

Arturo and Julia

It was at noon when Julia called to tell me that Arturo had killed himself.

Arturo was the best writer I had ever known and truthfully I was glad he was dead. Though, when her words finally settled and I was able to think straight – and return to my body – I could feel a stillness begin to numb my mind. I was on the verge of tears I hadn't felt since the last time I saw that stupid man. My chest tightened. A slap of cold-heat hit me. My sweat stretched like the skin of leather. Soon though, Julia's breaths woke me up. The thought of her cooled me. I knew she was probably worse off than me. She was the last person Arturo really loved, like love loved, higher than loving your mother love, or loving yourself love. He would brag about it all the time to me after we made LOVE. At first this hurt but soon I got used to it. I learned by then that boy sex was just sex to him. Or like how he used to say, he was in it for the experience. To test the waters. You don't know till you come.

I met him in the restroom of a bookstore, of course.

I remembered that he was the most frightening, or sickening, thing I had ever seen. Yet he also looked completely normal. The dark that I had seen, or as he would say, had let enter, was the fear he carried around. He didn't even smile when he passed me. But I knew I had to speak to him. He told me later that the book he was carrying in his back pocket was stolen and that he never bought books. All the books he had – which stacked against every corner of his room – were stolen at bookstores across the city. He thought it was *unwise*, his word, to buy books. I asked which book it was, and he said, while looking at its cover, *The Apprenticeship, or Book of Delights*.

I had never heard of Clarice Lispector before. But neither had he. Arturo was introduced to her through Julia. They had also met at the same bookstore. We were all book lovers and shared some weaknesses too. Julia had found Arturo – just like I did – irresistibly beautiful, irresistible in the way that certain people are doomed to loving the ocean, and loving it hard, but only at night. We were both attracted to the cold, endless way Arturo presented himself: dark waters lapping up the shiniest rocks.

Julia had introduced Lispector to Arturo because Lispector was her favorite author, and having worked at a bookstore that Arturo occasionally robbed, she picked up on his tastes. Innocently, as was her way, she approached him in the stacks where he sat eating the words as they zoomed up. She wanted him to read her. She knew he would love her.

Except he didn't, he told me one night.

I can't explain why she likes her so goddamn much, he said. We were drunk and held tight like young lovers trying to see each other for the first time.

Try to. Try.

After a brief moment, Arturo coughed, I think she likes reading her because they think alike. It's all full of wonderful feelings but all in obscure wordings that go nowhere.

Like you said of my poems.

No, although Arturo was dark I could see him reddened. He smiled, No your poems are about re-learning about life. Right? I looked outside the window. I saw a street light flicker on, then turn off. I thought of Lispector and then about Julia then about how much, and how many, opposing emotions were trapped and fueling me, guiding me, torturing me, undoing me. I thought about Lispector's beautiful face on the book's cover. I tried to describe what these feelings amounted to, and the only thing I could think of was, Beauty: eyes that lead nowhere.

I was lying on my bedroom floor when had Julia called. She asked me if I wanted to know how Arturo did it. I thought about it for a few seconds. I imagined that the obvious thing to do was to say *how*, but I didn't feel like letting the details in; the visuals would raze all the strength I had left. I shook my head imagining Arturo spying on the other line, chuckling like a little boy. He always made fun of how little I could stomach gross, indecent details. But Arturo loved that. One time he even showed me a video online about some beheadings down in Mexico where his mom lived. While explaining the reasons why I should see it, a smile inched, like I imagined a tapeworm would inch, higher and higher

until at the very end he said, The thing is they don't even cry when the chainsaw cuts them. He looked like a ruptured stomach, there smiling. I rubbed my eyes. They were dry. I told Julia, No.

He jammed his head between the doors of an elevator as it was going up.

I said no.

They told me he died of suffocation, though.

Julia are you listening to me?

I guess he passed away before his head tore off.

I felt a silence in my head. I could've sworn at that exact moment there was a wall being constructed in it, brick by brick.

He always loved you, you know. Even while with me.

Julia. Please.

Julia took a moment before she spoke again.

He left a note. He wrote it for both of us. Do you want me to read it?

No.

No?

I'll read it myself. Are you at the bookstore?

No, I'm home.

Okay. I'll meet you there.

