

Taste Like Ashes

Lucy never sleeps in her bed anymore.

The cold, smooth porcelain of the bathtub presses against her neck and reaches up through her thin cotton nightshirt to steal her body heat. Her shoulders quake and her teeth shiver and Lucy feels dead inside, wants to be dead.

She closes her eyes and breathes through the pain and tries to remind herself that she used to be a forgiving person. So why was she was having so much trouble forgiving Anna for leaving?

Maybe because in her eyes what Anna had done was unforgivable. Leaving Lucy to fend off the world by herself, leaving her with photos of the two of them from what seems like another lifetime plastered against her bedroom wall. Neither one of them is ever alone in the photos and she thinks maybe she should burn the photos to purge the reminders of Anna and her betrayal from existence.

Lucy's head shudders to the side to bury her face in her shoulder and a gag of hair catches in her mouth, smothering her. A great yell has built up in the back of her throat, has been there since *it* happened but she cannot release it, cannot let herself cry any more tears. If she heals, she will not grieve, and then how will she remember Anna?

Stuck in this limbo between wishing she were dead and feeling like she's dead Lucy ends up sleeping in the bathtub to try and bring her back. She wears Anna's favorite leather jacket and smokes her favorite brand of cigarettes; she wears combat boots to school every day and last week she came home with her hair dyed blue like Anna's.

Whenever she goes to the unofficial student café downtown she always buys black coffee, no cream no sugar no frills, just the way Anna liked it and she never gets anything else. She sits at their table and stares out the window and strains to hear Anna mock the wannabe rock stars who perform live on the weekends.

But all she ever hears is silence.

*

Taste Like Ashes

Lucy's locker is abandoned at school, has been for weeks now. She goes to Anna's classes and carries Anna's bag and never brings books because Anna never used them.

People at school sometimes stare at her as she walks past, a dead look in her eyes but Lucy doesn't care. (Whether it's because she just *doesn't* or because Anna *wouldn't*, she's not sure.) People were always staring at her after it happened, later they wonder why her hair is no longer blonde. They wonder why she wears leather jackets instead of soft sundresses and bright cardigans and why she simply stopped going to Student Council meetings when she used to be Treasurer for the junior class. They wonder why she wears a shade of lipstick so dark a red it's technically purple.

They wonder when she started smoking.

All of them knew Anna the way one knows someone where you do a half-nod when you see them at the grocery store. They heard about her family and shook their heads and said 'how awful' and moved on with their lives and don't understand why Lucy can't do the same.

Over the past nine weeks six days fourteen hours and twenty-eight minutes, Lucy has been sent by one teacher or another to the guidance counselor's office more times than she can count. Ms. Macintosh is a nice enough old lady but she keeps trying to get Lucy to *talk*. She tries to get her to see *why* emulating Anna in every aspect of her life isn't *healthy*, isn't *reasonable*.

After the first few sessions Lucy gave up paying attention and now whenever she's sent to the office she just lounges on the couch and smokes, ignoring Ms. Macintosh's disapproving looks and polite requests to put it away. She pretends not to listen, she knows Anna wouldn't listen. And every time she pulls the cigarette away to see the mouthpiece stained purple by the lipstick, just like Anna's were, she doesn't even have the energy to want to cry.

*

School is bad enough but home is even worse.

Taste Like Ashes

Lucy just sits in her room, staring at the photos that have already burned themselves into her eyelids. They all have a certain similarity to them in that no matter the background, their age or attire, it's always Lucy lunging over to wrap Anna in a monster hug, laughing; Anna is always bent back from the sheer force of Lucy's affection, a half-smile tugging up her lips, her hand tangled in Lucy's hair.

Science says hair is just dead cells, that it doesn't feel pain but Lucy swears her very strands ache for Anna's touch, scream for Anna to bury her dark-painted fingernails in her blonde-turned-blue locks, yearn for Anna to come back come back come *back*.

Her parents' hushed voices constantly drift down the hall into her room. Lucy hears words like grief counseling, rehab, ten weeks, and bathtub. Some deep-down part of her knows her parents think they're trying to help her, but she knows they couldn't understand, wouldn't understand.

How could her parents, Ms. Macintosh, or for that matter anyone at all understand her? How could they understand that when she wears Anna's leather jacket Lucy can almost see her smiling? How could they understand that when she takes a drag on a cigarette and blows out the smoke it sets every single conversation they'd ever had on replay? How could they understand how the shade of lipstick she puts on every morning was Anna's absolute favorite and she always wanted to see Lucy wear it? How could they understand how if no one will keep Anna alive, if not even Anna would keep Anna alive, then Lucy has to do it herself?

