

## A Winter Wonderland

He despised shoveling snow almost as much as he despised himself; for moving back in with his parents at the age of 24, for dropping out of college in the middle of senior year, for not telling her ‘I love you’ more—the list runs long and after five hours with only half of the driveway cleared, Jay Birch could no longer push away the bitter melancholy thoughts that bit at his toes. But Jay excelled in suppressing sadness with heavy sighs, swallowing sobs, and keeping a dry eye.

Jay planted his shovel in the snow and cracked his neck. After moving back home, he lost the motivation to work out and watch his weight. He wasn’t as limber as he once was, so he laid down in the snow to recollect his breath and peace of mind. As bleak as these grey winter days looked to some, Jay couldn’t help but find peace in the silence of lightly falling snow.

He held out his tongue, shut his eyes, and let the little flakes fall where they may. Jay’s mitten reached for an absent hand, only to grasp a wad of snow and hold it lovingly. He sighed. The wad melted through his mitten; luckily, Jay was too dissociated to truly notice the freezing water gathering in the palm of his hand. Since Jay moved back in, this was the only time he was permitted to be alone. It was in these brief hours of silence that Jay managed to find solitude.

“Hello?” Jay softly whispered to the winter breeze, yet only a gust of wind was returned. He swallowed hard. Jay closed his eyes and grasped for the absent hand once more.

“Hello?”

“Here I am.” A young woman’s hand appeared in Jay’s mitten. Beside him in an oversized snow-suit and a beanie was a college student far too beautiful to be laying with him.

“I missed you,” a tear gathered in his eye. Jay was mindful to keep his voice down, but she didn’t need to carry the same restraint. Jay cleared his throat.

“Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“It’s alright. I’ve always been more of a ‘sunny day on the Pier’ kind of girl.”

Jay smiled, “Yeah, I know.”

She leaned forward abruptly in an attempt to stand in one fluid motion, but tipped back into the snow. She looked down at her outfit.

“Not the most practical, Jay.”

“That’s what you wear in the snow though. I thought you’d be comfy,” Jay said as he stood to his feet and helped her up.

“Thanks,” she shook some of the snow out of her suit, “Been keeping outta trouble?”

Jay shrugs and she punches his bicep. He smiles and retorts, “Mostly, yeah.”

“Good. Though next time it should be ‘Absolutely, yeah.’”

She hugs his arm and they stroll together through the empty street. She rests her head against his shoulder, nuzzling into him to keep warm. He takes off his coat and drowns her in it.

“Jay, you really shouldn’t. You’re gonna catch a cold or hypothermia or something.”

Jay smiled and kissed her forehead. The smell of fresh mint fluttered around his nose. He inhaled and captured the fragrance, renewing the scent of her hair that Jay had tried, and failed, to recreate over the past year and a half. Her eye caught the deep scar that snakes along Jay’s neck and up the back of his head. Her fingers gently reached to explore the indents and curves.

“I’ll be alright,” Jay interrupted and pulled her hand away.

“It wasn’t your fault. It was a bad storm. I should’ve-”

“Come on.” Jay pulled her along without entertaining the conversation further.

The two wandered aimlessly through the neighborhood Jay was raised in. Before losing his license and moving back in, Jay seldom mentioned, or visited, this place. He was never one to talk much about himself; he wasn't one to wear his life on his sleeve. Yet, a small part of him always hoped someone would be interested in knowing where he'd been.

Although she was no longer shivering, she still clung to Jay's arm as her eyes examined the angles of the tiles on the roofs and the edges of the windowsills that were now soft with snow.

"Did you grow-up here?"

"Yeah. Back in the yard we were laying in." Jay's watch began to beep. It read 2:30. He silenced it then returned his gaze to her.

"It's nice, quaint. Why didn't you take me here?"

"I mean, the way you talk about back East, I just don't have that here. And my parents only moved back three years ago, so I don't know anyone anymore.

I'm hardly a memory to the ones that settled down here."

