

Sadie

Some weekends, my mother would leave.

She would never be gone for longer than two days, leaving Friday afternoon after work and coming back Sunday evening. From what hazy details she'd give me when I asked, here's how things went:

She would get on the expressway, drive over the Goethals and onto the Turnpike South until she reached the exit where her hotel was, somewhere in New Brunswick, Rutgers country. She'd check into the same Hilton, request the same smoking room, and order room service for every meal until it was time to check out Sunday morning. Then she would take a detour further south to hit the outlets, buy herself something, and return home to greet my father, brother, and me. I wasn't sure exactly what she did, really, but my imagined weekend for her was a way for me to not feel upset about her leaving me behind.

There was a part of me that looked forward to these weekends. Those Friday evenings, my father would take my brother and me out to McDonalds and get us Happy Meals, a rare treat in a crunchy granola household like ours. Then we'd rent a movie. We had just gotten a Blu-Ray player, and I loved the novelty of skipping scenes I didn't want to see, like scary scenes or kissing scenes. We got to stay up late because, duh, no school tomorrow, even if I had piano lessons at noon the next day. It was the sort of bliss one felt when they were misbehaving, even if it was parent sanctioned. Only in the morning, when I would not see my mother doing the Times crossword at the kitchen table, would my heart hurt. I'd play scales with Mrs. Calloway and feel the contents of my stomach rise and fall with the notes in her just slightly out-of-tune piano. I'd look at her

old fat dog Sandy and how my mother always made fun of her when she was the one taking me to lessons. *Do they feed her rocks or what*, she'd say, gravelly tone in my ear, and I'd giggle too loudly. I'd smell that steel wool smell that came from Calloway's kitchen sink just a few feet away. I'd feel lonely, more lonely than I'd ever felt before, a loneliness that I heard in my father's voice when he said, *She's gone away for the weekend, but she'll be back Sunday night.*

By the time I got around to telling Sadie, the first and fourth and seventeenth time, these solo retreats had stopped. One night, over a bottle of Georgi and a split joint, I told her that I didn't blame my mother, not really. She just needed a break, you know? The idea of her life was a lot for her. She had wanted to be a musician, "just like you, Sadie," I would say, watching her smile around the drag she was taking. My mother hadn't taken her own adulthood into account when she signed people's yearbooks or drank in the woods or took the bus upstate back in her own teenage years. She hadn't considered the weight of children, a husband, a house tying her down to the earth. In my punch drunk stupor, the enormity of my mother's choices loomed over me as if the burden were my own.

"I don't think any of us do," Sadie would say after a long exhale, a failure at making smoke rings yet again. "I think it just happens to us. Like it happened to her."

"What happens to us?" I would pass the bottle to her and study the way dusk's last light cast shadows on her face, coloring her Monroe piercing so it looked like its namesake's actual mole.

She would flick the joint, take a swig, cringe. "Being a woman."

I never understood why Sadie liked hearing that story so much, asking for a repeat at every sleepover. Perhaps it had to do with her own familial circumstances. Her own mother wasn't much of a mother, changing husbands like changing clothes, never really home. She and her brother were essentially left to fend for themselves. She was a constant fixture at my home during our childhoods and into our adolescent years. My mother welcomed her readily, another daughter. Sadie would stare at her faded, shoddy tattoos, my father's initials on her left bicep with a skull and crossbones. Sadie's own mother was the opposite, prim and proper, concerned with appearances. She was unaware that her daughter was regularly spending her time with the child of two former alcoholics in their messy home, history riddled with the uncertainty of a mother's coming and going.

Regardless of her reasons for wanting to hear it, she liked the ending the best. At the end of the story, my mom always came back.

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Sadie's thirteenth birthday had been a school day, and my mom was allowing us to have a very rare Friday night sleepover. The fifteen minute walk from school to my house seemed to take forever, with all the excitement buzzing through our veins. We chattered happily as we walked down the main thoroughfare, a large, long tree-lined two way street with an elementary school directly across the street from our junior high school. Next to the squat grade school building was a run-down playground with lead-painted wood and metal jungle gyms that we always cut through to save time. Today, as she talked rapid fire about our awful math teacher who pulled her pants up to her boobs, I noticed her backpack was bulky, probably full of clothes. We had discovered the last

time she slept over that she no longer fit into my clothes. I had ignored the pang of jealousy in my stomach when I saw that her curves could not be contained in my boxy pajamas. She borrowed one of my brother's shirts, but now apparently brought her own stuff. Everyone always thought Sadie was the older of the two of us, even though I was. I wondered when I was going to bloom beyond my current confines. My mother was a slender woman, but still had breasts, a slope to her waist. My body was still that of a child, my slight stature adding to the illusion of me being eleven years old as opposed to my actual age of thirteen.