I hung up the phone. After a while, I poured water into a coffee cup. I didn't drink any. I stood there with my hands on the edge of the sink. Staring at the cup as it started to dot with perspiration, I began to hate how irresistible self-pity can be. How easy it was to fall off. To sink and then let go. I watched the water there. It was unmoving. I've always hated clear water. When I was younger, about ten, my best friend invited me to his swimming pool party, and being from a small town, this meant everyone would be there. I didn't know how to swim and was worried everyone would find out. Plus,

we were poor and didn't have any extra clothes to waste with chlorine, so I tried my best to think of any excuse during lunch. When he finally asked if I was going, I said, No – then like I always do when forced to lie, I told the truth -- I'm afraid of drowning. I don't want to die. He stared at me like I as speaking another language. Being dark, I didn't have to worry about turning red. He then smiled.

You're playing right?

I smiled, No.

Don't lie.

It would be suicide. I don't want to commit suicide.

And yet there wasn't anything evil about suicide, I said to my water. It sat there unchanged. Suicide was turning off and turning on again. It happens often. And the moment it happens, our consciousness would be like those photons we can't see but who can see us looking at them. Our consciousness would realize that it was best to be both here and there. The moment would be blurred. Then I thought about the worse way to die. My own personal hell. It was at the bottom of concrete building just after it collapsed. Alive but barely there, breathing more dirt than anything else. Hoping for light. Hoping for sound. Then realizing I was lucky to even have these thoughts, I would calculate my oxygen. It would be depleting soon. And outside, just a few yards from my feet, the sound of the city, alarmed and panicked. Yells, screams, sirens – muffled and echoed, barely there. I would be alone in the dark, so close to them but frozen. Then a thought so true it makes you laugh: I would die here because I didn't have any water.

I stared at the bare white walls thinking about how everyone needs water, good and bad. I drank the water. I would leave to the Julia's in a few hours.

The truth is I'd never slept with a man until Arturo. I didn't like it. It hurt and worse of all I felt unsure of what it meant. After we had finished, I brushed my teeth and took the longest shower I'd ever taken. When I got back to bed I couldn't even face looking at him, so suddenly asleep. But I lay there

watching him, imagining all of my thoughts, or really all of my feelings, as tall blonde and faithful believers of Dionysius, each dancing around the last bonfire they would ever see. All of them trying to find their own reflection in an unreflective shine. My head hurt, thinking about those crazed pagans, underneath an ancient moon. I started thinking panic attacks weren't so bad after all. And that someone must have realized the moon is always warm at night. I looked to how Arturo could breathe so easily.

His back was uncovered. I could see the ridges and bumps of his spine. The curve struck me as unnatural. Where a normal, supine S should be, I saw a jagged G. My insides felt bruised and newborn. All I wanted was for him to get up and leave. Take his clothes, his smells, his breathing, out there, anywhere, as faraway as possible – and I wanted to leave the city that night, but then again I also wanted him to wake up and kiss me. I thought this would make me feel better. Though smiling, I knew if Arturo tried to make a move I would back away and tell him to stop. I knew only he could make things better. The sex had been unlike anything I had experienced. In some ways it was better, in others less than what I wanted. Still, I let Arturo come inside me. When the moment had arrived I couldn't pretend that I didn't want it all. I wanted to feel that gross temper inside me, I wanted to feel ashamed. I wanted to look at the mirror the next night and curse myself, while a few tears sparkled as if to show me that my heart wasn't as bad as I thought. This goes without saying, I came hard when I felt his jizz run down my thighs.

After lying there for a while, Arturo began to snore louder, and I was getting bored. I felt a large pit of non-feeling start to wall up. I saw his bare ass, it was smooth and without hair, pale but dark, but less dark than mine. Now all my feelings crumpled into a buzzing that muted everything else, removing all of the good – natural – polite rules lodged in me long time ago by decent folk. It stripped me of choice: I needed to fuck and that was all. So I did. And, although it was technically the second act with a man, from that day forward I would always count the time when I entered Arturo as my first. It just felt better that way.

I asked Arturo how did he enjoyed it.

On top or bottom?

Both.

In truth, Arturo replied in tone that made me want to gash his eyeballs out, It was like sleeping with a frail woman. You worry too much, he continued. You're thinking about all kinds of things. Just let go, you know? Enter a different plane of existence. Become part of me. Stop trying to probe into what is happening. Be here.