Lucy breaks her staring contest with the photos to look down at her painted nails, the black coating is already chipping at the edges and it makes her want to scream because she's not good enough. She can't recreate enough of Anna, can't save enough of Anna, not in the right way. Lucy doesn't scream though. Instead she reaches into her pocket for the cigarettes and the lighter, flares up, and sucks in and blows out, watching the smoke twirl up into her bedroom, her lipstick staining the mouthpiece ever darker.

*

Hindsight is always twenty-twenty, she thinks.

Taste Like Ashes

The signs were so obvious in retrospect Lucy can't believe she missed them, and it makes her think maybe she wanted to miss them, didn't want to believe it was true.

*

"Luce?" Lucy turned to see Anna crawling through her bedroom window, combat boots catching on the sill. She put down her book and walked over as her best friend stood up, her eyes wide and lips trembling.

"What's up Anna?" she asked cautiously, wondering what's got her so spooked.

"Promise you love me," Anna demanded, fists clenched, eyes red.

A frown shaped itself across Lucy's face and she blinked, trying to figure out what on earth was happening. "What's this all about? Of course I love you."

But Anna was already shaking her head, bright blue hair swinging past her shoulders like a pendulum. "No, no, no, no. That's not good enough. You have to promise. You have to promise you love me."

Lucy rolled her eyes and reached her hands out. "I promise I love you. Now will you please tell me what's going on?"

But once the words had left her mouth Anna relaxed, the fight draining out of her shoulders, acceptance filling her eyes. "It's not a big deal," she'd insisted, pulling out a box of cigarettes. "Just picked up anxiety somewhere I guess."

Lucy had shaken her head and went back to her book while Anna stood by the window and smoked. Without talking both girls knew an impromptu sleepover was taking place and that Anna would be spending the night in Lucy's bed with her. There was a drawer full of Anna's clothes in Lucy's room already, for whenever her parents were fighting like tonight. Ever since they became friends Anna has never let Lucy meet her parents, saying their fighting drives everyone away. But Lucy heard them fighting once, when she and Anna were planning to spend the day at the beach and she stopped by Anna's house to pick her up. A lawn full of daffodils, a white picket fence, and shouting drifting through the screen window.

Taste Like Ashes

When Anna finished her first cigarette Lucy had expected her to light another, not reapply her lipstick before dragging a chair next to where she was reading and rest her chin on Lucy's shoulder. "We're best friends right?" she'd murmured.

Lucy had squeezed her hand and nodded reassuringly. "Always. It's been that way for eight years, ever since the third grade, remember? Till death do us 'part?"

Later, they fell asleep together in Lucy's bed.

She'd woken up at 4:22 in the morning with ice creeping through her stomach and dread streaking down her spine.

Anna was no longer next to her, and everything felt wrong, wrong, *wrong*. Her feet took her to the open bathroom door that she always closed before bed and pushed it open further and her world shattered when she took in the sight before her.

*

Maybe if she'd known what had happened at Anna's house that evening she could've stopped it.

Maybe if she'd realized Anna's father had been abusing her mother for years she could've stopped it.

Maybe if she had found out before reading Anna's suicide note that her father had turned a shotgun on her mother and then killed himself while Anna hid beneath her covers one room over she could've stopped it.

Maybe if she'd been able to truly reassure Anna that she loved her and it was going to be okay then she wouldn't have walked into the bathroom that night to find Anna's body lying in the bathtub, a razor blade in her hand and blood soaking her wrists.

Maybe if she'd known it was going to happen, if she'd been ready, she'd know how to keep her alive now that it was over.

*

It's been another three months two weeks four days and twelve minutes and she's tried everything possible to keep Anna alive.

Lucy thinks she's probably single-handedly keeping the town's cigarette industry running. She's dyed her hair cotton candy blue so many times she's surprised it's not

Taste Like Ashes

permanent, and the leather jacket and dark purple lipstick are practically grafted onto her like a second skin. Her bed could be an exhibit in an antiques museum it's been so long since she used it. When she walks into the coffee shop down on Fourth whatever barista is serving sets a straight black coffee down on the corner of the counter, knowing she'll always order the exact same thing.

Lucy's not sure how to live anymore, she's just going through the motions and everything feels slanted and empty and just plain *off* and she wonders when she started seeing the world in black and white.

*

She's sitting at her table in the corner, sipping the drink and blankly staring at the table and aching for Anna's hands or arms or voice when someone slides into the seat across from her.

