

A Dream Of Mars

Constant shouting was an unbearable sound. A sound that grew increasingly unbearable when it stemmed from the mouths of the only two people in your life that were supposed to love each other unconditionally forever and always. I covered my ears as I pictured my mother's jaw unhinging like that of a hungry snake in order to scream louder at my father, who probably appeared similar. It had been approximately half an hour since this had begun, just as my father gets home from "work" (Mother says that's what he calls the whore next door), and I've been hidden in my room ever since. I had to let them tire themselves out. Eventually, their throats would go raw and their eyes would burn from the hot, angry tears that escaped them.

These days, I hardly knew what they were arguing about, and honestly, I don't think they knew either. It was a wonder they hadn't split yet. I'd heard them discussing it before, but they made petty excuses not to.

"Think about Ash," they'd say as if my well-being was of their utmost concern, "she'd be devastated if we parted."

At this point, I could care less. All I wanted was for the fighting, the shouting, the horrid screaming, the namecalling, all of it, to stop. As the battle downstairs raged on, I decided I needed an escape. Uncovering my ears, I rose from my bed and slipped on a pair of black rubber rainboots before beginning my descent down the stairs and out the front door. My parents froze for a second as I passed, their faces looked odd. Their mouth appeared oversized and the rest of them was blurred and twisted, yet their toxic screaming continued the moment I turned my back. Perhaps it was just my brain playing tricks on me. I paid no mind to their altered state.

The brisk autumn air was crisp and refreshing. It blew across my cheeks, chapping my lips and reddening my face. I shivered, pulling the light coat I wore closer to my body, too stubborn to return inside for a thicker one. It was late October and fall was just setting in. In every direction you looked, bright oranges and yellows painted the atmosphere. The air smelled of freshly fallen leaves that had piled, awaiting a body to jump into them and scatter them around the neighborhood. I heaved a deep sigh, allowing my surroundings to flush out the memory of my parent's twisted features and piercing shouts, then stepped off my porch and onto the sidewalk. I walked without a destination in mind, my only goal was to clear my head.

Time seemed to warp I strolled along my neighborhood. It didn't speed up or slow down in particular, it just passed, unobserved and uninterrupted. Time wasn't of any concern to me. As for how long I'd been walking, I hadn't a clue. The previous chill I'd felt had subsided and the steady sound of crunching under my boots was all I could hear. Peaceful, everything had been so peaceful. Eventually, I passed a park and only then was my attention truly snatched.

A tall white cylinder stood tall in the dead center of the park. I did a double-take, at first hardly noticing it but being engulfed by curiosity upon my second glance. The crunching halted as my feet stopped moving so I could turn to face the cylinder. It was out of place. Its exterior was pristine and shone a bright white in front of the weathered monkey bars and broken tire swing. There wasn't even the slightest possibility that it had always been there, nor could it have been installed recently. A cylinder of such magnitude would have taken several weeks to erect in the park, surely I hadn't missed the machinery required to do so. Further driven by curiosity, I stepped towards the great, white cylinder. With each step, adrenaline welled up inside of me. The cylinder gave off an air of unusuality and I fed off it. Somehow, I knew this was going to be the

pinnacle of my day, the most rousing adventure I could ever embark on, and all I had done was take a couple of steps. Now standing within arms reach, the colossal size of the cylinder was apparent. Its scent overpowered the autumnal scents I had been enjoying thus far. However, the scent wasn't exactly unpleasant. It wasn't pleasant either. It was... otherworldly. Unlike anything I'd smelled before. Like a lost dog, I upturned my nose and sniffed at the air, desperately trying to pinpoint the scent. This resulted in a lost cause. Reaching forward, I knocked lightly on the cylinder's exterior, fearful I would ruin the prestige. It was hollow. The echo of my knock reverberated within the cylinder but nothing more. The adrenaline that once coursed through my veins quickly vanished as my hand was returned to my side. I shook my head and tsked in disappointment. Turning on my heel with the aim of forgetting the cylinder entirely, only to be halted by a loud bang behind me. Startled, I froze and slowly peered over my shoulder at the cylinder to see a large rectangular impression had appeared. The rectangle resembled a closed door, suddenly piquing my interest again. Turning again, I quickly moved to lay a hand on the space. Only then could I feel the cool texture of the cylinder, porcelain. If I was sure of anything about this strange object, it was its material.