Arturo was proud of speaking the truth, no matter how hurtful to him or the listener. He was an impatient man. Impatient like those men who wait just inches from a closed elevator door hungering for their appointed floor. What was making them anxious? Were they in a hurry or just afraid? Getting stuck in elevator with Arturo wouldn't be good.

Now, I had to go and see Julia. I wasn't pleased with this. She was supremely beautiful, and I was afraid of showing how bad I felt in front of her. She had that voice you hear in people who've had too much in their life. It conveys more than anything – with its raspy haltering mumble – that they are tired. Tired of what? Of being able to get away with anything? She was young, yes. And yes she loved to read too. It was perhaps the only thing we shared. That and our love of a dead man. But I wasn't that much older. I just knew there was evil in everyone. I was angry – or as angry as I could be – whereas they were inspired and wanted the clouds, and from that height I don't know how they failed to see how vulnerable they were. They were flightless birds, soon to hit the ground. It was people like me who had to pick up the pieces. It was that simple. Arturo was strange in this way. He was both. He had at times shown how unbelievable hard his heart was and at times shown how incredibly worried he was to the goings-on of people around him. Though, like Julia, he was innocent too. Only corrupted. He loved deeply but let that energy corrode the barriers meant to keep the emotions from mixing. So everything was enmeshed. Love. Hate. Compassion. Fear. He was burning and that was what Julia and I saw. I got up. Put on the cleanest clothes I could find. And lit a cigarette. Nothing was what I wanted to feel, but all I felt was sickness. I was going to that hell at the bottom of a ruined building, surrounded

by broken concrete. Darkness and screaming. Inside her home, again. The last time I was there, Arturo and I had our last fuck. We were in her room, and I was tired. I wanted to tell him about a nightmare I had the other night. So I faced in him as he was standing. Quietly, I told him that I was afraid of my voice.

That's stupid, he scoffed.

You're stupid.

Arturo was angry because of Julia. He always took it out on me. That's why we used her room when she wasn't there. To be honest, I liked it too, being there. It was a personal victory for me, knowing I was dirtying her holy bed. Until she found out. Then it was boring. This time though we hadn't planned to make love. But we did anyways, since Julia had just left to work. He took off his shirt and threw it at me.

While the shirt spun in the air – for what felt like an eternity – I could see Arturo looking at me. It was a look that frightened me. His eyes were smiling. They were tender. Although his lips weren't. His eyes were. I knew I had to say something appropriate.

I love you.

The shirt landed on my chest. Arturo immediately turned away, facing a black poster that Julia made in a printmaking class in college. It said, Same. Ghosts. Galleries then Porcelain. I wished with all my heart that instead of this stupid poster she had put up a mirror. I wanted so desperately to see those eyes again. He faced that corner, breathing and unmoving. I thought he was about to cry. But then he spoke, Why?

I got up, half-expecting Arturo to flee. Each step was quieter than the next. I knew I had only a few seconds before he changed. Arturo, I said as I kissed his neck. He shuddered. But it wasn't just a reaction of disgust or incomprehensibility. There was a something unutterable about it. I yanked Arturo's shorts down and stared at his hairless ass. Arturo, you're so beautiful, I said. This turned him around, but instead of misery or a unwelcome sadness that I had expected to see, there was only anger.

I took a step back. Arturo reached for me as if to strangle me. I closed my eyes, braced for it, expecting the worse. But instead his hands sunk into my shoulders and twisted me around. I was thrown to the bed, face first. My shorts and boxers were slashed by his left hand, as his right burnt on my ass. I opened my eyes when Arturo shoved his cock inside me. I felt like a dark ocean. He fell atop me, breathing heavily and thrusting with the anger only a betrayed lover could force. I could feel the thousands of tears yelling at the dark behind his eyes.

After he finished he told me to get the fuck out the house. Julia would kill me if I didn't.

I had to go to Julia's now. I entered the car. Started the engine. Sat for a few seconds. I thought about how Julia hadn't caused anything to happen. I and Arturo and Julia were independent from each other, no matter how tied up in bodily stuff. She was no more to blame than I was. But she was the one Arturo loved. She was the one who quoted pages of motherfucking Lispector, Lispector! I was never good enough. All I wanted was to let her know how much I suffered caring for that worthless man. How much I wanted her to see the times when Arturo wasn't there to play nice (like he always did for her) but instead was out for blood. Out to test how much he could take, and revel in his good looks. No, she didn't see those nights. She got the wine. I got the booze – the straight gin, the red eyes. The look of, So what if you hate me, I hate me, why do you let me do this to you then?