Her breath hitches and she looks up, her treacherous mind thinking maybe miracles do happen and maybe Anna's come back, but instead of being greeted by piercing eyes, an omnipresent grin and a lit cigarette, she's facing someone else entirely.

The boy smiles at her and she tilts her head in response and acknowledges to herself that he's pretty cute with his wide grin and soft eyes, and if this were another life she might have liked him.

"Hey," he smiles, sticking out a hand. "My name's Keith."

An eyebrow pulls itself up her forehead at his outstretched hand and she takes another sip of coffee, refusing to break eye contact or take his hand, intending to let awkwardness overwhelm him.

He shrugs and drops the hand, drumming his fingers on the table. "I just moved in with my aunt and uncle a few weeks ago, I've seen you at school. Do you want to grab coffee before class or something?"

If his utter inability to take a hint weren't slightly pathetic Lucy might have laughed as she leans back and eyes him up and down. A purposefully wrinkled tee shirt and jeans. Hair just long enough to pull into something resembling a ponytail. *He must*

Taste Like Ashes

think he's cute. But then she remembers her own ensemble and decides she and Anna don't have much better taste.

"Do I look like a hostess to you?" she sneers, fingers digging into her paper cup.

Keith's smile fades and his eyes become intense as storm clouds the split second before a lightning strike. "Every time I see you, you look like someone drowning, and I promised myself after last time that if I saw the signs I wouldn't ignore them."

Lucy turns her eyes back towards the window and lets the sneer fall from her lips. "Well now you have to tell me what happened last time," she says, because she actually is curious and she thinks Anna would be too.

He stands from his chair and for a second she thinks he might be leaving. She feels a faint echo of disappointment. But then he says, "I don't live too far from here. How about you walk me back home? I'll tell you my tragic backstory if you tell me yours."

Lucy raises her bloodshot eyes to his own determined ones and she hesitates, because despite the truckload of caffeine in her blood she's exhausted. She really is. But Anna always did tell her to take more chances, and she thinks Keith would interest Anna if nothing else, so maybe she should. "You expect me to just up and leave with some guy I met ten seconds ago? For all I know you could be a serial killer or something." It's a meager defense and they both know it.

"I could be, but a serial killer would never admit to being a highly skilled tap dancer." He promptly breaks out into a flashy step right there in the café and a laugh bursts out of Lucy before she can stop it. She claps a hand over her mouth, eyes wide. It's the first time she's laughed in months.

Keith holds his hand out to her once more. "Are you coming?"

This time she takes it.

*

They stop at the park on the way to his house and lounge on the swing set together. Lucy is facing one way and Keith is facing the other, and maybe the fact that she can't see him clearly is why she's able to talk as easily as she does. Maybe it was just

Taste Like Ashes

that she wasn't ready to talk before, and now that she is it feels like everyone gave up on her speaking a long time ago, except for this perfect stranger.

Whatever the case she tells him about Anna, her very best friend, the person she hates more than anyone. She doesn't tell him everything, just the good stuff. Anna's love of outdated technology, the time she led a school-wide protest over the unjust firing of the janitor, the way she would jump on the bed and sing into a hairbrush when she and Lucy were up way later than they should have been, high on mushroom pepperoni pizza and the euphoria of having found someone who knew your very soul. Then she tells him about the murder-suicide and how she found Anna in her bathtub, blood dripping onto her tiled floor.

"That was almost six months ago." Her throat feels scorched raw from the deluge of words, as though each one had been coated with acid. Maybe it was better now that they were out of her, if that meant the acid could no longer burn her alive from the inside out.

Lucy can see Keith looking at her in her periphery. "That's awful," he says.

She pushes her feet against the ground, swinging back and forth lightly, feeling a phantom pressure on her shoulder blades where she wishes Anna was pushing her the way she used to. "No shit," she says. "Your turn now, I want to hear about the great tragedy of Keith whatever-the-fuck-your-last-name-is."

Keith starts talking, and when he does she almost wishes he would stop. His mom died in childbirth, something he's always hated himself for despite logic, and he thinks his dad may have always hated him too but now he'll never get the chance to confirm it because two months ago he jumped off the roof of their six-story apartment building. Keith loved his father despite everything, despite how he'd never made time for him, or how he'd been sinking deeper and deeper into the throes of alcoholism over the last couple of years he was alive.

"I saw him slipping but I didn't want to see it," Keith says. "I didn't want to admit that I wasn't enough for him to stay so I ignored it. Then I had to identify his body and I promised myself I'd never ignore those signs again, not for anyone."

Taste Like Ashes

Lucy feels defensive. "I'm not suicidal." Someone in this world has to stay alive for Anna.

