place-holders for others with the same idea as me - that filled the tiny parking area just off the main road. Perhaps they too had just professed their tormented love to an ex, "the ex" of exes.

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I heard the crushing of gravel get louder. Size 8 women's mesh running shoes entered my line of sight, my hat was falling me. I continued tying my laces, not wanting to be the first to make a move. Perhaps this woman-footed person was holding a gun. Dr. Manne also said I need to stop thinking so catastrophically. Maybe she was holding up a beef jerky; trail truce, currency of the woods, a charitable offering amongst fellow hikers. Happy now, Dr. Manne?

"Nice van," came the voice from above.

"Thanks." My eyebrows triangulated. As my vision hazarded to lift, my heart sank. All the butterflies that had died in my stomach had resurrected. The pyloric valve that was tasked with slowing food exiting the stomach to my small intestine must have held a doctorate in Frakensteinism this whole time. I stammered. It was her.

"I..." I looked around for her boyfriend but he wasn't there. Perhaps he was waiting in one of these cars. Probably with a gun. No. Dr. Manne, you would be happy to hear that I knew they were most likely not doing that. But still a possibility.

"I'm sorry he hit you." She inspected my face. "He was just protecting me."

"That's a good boyfriend. He'd make a great boxer." A joke. Why must you always joke? Insecure to the end.

I nodded my head as cement dried in my throat, thinking that an hour ago I had spoken my last word to her, that we were forever done having to converse as I stumbled through the tightrope walk that was playing it cool and being sincere, often times landing on something that sounded indifferent such as, "...I just called to chat, but more importantly to tell you about a squirrel I saw eating a piece of pizza in a tree." A true thing I saw by why give that innocuous event more importance over wanting to

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hear about her? I sat there blankly. I tipped my hat back off my head so that the drawstring caught my neck, pressing on my Adam's apple and further fortifying the cement. Thanks for nothing, Universe. Nothing ever really goes as you think it will. Don't think. Keep the universe guessing. Ball bearings and blueberries are cousins phonetically - did you see that coming, Universe?

"I do love you, you know."

Imprisoned in my own body. Not wanting to make sudden movements to risk making a wave to rinse away that sweet sentence from my ears. I was not in my bed so logic would support that I was not asleep. My brow furrowed uncontrollably, confused with a hint of sadness steeped too long, three years in fact, in a tea of frustration that turned bitter. My face was a marquee of girdled excitement, shaping my baggage into a six-pack, well-lit and hiding nothing. I never was good at poker.

"Um. Like you care about me." Sarcastic. Mumbled. "Like, you care about me? Hopeful. Vulnerable.

"That too," she added nonchalantly.

"But, you said you woke up one day and it was gone." Desperate. I panicked, sounding so needy when really I hadn't a need in the world. Dr. Manne was right; What did it matter if we got back together? What was six months?

Just as indifference was about to envelope me again, she bent down to hug me.

I sat instantly corrected. A hug. That hug felt as though it could cure my cancer. I didn't realize how much I needed it, but then again, when do we ever fully understand what we need? Perhaps we would only ever know a series of superficial wants. Those deep needs - this hug - like a cool drink of water after spending all day in the sun,

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traced my throat all the way down to line my stomach to create a superficial image of coldness traveling through my insides. The hug was nostalgia. I was brought back to the good times. That thoughtless gift, a tiny gesture and yet it was everything. It had the trappings of love or held its place in line at least. A hug was also nothing. I hugged my pillow sometimes. I hugged my friends when I saw them. I hugged the toilet after a foolish night of alcohol. Was I a toilet to her? Something to give her waste to and not eat with? Dr. Manne, it would be the best six months I could possibly grasp if this hug was something more than a toilet bowl hug.

As we embraced, I smelled the top of her head. Clay. She must have been in the ceramics studio this morning before breakfast. She always was a hard-worker. I couldn't help but let my mind wander to the deeper part of my brain, where I let hope live. The right side of my brain had told me to take hope out back and shoot it. Well I did, I walked with it holding its hand, but once I got to the left side of the brain, I just couldn't do it. I gave it a new name, a new purpose. I turned it into this. These very words you are reading. Hope lives here with you.

Those carcinogenic butterflies transformed one last time into a sheet of vibrant glass surging through my skin. I should not have smelled her hair. Hope had returned but she had not.

“Let's go for a hike.”

The woods beckoned. Its call was clear and inviting.

I listened to her command without thinking and I went. I pulled my large sun hat up over my head, blocking out the world of before and behind, as we entered the trail.

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A few steps in she grabbed my hand. A million ways to respond. I chose to hold back. "2"s. "4"s.