The moment I removed my hand from the surface of the cylinder, it exhaled like a slowing steam engine and the rectangular impression slid aside. The air that escaped from what was previously an enclosed room was colder than outside, feeling more like late winter than early fall. Again I pulled my thing jacket closer, and again this did nothing for me.

Staring into the cylinder was like staring into a white abyss. It was so immaculate that I nearly lost myself looking into it. My head spun. There was nothing for my eyes to latch onto, nothing but white nothingness. It grew unsettling, yet my curiosity plagued me. I stepped

forward, my black rain boot being the only bit of color to enter the cylinder until I was standing in the center. I gazed around and found just as I expected, nothing. Call it instinct, or stupidity, but I remained in that cylinder, expectant. Sure enough, minutes passed and suddenly the doorway slammed shut. At first fearful, I rushed to where the door once stood and banged my fists against the unblemished wall so hard I swear a crack appeared. I screamed, but no noise came out. Suddenly I felt suffocated as I continued to open my mouth to scream and a distinct lack of noise emerged. Hot tears threatened to fall from my eyes as overwhelming fear took hold of me, but before one could fall there was a familiar exhale. The doorway appeared again. I paused and took a deep breath to compose myself, knowing the cylinder would open any minute.

I felt silly, getting all worked up over being inside an unusual object for no more than a minute or two. It had been *my* choice to step inside, I had nothing to blame but myself. As expected, the doorways opened and I ushered myself out of the strange cylinder. In fact, I had been so preoccupied with outing myself, I didn't even notice the red haze that coated my surroundings at first. Of course, upon realizing the state of the park around me, I promptly rubbed my eyes and blinked them repetitively under the assumption that it was a side effect of staring into the whiteness of the cylinder for too long. The red didn't fade. Its odd haze only bothered my eyes for a little bit before I was accustomed to it. Perhaps it was some sort of sign to head home. I heeded my body's personal warning system and began my walk back home.

"Ashlyn! Ashlyn! We're going to be late, you *idiot!*" A voice called out to me. I spun around but could not find the source.

"Ashlyn! Oh my dear god, you're blind and stupid!" The voice called again, but this time it was followed by the feeling of a hand on my shoulder. I jumped and spun around to face the

source of the voice and the hand. Behind me stood a girl about my age, a fraction of the size taller than me. Her black hair was pulled back into a loose braid that hung past her shoulders with stray hairs that framed her small face perfectly. The way she spoke to me was friendly as if we had known one another ages, and yet I have never met this girl before. She cocked her head at my visible confusion before laughing aloud and patting my shoulder. My confusion only intensified.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost, but we really just don’t have time for this. So come on then, let’s go.” She slipped her arm around my shoulders and began dragging me towards wherever we were late to. I protested, making whatever claims I could.

“My parents are expecting me.”

“I’m getting a cold, I should get home.”

“My dog hasn’t been fed yet.”

None of my protests were true, but I needed an escape from this strange girl. At each protest, she would laugh and brush it off, telling me she knew it wasn’t true. It was almost frightening how much this girl knew about me.

We had walked for about thirty minutes (which of course felt like hours while listening to this girl ramble on and on about who knows what) before she halted. Only then did she release me from her iron grip on my shoulders to gesture at the area in front of us.

“We made it just in time! They’ve just begun cooking!” Her voice held more excitement than I could ever describe, and before long she was dragging me along yet again.

It was some sort of neighborhood cookout party in another open space, similar to a park. An odd occurrence considering my neighborhood wasn’t exactly known for being tight-knit, nor

for being much of the get-together-type. Plus, there was the added aspect of the distinct lack of people I recognized. Everyone's faces held that same twisted look my parents' faces had. No, not twisted. Blurred. It was almost as if it would take all my concentration to make out their features. In my state of disarray, I found myself as a dog on a leash, being walked by the odd girl that had coerced me here.