She looks up to see him watching her.

"There are ways to destroy yourself without dying," he says.

*

She walks him the rest of the way home, but when she pulls out a cigarette he launches into a lecture on the dangers of smoking so determined ("not just for you but the rest of the neighborhood, second-hand smoke kills, Lucy. Think of the poor children") that within three minutes of lighting it, she's rolling her eyes and grinding it into the sidewalk with her boot, just to shut him up. When they reach his house, just as cookie-cutter as all the others, as hers is, as Anna's was, he promises to pick her up for school on Monday and she resists. He bribes her with an offer of coffee.

Keith shows up Monday at seven-thirty, and Lucy's mom spits out her cereal when she sees her leave the house on time, with a ride waiting. Keith disparages the drinking choice of black coffee, calling it 'hell in a paper cup'. Instead of disagreeing she pours his own order of hot chocolate out the window.

They separate when they arrive at school, Keith going to first period and Lucy heading outside to the soccer field. She lies down on the very top metal bleacher, letting her leg swing off the end, feeling the sun soak into her face. Anna had always loved the sun, so Lucy doesn't feel guilty for enjoying it.

A shadow falls across her face during what she thinks is fourth period.

"Is this really what you do all day? Just lie outside and be miserable?"

Lucy cracks an eye. "You're blocking my light."

"What about your classes?"

She closes the eye. "What about them?"

Lucy expects him to leave, but instead she hears the creak of metal and reopens her eye to see him lying down on the bleacher beneath hers. "What are you doing?"

Keith raises a hand to shield himself from the sun's glare. "I'll go to class when you do."

Taste Like Ashes

Indignant, she sits up to glare at him. “Keith.”

A smile plays at the edges of his lips. “Lucy.”

“Go to class.”

“Hypocrite.”

Lucy is so mad she can’t even speak. Why the fuck should she even care if this stupid boy is going to miss his first day of classes just because he’s too *stupid* to leave her alone? She thinks of Anna, seeks out her voice in the back of her head, but all she gets is a phantom pain in her ears when she hears only silence.

The anger goes out of Lucy like air escaping a deflated balloon and her shoulders sag. “I don’t know what class I have.”

Keith sits up, his mouth sketching a frown. “What do you mean?”

She lifts her shoulders in a shrug, a Herculean effort. “I haven’t gone in a while.”

Keith pulls a notebook out of his bag and starts to draw.

Lucy resigns herself to letting him fail, to letting one more thing be her fault.

The next morning Keith shows up again outside her house with coffee for her and hot chocolate for him, and when she climbs in he hands her a folded piece of paper. She takes it gingerly and he rolls his eyes. She opens it to see her name and student ID number at the top of the page, and beneath it her class schedule. She looks at him in disbelief as he mentions off-handedly, “The lady at the front desk said you haven’t been to class in months. Seriously, how have you not been expelled?”

Lucy manages to recover some semblance of her wits. “Fisher doesn’t expel people, it just graduates them off to be someone else’s nuisance.”

Keith says this is problematic, and Lucy ignores him. When they arrive at school Keith steers her in some direction, she’s not paying attention. But when they stop she recognizes it as the geometry classroom, which according to her schedule she has first period. She gives him an exasperated look but his face is the picture of innocence.

Deciding she will sleep through the class, Lucy sulks inside when the teacher unlocks the door. Some people stare at her and a couple of them whisper. Anna would

Taste Like Ashes

have glared menacingly, or maybe blown them a kiss depending on her mood that day, but Lucy just trudges over to a desk in the back and drops down.

She doesn't have the energy to be surprised when Keith sits next to her.

"Shouldn't you be getting to your own class?" she asks.

Keith pulls out what she assumes is the homework. "This is my class. Turns out we have all the same ones. What a coincidence, huh?"

Lucy stares at him blankly, before folding her arms on top of the desk and resting her head atop them.

*

Lucy lets Keith drag her to all of her classes the rest of the week, but she does not pay attention in any of them. And then on Friday Keith says they are partners for a history presentation on Monday, and that he will be putting in exactly the same amount of effort that she does. Lucy stares at him from the passenger seat as he asks whose house they should go to, before adding it should probably be hers, since his aunt accidentally burned vinegar this morning and the whole place reeks.

Lucy refuses to say a word the entire drive, and every time Keith tries to turn on the radio she snaps it off, pointedly letting her silence poison the atmosphere. Keith is just as pointedly not affected, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. He always drums them on something. She wonders if he used to play piano.