We quickly walked through the park and down the street parallel to the main road. I was so preoccupied with my thoughts that I collided with Sadie as we came to a stop in front of a house. It was a normal house, the only single house on this particular block, with false brick inlay and a heavily slanted roof to let rainwater easily slide down. There was a well worn set of front steps leading to the door, a warped brown wood that was covered with a storm door. The grass in front was decently kept, a little patchy in places. The sign peppered with bird shit anchored in the front lawn read, "Dr. Anthony Genovese, OB/GYN," with the phone number of the practice below his official title. It was in elegant typeset, so unlike the Comic Sans of my pediatrician. My mom said I didn't have to start going to the gynecologist until I had had sex.

"What's up?" I asked.

"My mom says they do...abortions there," Sadie said, voice dropping to a whisper on the word 'abortion' despite the fact that there was no one around.

Sometimes, when I would sneak past my dad to get a late night snack, he'd be watching MSNBC in front of the lone television in our house. Mom would be beside him,

knitting, not really paying attention to what was going on on the TV, but his attention was rapt. Sometimes, I would stop and try to slow my breathing so they didn't know I was there watching with them. Lately, all the anchors had been talking about was the Supreme Court, how its conservative majority was about to change many laws for people, including something they called "reproductive rights." All I cared about at that time was the possibility of gay marriage being repealed, because I had gay classmates and I wanted them to have equal rights. I didn't exactly understand what fell underneath reproductive rights until this moment, standing next to my best friend, staring at a sign for a place that I wasn't sure even really performed abortions.

"Oh yeah?" I said, trying to sound neutral.

"We've driven by it a few times and she's always like, 'oh he pretends he's just a regular gynecologist but he's an abortion specialist,' whatever that means. Goes on these crazy rants about how it's wrong. It gets her so worked up, and then Jonathan tells her to shut up, and they argue and I tune it out and - Shit, I'm sorry -"

"No, it's fine, it's no worries," I said. She never got worked up like this. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. It's just weird seeing it up close is all. Just looks like a regular place." She paused, pursing her lips. "Would you ever get an abortion?"

This was not something I had ever considered. I had never even kissed a boy. Sadie supposedly kissed a boy when she went away to summer camp that past summer, but I wasn't sure if I believed her. Then there was the issue of getting pregnant. Pregnancy was something that happened to people way older than us. Despite my typical middle school fascination with sex, I couldn't even imagine doing that with someone.

My own naked body embarrassed me in our bathroom mirror when I got out of the shower every day; the idea of a naked boy both thrilled and terrified me. My mother had made it clear that when my brother and I started having sex that we could tell her about it, but I didn't know what she would do if I were to get pregnant. I thought she'd maybe be okay with that, try and work on a solution just me and her.

I settled on, "I think so."

Sadie was already walking away. "Me too, I think. Couldn't tell my mom though."

I tripped up a little bit trying to catch up with her long strides. Another beautiful, wonderful, annoying thing about Sadie is that she was tall. Even though she already looked like she was in high school, I couldn't imagine her having sex either. Like me, she was in this weird, alien in-between space. I had seen glimpses of her naked body when we were changing together at my house, and nothing seemed to fit her frame yet. She had just gotten her braces off and still had to wear a retainer. She had a huge collection of stuffed animals adorning her room, all precisely arranged on her bed before she left the house every day. She had shoplifted a thong from Victoria's Secret the other day when we'd been allowed to go to the mall, but she was too nervous to wear it. Adulthood felt a million years away for both of us.

When we got home, my mother gave us free rein of the pantry and the cable TV for Sadie's birthday. We changed into pajamas right away and pulled out all of our favorite treats, putting on a D-list horror movie from my brother's collection. Mom and Dad were playing Simon and Garfunkel songs and harmonizing behind their closed bedroom door. Sadie pretended that she didn't care, but every so often I would catch her looking away from the TV and toward the door, listening for something she recognized. Even

over the sound of a bottle blonde getting stabbed to death by the movie's killer, I could hear the strain of my parents' tangled voices.