As the day progressed, I grew acquainted with the girl. Turns out she was my age, and her name was Avalon (but she insisted I call her Ava). Getting this simple information proved to be a task far more difficult than it should have been considering she would laugh each time I questioned about her, thinking it to be some joke I was playing on an old friend. Though I certainly wondered why we'd never met before, after all, she was almost just like me. Everything she wanted to show me, I enjoyed. We ate foods I loved, listened to music from my favorite genres, and overall did all the things I would have wanted to do at such an event. It was almost strange how perfect this block party was. How perfectly suited it was to *my* tastes in particular. At this point, I didn't care about the various odd aspects of this place. From the cylinder to the girl, to the blurred faces of my neighbors, all of it was just so...surreal, but it wasn't home. It wasn't filled with constant screaming and disagreement. It wasn't something I was afraid of. Instead, I was happy. Genuinely happy for the first time in a long time. Perhaps it was because I was free from the shackles of my unhappy parents, it didn't really matter. All I knew was that I never wanted to go home. I would remain in this park of red haze until my own happiness swallowed me whole.

The dark was finally beginning to set in. The night was approaching but it had felt like mere minutes once I had fallen in love with my new surroundings. Ava and I giggled and chatted

on a park bench as we realized how many things we had in common (well, I realized, Ava apparently already knew these things). She told me that I would have to stay for at least thirty more minutes because then would be prime time for viewing. Per usual, I asked what we would be viewing, and as she always did, Ava laughed off my question and called me silly.

“Now look, isn’t it beautiful.” Avalon had pointed at the sky when she had decided the time was right. I peered up, but I didn’t need to crane my neck very far to see what she was talking about. The dark was almost completely eclipsed by what looked like an absolutely gargantuan planet. Oranges and white swirled clearly like milk in a bowl while a great eye on its surface stared down at us watchfully.

It was Jupiter.

My eyes must have been the size of dinner plates as I watched the planet appear to hover tediously in the sky. I had never been able to see such a sight from my home, or anywhere else for that matter. In fact, that was precisely the moment I realized: I was nowhere near home. The cylinder, it had to have been the cylinder, its taken me somewhere where such a thing is possible. Where anyone should be fearful in knowing that they have suddenly been transported somewhere far away, I was electrified. The feeling of freedom I had felt before was only heightened by this realization. Wherever I was, I was far away from the troubles of my home. This place, it was quiet and free.

“It’s Mars.” Ava interrupted my thoughts, smiling at me in a way that showed she knew what I had been thinking about.

“Mars?” I asked quietly, my eyes returning to the great planet in the sky. Suddenly, the red haze and proximity to Jupiter made sense. My life was turning into a science fiction movie,

and I wasn't upset by it. If little green men popped up in the center of the park, I would join the ranks without hesitation, especially if it meant I got to stay. I laughed aloud at these thoughts, Ava joined in.

We sat on that bench watching Jupiter overhead with as much focus as we could muster. Not a word was said between us. We preferred the reflective silence instead. The other people in the park shared this feeling and grew silent as well. The calming environment caused my eyes to grow heavy. Leaning back against the bench, I allowed them to fall shut with the intention of simply resting them for a little bit. I must have dozed off in doing so because the next thing I know my shoulders are being lightly shaken.

"Ashlyn...Ashlyn.." Ava's voice calls in a light whisper. As I come to, her voice warps. It becomes raspy, deeper. It becomes my mother's. I open my eyes to see her staring down at me. Her mouth was now the size its supposed to be. Her face no longer twisted but instead soft concerned. The red haze was gone.

"Come down now, its time for dinner." She says casually before exiting my room as if I hadn't just returned from a distant planet where all was free and kind. My eyes searched the room, expecting Ava to be standing nearby, waiting for me. There was nothing. I was in my room and it was just as I'd left it. Black rubber rain boots, still waiting by the door. How had I gotten here so quickly? Who brought me here? I was in a state of disarray. I jumped from my bed and threw my rain boots on as swiftly as I could before taking off running down my stairs and out of my house. Not once did I pause to look at my parents, nor did I mind if they were concerned with where I was headed. At a dead sprint, I made my way to the park. The crunch of leaves beneath my feet was erratic as moved with a haste I had never experienced before.

There was nothing in the park. Nothing but the same weathered monkey bars and broken tire swing. Falling despairingly to my knees, I stared at the empty park with a near-expressionless face. Tears welled up in my eyes at the thought of never being able to return to that place or seeing Avalon again. My body fell to the concrete, my forehead resting on the dirtied sidewalk. It was gone. My ultimate paradise. Gone without a trace.