He glanced over at her and found himself floating in a tranquil blue sea, simply drifting along the shoreline. He always took solace in her eyes. Beetles could burrow under his skin and the voices could antagonize the simplest of actions, but as long as he had her, Jay would find a way to be okay.

“I’m your girlfriend. Show me around. I wanna see it.”

Jay nodded and led her down deserted streets lined with cars wrapped snug in frosty blankets. Hickory from slow-roasting fires wafted out of chimneys and meandered down driveways. The people may have been strangers, but the smell of a winter fire never changes.

Jay stopped before a slope that led down to a small iced over man-made creek. The HOA had decided to beautify a handful of empty lots around the neighborhood. They had been landscaped to look like a safe suburban walk through the woods.

“We used to have airsoft wars over there. I used to climb up the tree in the back corner and snipe.”

“Ah, I see. So you think camping is a legitimate strategy?”

Jay erupted in laughter.

“It’s a cute little creek though. I can imagine Little Jay in the dirt catching bugs and frogs, and then putting them in his little pockets for safe keeping.”

“Yeah, I caught a few big salamanders down there.”

As they continued walking, the streetlights began to wake up. Jay’s watch began to beep again, but he let it ring as Jay felt the tiny hands of a millipede crawl up his neck. It tickled his ear, then began to burrow without consent. Jay’s eyes widened, and

he casually stepped aside to slap his ear. He shuttered. She pulled his hand away from his ear and he subsided back into the calm waves, peacefully floating by.

“Your watch, Jay.” He slapped it into silence. It read 4:45.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. What’s it for?”

“Uh. My mom read in a book that I should adhere to a routine to help manage my time, so I’m not alone with my thoughts for too long, or something. It feels like running away from them though.”

Before she could speak, Jay mentioned, “There’s a school around the corner. My mom used to teach 4<sup>th</sup> grade there,” Jay gestured in the direction of the school, “It’s got a good playground.”

Whispers of old childhood friends crept into his ears as they walked toward the school. Nowadays, he wanted the companionship of the voices more than he wanted them to stop. *At least I’m not alone*, Jay would think. Some days the voices were waking dreams of old memories, but just like a dream, nightmares could creep in.

*Jaybird, you got a raider on your six.*

*Nice try, Bird. But your ass is grass.*

*Come on, fellas. Streetlights aren’t on. Another round?*

*Woah, did you guys hear-*

“Jay—,” he looked back at her, then at a tree directly before him. Jay stepped around the thin pine then gestured to the mass of green structures almost hidden behind a brick building.

“See. It’s a good one.”

She was skeptical of him. Jay was never able to hide from her when his mind was playing tricks on him, it was one of the many traits he loved about her. Her skepticism faded as they walked closer to the building. Jay peered into a dark classroom window, and silenced his beeping watch.

“I was eleven when this school opened, so I would get off the bus and walk over to help my mom grade papers.”

Jay watched as a janitor vacuumed the hall while bobbing along to music on his headphones. He wondered what songs an overweight, unkempt man in his 60s listened to that made his days bearable. Maybe he would enjoy that playlist too.

“These kids have a bunch of little stickers on their desks. Look, that one’s got an army of ladybugs,” her finger tapped the window.

Jay looked at the few centimeters of glass where her finger pressed against the window. His eyes traced her reflection, he couldn’t help but gaze at her and bask in the warmth of her voice. For 547 days, Jay hungered to be in her company once more;

even if only for the duration of a held breath. Jay's eyes wandered back to the window to see his reflection grinning at him.

“Yeah,” he muttered with his eyes locked on the reflection, “They used to let 5<sup>th</sup> graders decorate their lockers in the hall.”

“5<sup>th</sup> graders with lockers?” She shifted to better peer into the hallway, but his reflection continued to play tricks.

“Yeah. Strange, I know.”

Jay's reflection cracked his neck then placed his mitten-covered hand on the windowpane, yet Jay remained unmoved. A bead of sweat rolled down his sideburn, but froze before dripping down his jaw. The millipede continued burrowing.