But when I entered her kitchen I was surprised. Julia was sitting by a small wooden table. Cold black coffee pooled in a wine glass by her left hand. It was clear she was trying to sober up with caffeine. There were empty beer cans as well as tequila – most definitely Arturo's -- beside her. And her red hair was all over the kitchen. I could see clumps on the floor under the fridge. I then saw the letter. She was holding it like a cigarette, cradling it near and at same time keeping it as far away as possible. She noticed I was staring at it.

I sat down across from her. Julia now looked outside the window which lighted her face. The light in the room was really soft. Julia was born for this light. I followed her eyes that stared outside.

Soon, I was staring at the sun, now miles above the fence. There were chips of paint falling off and collecting at the bottom. They were forming small mountains. I was like those mountains, softening by light.

Arturo. Fuck him, Julia finally managed to say.

Why do you say that? I said coldly.

Read it. You'll see why.

I opened the letter. Read it three times. Half way through the fourth, I stopped.

Julia was crying. Her eyes had fallen to the table. And she wiped her tears as they flooded past her thin fingers. At the moment I lost my edge. I hadn't expected her to be like this, but I also hadn't read the letter. The letter was cruel, especially for her. He said although he loved her, he had to go. He had to leave. There was nothing she could do and that he was no good. To me, he said take care of her. There were also words about Lispector, goodness, evil, and love. This made me feel like how a mother might feel when her child becomes an adult, and this adult then realizes she or he isn't meant for world.

I drank in silence until I understood what the letter meant exactly. Now, I had become as confused and drunk as she.

Fuck him right?

Yeah, I didn't know what else to say.

He was a fool. A goddamn fool!

She grabbed the wine glass and sucked down the stale coffee. A little drop of black scooted down her chin. She wiped it off. A long strain of hair was in her mouth. Julia had a habit of biting her hair.

Stupid scum!

Fuck him, I said. We both smiled for the first time. Julia's hair fell from her mouth.

There was a long pause. I hadn't realized that Julia was a woman until that moment, and hadn't realized I hadn't been in bed with anyone since Arturo. Seeing her there, I craved her touch. Her

warmth. Julia took in her hair again. She looked up. It was the same look Arturo had when he was in need of comfort.

I loved him so much, you know, she said.

Yes he told me.

He said you didn't give a fuck about him.

Yeah after I found out about you.

He said you were cold.

At first I wasn't.

That you called me names too.

I was angry.

That you loved fucking in my bed.

I know.

Why? Why did you two faggots like doing that?

She smiled but her eyes were distant.

I hated you for a while.

So?

So I wanted to fuck in your bed.

Do you still like women?

Yes, I do, I said as I saw her nipples glance against her thin white shirt.

You're looking at me like he used to.

I know. It's on purpose.

She smiled.

Are you drunk?

Not really. Do you want me to be drunk?

No. Not at all.

Good.

She stared at me.

Why do you still like women?

Because I like them.

Do you think I'm beautiful, she asked as she pulled her hair up and smiled, model like.

This wasn't how I had planned our conversation to take place, I said.

So what? Am I beautiful?

You're very beautiful.

I don't look sad?

You look very sad.

I hate Arturo, you know.

I do too.

She picked up her coffee mug, pressed it against her lips as if thinking.

What's happening Julia?

Nothing.

I think something's happening, I said.

Maybe.

No. There's something here.

She looked around and shrugged her shoulders.

Get up, Julia.

She hesitated at first but she got up.

I filled my wine glass with as much tequila as I thought I could down. The whole time never breaking eye contact with her.

Come here.

She followed.

I hugged her. She smelt like concrete after rain. It was both good and bad.

I'm sorry for everything.

...

I'm sorry Julia.

Fuck him.

He was bad.

Yes, she whispered.

Though we moved side to side as if dancing, it was quiet.

Let's go to your room.

She stared into my eyes. They were the most vulnerable eyes I had ever seen.

Be quiet, she said, just follow me.

We went to her room.

It was like I remembered it.