When I left my home and my family, I was no more than a boy in the company of strangers, in the quiet of the railway station, running scared...

They were taking a while to get through the song, since Dad was often off with the harmony and Mom made them stop every time. Sadie closed her eyes and smiled, small and comforted by their singing. I was used to it by now, but it made me happy when she was at peace. I didn't know why, but I chose not to question it. There were some things that just made sense, like Sadie and me having sleepovers and horror movies on TV and my parents loving each other through song.

"Wasn't your mom in a band?" Sadie asked.

"Yeah, my dad's old band put up an ad for a singer, wanting a guy, but she showed up. Love at first sight, or that's what they tell me."

"Did she - uh, you know - ?" Sadie asked, and gestured to her stomach. Something about this gesture made our conversation from before turn my own stomach sour.

"She was like twenty five when she had my brother," I said, shrugging. "So like, sort of?"

"I'm never gonna have kids." We both laughed, her probably at her indignation, me in relief. Her train of thought from before seemed to have disappeared.

"Me neither," I said confidently.

We lounged in companionable silence for a while as the movie on the screen became more and more incomprehensible. My parents had moved on from *The Boxer* and

started singing Cecilia, which meant that I had missed my favorite part of the song in my absorption. It felt like ages before Sadie spoke again.

“You like Joe Ciarvdone, right?”

Sadie’s voice, which was never small, was so tiny in that moment. She for sure liked Joe. A few days ago, we had looked up our horoscopes in an issue of Seventeen she stole from Duane Reade; hers, Gemini, said that a chance to hang out with her crush on the 17th. That was three days away. Probably why it was on her mind. I grabbed a Twizzler from the bag on the table and shoved it into my mouth to buy me some time. I couldn’t deny that I did like him. He was a year older than us, hung around with Sadie’s brother Jonathan’s friends. His hair was long and cut just like Kurt Cobain’s, and he had the same stumbling swagger, a cigarette always hanging from his mouth. When we were all at her house at the same time, the boys would sometimes take pity on us and let us play cards with them. She’d sit up really straight and perky, batting her eyelashes and looking over at him in a way she probably thought was cute, but looked sort of deranged.

In my favor, Joe talked to me more since I was better at the games they played. The prior week, he had complimented my poker face, leaning over the table for a high five from me. It had taken me a minute to realize he was talking to me, and I sheepishly reached back to high five him, blushing. His friends had teased me, calling me a space case, and Sadie and Joe had come to my defense. He high fived her too, for good measure, but mine felt more special. The smile he shot in my direction was crinkled at the eyes, showing the dimples in his cheeks, sincere. Maybe, maybe, just maybe he cared about me.

However, the truth was plain and simple: she was the prettier of the two of us, whether she knew it or not. It didn't matter how great my personality was - with guys, that counted more than anything. Even behind glasses, her amber eyes were soft and kind. Her features lended themselves to the Jamaican side of her heritage rather than the Irish side, and her skin, normally closer to a white complexion, was a healthy bronze due to the gloriously sunny June we'd had so far. Her hair, dark and normally unruly, was up in two little Sailor Moon buns. Her curves were accented well by the clothes she had brought, a tank top with a cute lavender bra underneath and yoga pants. (My own pathetic, practically concave chest was swimming in my brother's old Reel Big Fish shirt.) In that moment, I knew any pursuit of Joe was a lost cause. Even if Joe and I had our conversations over cards, my scrawny body and my messy auburn hair were not as appealing as Sadie's exotic appearance. Her eyelashes were longer than mine, her clothes better fitting, her laugh more feminine, less braying. Seventeen Magazine told Aries girls like me to be good friends that month. It was better to relent.

"Not if you do," I said, finally looking at her.

Her smile broke out into a grin, and I couldn't help but grin too. From their bedroom, I heard my parents finally nail the harmony of the last refrain of Cecilia.

Jubilation! She loves me again...

The first slug of beer on a night in was always the fizziest. Joe was already on his third as I got used to the bubbles in my throat. It was Gennesee Cream Ale, twelve dollars for a pack of eighteen, and his preferred poison, the easiest for him to get at age twenty at the local 7Eleven with his shoulders squared and his stubble grown in. I knew

jack shit about beer, but it was easier to slam back than others, which is all we were interested in doing. His cloudy eyes were a little bloodshot from the joints we'd been passing back and forth, his pretty pink lips slick from the onslaught of liquid. I wanted to bite those lips until they were swollen, run my hands through that messy black hair, but I was feeling too lazy to get up. Maybe he could come to me, get his hand up my shorts and really get the night started. Wishful thinking.