They arrive at her house and Lucy mentally braces herself before going in. Her dad is a paramedic and her mom is a trauma surgeon, and both of them are always exhausted. But she grudgingly acknowledges to their credit that ever since Anna died they have been taking more hours off to try and spend time with her.

Her parents are sitting at the kitchen table and the conversation abruptly ceases when she walks inside the house just like it always does. Her dad drops the plate he's washing in the sink at the sign of Keith, the cacophony filling the room. Her mom knocks over a glass of orange juice and the liquid spreads to stain the kitchen table, she ignores it as she asks who Keith is in an almost awe-struck tone of voice. Lucy walks past them, tugging Keith along, he calls out some explanation that she only half pays attention to.

Taste Like Ashes

She drops down on the bed and sets her backpack in front of her. She reaches inside out of habit to feel the cigarette box, realizing she hasn't smoked since Keith told her not to, over a week ago now. It makes her want to smoke one right now just to spite him, and then she wants to smoke one for Anna, but when she pulls the box out she only runs her fingers over it a dozen times.

Keith sits on the other side of her bed and idly comments that she is most assuredly going to die of lung cancer before she's thirty if she insists on smoking.

"They taste disgusting."

Keith is focused on setting up a PowerPoint on his laptop but looks up at her voice. "What?"

Her knuckles whiten on the box. "They taste awful, like ashes, I hate them I've always hated them I told Anna not to smoke them but she said it was the least painful way into oblivion and I never understood before now but they don't even work anymore." She is breathing hard, tasting smoke on her tongue.

Keith puts his computer away, giving her his undivided attention. "Anna was a smoker too?" Lucy lets her eyes flick to the photos on the wall and sees his eyes follow. He gets up and walks over to them. "Is this her?" He is looking at the blonde haired girl, and she sees the moment of recognition in his eyes when he recognizes the face and sees Anna as she was and when he looks back at Lucy as she is there is a tremendous sadness to him. "Oh, Luce." His voice is a whisper.

"She's not coming back," Lucy gasps. It is getting hard to breathe. "She's not coming back. I can't bring her back. I can't even keep her here. I can't do it. How did I ever think I could do it when I don't even like the taste of her *fucking* cigarettes?"

She means to say more but now she is choking, on grief, on rage. Ragged animal noises emerge from her throat. Lucy knows she is sobbing. She thinks she might be dying.

Keith rushes over and sits next to her and wraps her in his arms. She presses her face into his shoulder to muffle her scream.

*

Taste Like Ashes

Lucy's mom stands in the doorway of her bedroom, wringing her hands, asking for the hundredth time if she's sure about this. She and her mother have had a dozen different variations of this conversation. Her mom is glad she's trying to start living again but worries if this is really the best way to spend her summer, with a boy she's only known eight months. (Her assurances that Keith is not a serial killer don't seem to do much.)

Lucy has never been more sure of anything in her life. She finishes zipping up her suitcase and heads into the bathroom, doing a final check that she hasn't forgotten anything vital. She glances into the mirror, running a self-conscious hand through her hair. Her mom went to the salon with her, to help Lucy get it as close to her original color as possible. She also cut off eight inches so that it now falls just barely past her shoulders. She thinks Anna would like it.

She walks back to her bed and pulls on her old favorite purple sweater, the soft cotton holding all the familiarity of a warm hug. She pulls on Anna's old leather jacket over it. Her phone buzzes with a text from Keith saying he's outside, right on time like always. Her dad grabs her suitcase and her mother clenches her jaw and Lucy lets herself smile. She heads outside and waves at Keith, and when she reaches where he is leaning against his car he wraps his arms around her and kisses her gently, before burying his face in her hair. "Good to see you Lucy-Lu."

Summer vacation officially started two days ago and Lucy and Keith are going on a road trip, all the way up the west coast to Seattle and back again. Anna always wanted to go to Portland and Lucy's always wanted to see the Space Needle and Keith has always wanted to go on a road trip.

Her dad puts her suitcase with Keith's in the backseat and her mom envelops Lucy in a warm hug, pressing a kiss to her cheek and squeezing her hand before stepping back and swiping at her eyes.

Lucy catches her mom's hand and her eye first though, and smiles timidly. "I love you," she says. She hasn't said it often enough lately.

Taste Like Ashes

She repeats the process with her dad, and her parents hold hands as she gets in the car and Keith starts the engine. She watches them shrink in the side mirror, they wave until she can't see them anymore.

Keith places his hand on the center console and Lucy takes it, interlocking their fingers together. He smiles at her, brown eyes as soft and warm as the day she met him.

Lucy smiles back, thinking how lovely it is to see the world in color again.