We had sex four times. I came inside her each time. It was the best sex I ever had. We were both crying at the end. We drank the rest of her alcohol – all of it – the wine bottle, the tequila, the beers. And told stories about Arturo. Some of them were funny, some sad, some altogether unremarkable. She told me how she had never been in love until him. I said I thought I was in love too, but that I had to turn away from this after seeing what was at the bottom of Arturo's heart. She laughed at this, said it was dramatic. I nodded. We kissed and that was the last thing I remember before blacking out.

The black felt as cool as the mornings where nothing is expected to happen, and nothing does happen. It felt good.

It was Julia who woke up first.

I could tell she had been crying because there were streams of crust on her white skin. She looked pitiful. But I could see why Arturo had fallen in love with this woman. It was a look I never had

seen before. It was hiding, I guess. She was like a gift, or precious stone, or like those brief moments when your head clears and you can see – literally – that life doesn't mean to cause too much harm and you could at last feel happy. I was drawn to her. I wanted to hug her. Her eyes were full and large, iridescent. Moving like the candles in a Catholic church.

But all I could say was, What happened?

I don't know. I don't know.

Are you okay?

She said, Yes, as she quickly rubbed her face.

Are you?

Yes.

Okay?

Okay.

Let me get up.

You can't.

Why?

We're stuck, she smiled.

Really?

Yeah.

She pointed to an area beside her chest. I strained to look but didn't see anything.

Do you see it?

I don't see anything, I thought.

But I said, Yes.

Looking at her, I saw what I knew I had to see, something that I knew was truth, but something I never wanted to admit, she was better than me. She was a fighter. She was good. That was what Arturo coveted more than anything. Goodness. Goodness is an art, he used to say.

I felt like crying. I was wrong to have been cruel. I left later that morning. She made me breakfast. Hugged me before I opened the door then kissed me on the lips. I walked a couple steps, and she told me to stop, grabbed me again. Then let me go. She shook her head. Then nodded. She told to be safe. I left.

She was so beautiful standing at the door. I didn't think anyone could be so beautiful. An angel, I thought. A goddamn angel, I thought again. Fuck you Arturo, I whispered.

I went over the next night and the one after that. Both times we were drunk. It was on the fourth night that we had sex sober. I stopped midway and told her that I hated myself. She asked me why. I told her that I was afraid of how evil I could be. She told me that if I was afraid of that then there's no way Arturo would have liked me.

I stared at her, thinking about that.

She pulled away and put her clothes on, while lighting a cigarette. She stretched and petted my back. She told me anyone could be evil. All of her friends thought they were.

But that doesn't matter does it, she asked.

This made me want to kiss her. She looked like she was from the movies.

Why?

Because what we think ends up nowhere. Nowhere.

We were quiet for a moment.

I got to go, she said.

To the bookstore.

Yes.

Yeah.

After Arturo was buried, we stopped seeing each other as much. I stop going to the bookstore and found other friends. Years later, someone told me that Julia had moved to New York City with some guy. That they got married and had two children, and divorced soon after, then she re-married,

had a miscarriage, developed a drinking problem, recovered. Started photography at the age of 33, and went to Europe. But a couple years before she had left to New York, she called me in the middle of the night. She was drunk. Her voice was uneasy and I could tell she was uncomfortable.

Were you sleeping, she asked.

No, I lied.

I had a dream about Arturo. You don't want to hear it, do you?

No, I do.

She coughed for a few moments. Then apologized, asked how I was doing. I told her I was fine. And then she continued. Well, we were in a desert. And we were lost but we couldn't tell how lost, so we thought we were fine. But there was smoke all around us. I couldn't breathe. Arturo was mad about something pointless. We walked for miles. Always circling. But then we found you. We thought you were angel. We thought you were the one to help us out of the darkness. We started crying, crying in the way you can cry only in dreams, without guilt. Then you talked.

What did I say?

You said that we were meant to find each other. That's why we were lost. Arturo fell to his knees and told you sorry. Sorry about everything. And I remember thinking to myself inside my dream that he looked like an overweight child, who cried for anything.

I smiled, and then?

You told us to follow you and I woke up. But before I did. I asked you if you loved me. I know I shouldn't have. But I did. I asked you.

Julia.

You told me that in all matters of heart there are only two things that matter. Yeah that's what you said. Really. Then you told me, of course.

What were the two things?

I don't remember, but I know they were funny because I woke up laughing.

She paused, I don't know what to feel sometimes. I feel I should feel more.

That was the last time I talked to her. We hung up and I never heard from her again.