"Whatcha thinkin' 'bout?" Joe asked, smirking. It was the first thing either of us had said in nearly an hour, both of us in entirely different zones.

"How cute you are." Only partially a lie.

"Aw, sweet." His voice was a low drone, almost devoid of emotion if I didn't know better. Right now, it was brimming with mischief. He gestured toward the can in my hand. "You still on your first? Really?"

"I drink slow, you know that!" I said, pouting. "We've been smoking all day. Give a girl a break here."

He scoffed. "You can do better than that, c'mon."

"What if I want to savor it, huh? What about that?" I nudged his knee with my foot, both of us seated facing each other on opposite ends of the couch.

He shook his head and said, without thinking, "Sadie would've been on her fourth."

The betrayal tore my insides in two, fragile like paper, and he wouldn't lower his gaze. He had broken an unspoken rule in the midst of his highness and drunkenness - never speak her name. Joe had never been the same after her death, a shell of his former self, if such a thing could exist. We naturally gravitated toward each other after...

well, after, picking up the ashes of everything, but there was always a layer between him and me that I couldn't penetrate, even two years after the fact. There wasn't a day that went by where he wasn't high or drunk in some way. It's what she would have wanted, he said. But I knew that wasn't true somehow. Joe seemed to forget that when he lost her, I lost her too. She was my friend first.

"Yeah, I guess she would have." I attempted a smile. He attempted one back.

I felt my eyes well up with tears, lifting the can to my mouth to hide as much of my already red face as I could. I closed my eyes and started to chug, chug, chug. The buildup of gas in my throat was almost too much to take, but it was so worth the change in the air. Even with no vision, I could sense him grinning.

He coughed, clearing his awful lungs. "Yeah, that's it. That's more like it. Let me get you another."

I opened his eyes just as he slid off the couch, catching sight of his hip bones peeking out from above the waistband of his boxers. He was getting thinner as the days went on, bizarre for someone whose diet consisted of chicken nuggets and deli sandwiches, nothing home cooked. (His oven, just behind my head in his cramped apartment, held art supplies.) It took me a second to register the Genny thrust in my face by his waiting hand, the relaxed set of his long, thin face, something jovial dancing in his eyes where there was sadness for Sadie before.

I took the beer and cracked it open in what felt like one fluid motion, my body not processing what it was doing until the liquid was going down my throat. In that moment, for some reason, I thought of my mother at twenty. She was already dating my father at this point, the man she would marry, whose children she would bear. Joe went back to

his sketchpad, his fingers already stained black with charcoal. His mother liked me more than she had liked Sadie, but she masked her racism well when Sadie had been alive, all *how are you sweetie* and *no no please have a seat you're a guest and you make my son so happy*. When she was talking to me, she said the same things, but she meant them. The whiteness of my features and name guaranteed that, regardless of my politeness.

“She drank until the very end, didn’t she?” Leave it to Joe to not leave well enough alone. “Even after she found out. Remember the night before?”

“She nearly downed the whole thing by herself.” I cackled. “Celebrating the freedom of not damaging any developing minds. Other than her own, of course.”

That went over Joe’s head. A lot of things did, but it wasn’t lack of intelligence - just perpetual wet brain. It never used to be like this. Not before the re-election, when he had had his hopes up for genuine change with the establishment. Not before so many laws had been overturned. Not before things had been made more difficult. Not before what became inevitable, what shouldn’t have been inevitable had this country not hated its own people so much.

“Got you, though. At least that’s something.”

At least that’s something. I knew he didn’t mean anything by it, but it still stung. I was always going to be second best, no matter how many years passed since her death. Her death was not her fault, but she left me behind with someone who didn’t love me. Not that he could help it. I wasn’t sure if he loved anyone or anything anymore. I wasn’t sure if either of us did. I think we were just going through the motions.

I took another sip of beer. It tasted falsely sweet. Good. Right.