“Is that clock right? It's 6:32. Your parents are probably stressed then, especially since that little game of chicken on your motorcycle. Do they still not know about—,” she turned to Jay as he was removing his mitten and extending his hand to the window. She gently wove her fingers in between his before Jay could embrace his reflection.

“Come on,” Jay's gaze broke from the window, “I thought we were gonna play on the playground.”

Jay nodded and led her to the mass of green play structures. From monkey bars to rock climbing, to five different slides, to a fireman's pole, this playground had it all.



Jay planted himself on a swing that, if swung high enough, over looked a ranch near the edge of the neighborhood.

“Wait, does that house have llamas?”

“Yeah. That’s not uncommon around here.”

“You mean to tell me...” Once again, Jay lost himself in her presence. He had no idea what she was saying, but he smiled as her hands danced around adding emphasis to her sentences.

Coming from inside a tube slide, Jay could hear screaming followed by scratching against the hard plastic. Jay jumped off the swing and sprinted to the slide, ignoring her as she called out his name. He dove in the slide and climbed up, searching for the owner of the scream. Yet, the slide was empty.

“Jay, when is your next appointment with Dr. Davis?”

“Uh,” Jay slide down the fireman’s pole beside the slide, “Tuesday. She always asks if I’ve seen you.”

“Are you going to be honest with her when she asks again?”

Jay pauses for a moment.

“Yeah.”

“Good.” She grabs his hand and checks his watch.

“You said you used to make snow-elves as a kid instead of snowmen. Let’s head back and we can build one,” Jay looked at her and exhaled heavily.

“I haven’t built one of those guys in ages,” he smiled, “The winter before we moved, I kept making igloos though.”

“Well, then fuck an elf. Let’s go build a fort,” she took off running and Jay followed suit.

The two sprinted through the snow, but both tired out as they reached Jay’s street. He leaned against a streetlight to catch his breath. A woman’s scream shattered the silence that filled the snowy streets. Without thinking, Jay found himself running in the direction of the distressed woman. He rounded the corner to see a small red coat under a black Escalade in the middle of the road. A blonde woman, no older than forty, hysterically climbed back into her SUV and sped away.

Jay’s heart stopped, yet he found himself running. He fell to his knees beside the little red coat. He swallowed hard and threw off his mittens. His hands struggled to check the pulse of a little boy whose face was now cold and unrecognizable. Jay tried to wipe away the blood and the snow with some fleeting hope that it would help; that underneath is a smiling little boy who, some day, will be okay.

“Jay—,” she rested her hand on his shoulder, but Jay couldn’t look away. He opened his mouth, but was at a loss for words.

“Jay, look at me.” Jay obeyed her command. “It’s okay.”

Jay’s eyes widened as he slowly looked back to the little red coat in his arms that was now being worn by a small dead dog.

“Do your parents know?”

Jay shook his head.

“Just about the motorcycle.”

His eyes remained on the dead dog that rested in his arms. She felt around the pockets of the coat he had given her until she found a prescription bottle stuffed with tissue, so it wouldn’t rattle.

“You have to take these, Jay. You can’t live like this.”

Jay swallowed hard. He couldn’t seem to put the dog down.

“But I’ll never see you again.”

She opened the bottle and took out a pill.

“It’s almost been two years. You aren’t supposed to see me. It was never your fault. I want you to remember that. P—,”

“I could’ve tried harder to stop you from getting on the road.”

She traced her fingers along the scar on his neck.

“Promise me that you won’t try to join me and drive into oncoming traffic again.”

Jay kept his eyes on the dog. She lifted his chin,

“Promise me, Jay.”

“I promise,” he mutters.

Jay’s eye gathered a tear. She lowered his arms until the dog returned to the snow. He looked into her eyes and floated at sea once more. She placed the pill in his palm, and kissed his forehead.

“It’s okay.”

Jay swallowed the pill. Together they laid in the street until his mitten was holding another wad of snow. After swallowing hard, he stared at the dog in the red coat, and sighed.