The day before Sadie had the procedure, there was a blackout. It was the height of summer, brutal August rearing its ugly, sweaty head. The cat had died two months prior. Sadie's brother had moved out for the umpteenth time. Sadie's mother was on a cruise with husband number four, the deep irony of her Christian values coming crisscrossing with her desires for wealth. Sadie had been alone for weeks. She used what little was left of her phone's battery to call Joe, and they descended on my house like vampires looking for a fresh kill. I was similarly alone, my brother back at college for RA orientation and my parents down the shore for the day. I look back now and think they were fools to trust us, but times were different then.

Joe pulled out a huge bottle of Svedka from his backpack, along with a two liter of coke. The plan was a little party to loosen Sadie up before she went to the only specialist left in the county. He wasn't even technically supposed to practice, but he did it out of that house that Sadie and I used to pass on our walks home from school. Anthony Genovese was still in the running. It had only been a matter of time before even a more liberal state like ours took on the agenda of the federal government.

"This guy's good." Joe rubbed Sadie's back with one hand while flicking his cigarette with the other. "My cousin used him when she got into a bad situation. He used to do it before the ban, remember?"

"You really think he'll do a good job?" Sadie asked. We hadn't felt young for a long time, but in that moment, she looked seventeen.

“I’m positive, babe,” Joe said. “We’d go somewhere else if he wasn’t. I don’t care how far I’d have to drive, if I didn’t know this guy was good, we’d drive until we hit the next best place. You, me, and Lizzie. Right, Liz? Ultimate team.”

“That’s right,” I said, holding out a fist. They both bumped fists with me and we all drew our hands back and made exploding sounds with our mouths.

“Leave it to me to get knocked up when the Supreme Court overturns the fucking law,” Sadie said with a bitter laugh.

I found myself laughing and rubbing her knee. “Drink up. It’s not gonna matter tomorrow anyway. No young minds to damage.”

She grinned. “I’m not even far along enough for a mind to be damaged. It’s essentially a jellyfish.”

Joe sucked in his lips and floated his hand up in a waving motion, imitating a jellyfish. “Glug, glug, I’m the baby, what’s up guys…” he said in a voice that sounded like Goofy.

Sadie threw her head back and laughed, really genuinely laughed. I did too. It wasn’t that funny, but anything to lift the mood was worth smiling about. “Jellyfish don’t have mouths.”

“In my mind they do,” Joe said indignantly, narrowing his eyes and pouting. We all were still before a second before bursting into laughter again.

Sadie gulped down what was left in her Solo cup and poured herself another big portion of the vodka. This was substantially better than any swill we usually drank, but its quality was wasted on us. Things felt impenetrable then, like we were invincible. Sadie would pop in, get the procedure done, pop out, we’d watch a movie and all live to

hang out another day. Maybe we'd watch Juno for the irony and Sadie would pretend to not have a weird crush on Jason Bateman. August would bleed into September, our senior year. Joe was already out of high school and working, so he'd be around when we got out of school. We'd graduate and maybe all go to school and Joe and Sadie would get married and I'd find someone, maybe. The world felt possible to conquer in my drunken haze.

The next day, we all went to the clinic together. The ride to the office was less than ten minutes by car, but it felt like an eternity. We had our Uber drop us off two blocks away from where we were going for fear of retribution; the driver chain-smoked and talked about his sick dog the whole time. Sadie's normally delicate hands gripped both of ours like a bear trap, long fingers pulsing with fear. When we rounded the corner and onto the street where we were given instructions to go, there it was, the house I passed every weekday on my walk home from elementary school. It still looked the same, except for a tall plastic gate that now was on the side of the house. As we approached, we read the words that we were instructed by Joe's cousin to read and follow.

"All deliveries, please use side door." We opened the gate and went in.

I wish I could say there was something that would tip me off that something was amiss about the whole thing. It just felt like an ordinary urgent care visit, really, so nothing felt amiss, but I wish I could have stopped it all. I wish I could take Sadie by the hand now, tell her she could live at my house, raise the baby, give it up for adoption, anything but this. It was easier before, when our parents were younger. None of us wanted her to be in this position - she and I were seventeen, Joe was eighteen. Nothing

could have told us that anything was wrong. We signed her in. Joe and I agreed we would stay and take her home. At least she had us.

I felt the volume of the ticking clocks, the crying teenagers that weren't us, the harried housewives' wearisome worrying, the radio playing musak over the speakers someone had jerryrigged in the parlor and disguised with some fake foliage rise and cloud over me. I looked around to see who was in the waiting room. A few teenagers like us, but mostly women in their twenties, thirties, forties. Aside from the receptionist and the doctor, Joe was the only guy around. I felt sorry for the other women here. What were their stories?

"Hey," Joe said, his eyes soft. They were a pretty slate blue color, matching the soft flannel he wore over his ratty Pink Floyd shirt. I'd stared into them a million times in the span of our friendship, but this was one of maybe a handful of times I was really allowed to appreciate them, to drink in his stare meant only for me.

"Hey," I said back. "You okay?"

He quirked his lip and sighed. "I'm a little nervous. Like, I know she'll be okay. He's done this a million times. Samantha, my cousin, she was okay in a day or two. It's gonna be the same thing with Sadie. She's just...I love her so much, you know?"

"Me too," I said. "Joe...did you want her to do this?"

Joe paused — not angry, just contemplative. "I don't think there was really much of a choice. I think maybe in the future we can have one, but not now. You gotta be an aunt when you're ready, too."

I nodded and smiled. My feelings for him in my even younger years had not necessarily grown stronger so much as morphed into a warmth that settled in my chest

rather than a fire in my belly. His angles were juxtaposed with all the curves of the other figures in the room, the way his body settled in the chair was vibrating with a different kind of tension. One of pure concern for another rather than himself. Feeling brave for a moment, I interlaced our fingers together. He squeezed my hand and smiled, eyes looking a little watery. I squeezed back.

I don't know how much time passed between that moment and when the doctor exited the OR. All I remember was a companionable almost-silence with Joe, hand in hand, as we both stared at the OR door and bit the nails of our unoccupied hands, waiting for any sign of...well, anything. Every once in a while, one of us would squeeze the other's hand. The comfort of that feeling got me through every second, every passing minute, just waiting for that pulse of reassurance or the lull that was a cue to shoot it right back. I felt close to him in a way that felt private, and I knew that when Sadie got out, I wouldn't tell her about this moment. This moment, I would keep just for me. This moment where I could pretend, indulge my most juvenile of fantasies, that this unattainable boy was mine. I wasn't even sure if I intellectually wanted that, but in my bones, I did.

When Dr Genovese came out, we both stood to attention. He was a tall man, fit and handsome even in his scrubs, probably about forty five years old. He still had his mask over his head and his hair covering too, and there was blood on the front of his scrubs. His eyes were dark and full of concern. When we walked forward, he held up his hand as a way to stop us.

"Please, have a seat," Dr Genovese said.

“I don’t want to.” I gripped Joe’s hand for dear life and looked up at him before looking back at the doctor. Joe was staring him directly in the eyes. He usually slouched when he was hanging around with us, but Joe at his full height was imposing, even with his skinniness. The doctor sighed and closed his eyes, opened them again. Joe stayed firm. “Anything you have to tell us, you can tell us right here, right now.”

“Unfortunately, due to some complications during the operating process...”

I was frozen to the spot, unable to process anything. A noisy world was now dead silent except for the blood rushing in my ears. My best friend, just...gone? Just like that? These people were supposed to be professionals. How could they let this happen? How could she die? This was 2019; people weren’t supposed to die from abortions. Joe’s hand was gripping mine so tightly that I was afraid he was going to cut off the circulation. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to see her just yet, but Joe was speaking for the both of us. I pressed myself against his side for the sheer warmth of his furnace like body.

I looked up at him to see tears already streaming down his face. I had never seen him cry before, not in all the years that we had all been friends. I tugged on his hand. When he didn’t respond, I grabbed his shoulders and spun him to face me. In one fluid motion, I stood on my tiptoes and wrapped my arms around him to try and quell the shakes. He immediately dissolved into my shoulders, stooping down so I could have my feet flat on the ground, and began to sob loudly. I rubbed at his back, unable to form tears in my eyes. What was wrong with me? Why could I not cry, shout, scream for the loss of my friend? It was surely sinking in for Joe, the energy thrumming through his body that of resigned pain rather than the cold fury he had been projecting earlier. I floated in and out of perception as I held his shaking body in mine, whispering sweet

nothings as I tried desperately to distract the awful din in my mind. My brain tuned into the too-loud headphones of someone listening to music just beside us, having turned it up to escape our cacophony. I recognized it as America by Simon and Garfunkel, and of all the lyrics I could have heard:

I'm empty and aching and I don't know why...counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike, they've all come to look for America...