

Cold Feet

It was just a sock. One bundled sock hidden in the depths of the drawer, as innocent as the grass that covers a landmine. One light brush of the ribbed fabric against the side of my hand; one touch that didn't give as easily as a sock should. The sharp poke from the edge of a box. There were puzzling thoughts, and a blind grab, and the landmine exploded. Curiosity kills us all.

My feet were so cold. It was January for God sakes, and although our shoddy furnace was on max, screeching and complaining from the hall closet, the thermostat refused to inch above sixty-two. It figures. Unpredictable Louisville weather.

And since it was Louisville in January, our tiny apartment was encompassed in several feet of glittery snow, which I had refused to trek out into to do laundry. Thus why I was looking for socks in his drawer. Thus why I was now holding the small, black box I had wedged from the worn fabric, and why I was standing frozen like the icicles that clung so desperately to our windows.

I didn't want to open that box. There was nothing in the world I wanted to do less than open that box. I knew what I would find; why did I have to do this to myself?

But keeping it closed wouldn't change what it contained. I wasn't Schrödinger, and it sure as hell wasn't a cat in that box.

Regardless of why I did it, I did. I lifted the lid, my jaw tight and insides churning, and there it was. The circular metal of the band shone, its centerpiece poised perfectly upright. I forced my lungs to expand, though they resisted. I stared at it, my heart speeding up. It glittered and sparkled shamelessly for God and everybody. It glared at me like I glared at it, and I felt like a brave child opening up the closet door, only to find that the monster inside was real.

I slammed the case shut, hiding the damn thing from view, and wrapped it back in the sock. I stepped back and leaned against the bed, trying to breathe around the giant knot in my throat. The questions on my tongue felt like bricks. When? Where? How?

Why?

We were normal that night; rather, he was normal, and I tried to be. We settled in, take-out boxes placed jauntily on the table, his arm resting gently on the back of the couch. I tried to mimic his relaxed, jovial posture, but continuously failed. So I sat there, awkwardly positioned, my mind a million miles away.

I hadn't asked about the ring. I mean, how could I?

I watched him when he thought I wasn't looking, noticing all his little habits I had memorized by now. The way his eyes crinkled up as he laughed at the nameless comedy we were watching. How he ran his hand through his sandy curls as he concentrated, his left hand that was still blank, like a check waiting to be cashed in for commitment.

He just looked so comfortable, so at ease with himself, and me, and us. So content was he to tattoo our left hands with miniature shackles that were supposed to be weightless, yet threatened to drag me under. Surely he felt some of this too, right?

As I stared, he turned to me and smiled, like nothing was happening.

It's not that I didn't love him; no, that was incredibly far from the truth. I loved and trusted him more than I'd ever loved or trusted anyone. But sometimes, for reasons we may never understand, that's not enough. And the truth was I could sooner name you ten distant galaxies, and all the stars they contained, than look into his eyes and tell him "yes" when he asked me that question.

Our love was fragile. If love is a house, then ours was a two-story Victorian, beautiful on the outside with a hole in the second floor. And marriage was just putting a rug over the hole and expecting no one to get hurt. But eventually, one day, someone will step wrongly and fall through that hole, and the other one will be left staring at the open wound in the floor, wondering what the hell happened to the rug.

Our love was quietly broken; our love wasn't the kind that could slay the dragons of the real world. It was no hero. It never had been. Yet we pretended, playing the parts like children dressing in their parents' clothes, because we were afraid of anything else.

I returned his smile and slid closer to him on the couch, tucking my freezing feet up underneath me. I rested my head on his shoulder, and tried not to get sick.

We'd met just over two years ago, in our senior year at the University of Louisville. I was finishing up a journalism degree, and on the brink of shedding my Minnesota roots and becoming the confident, independent, and brave woman I'd always aspired to be. He was a secondary education major, with a sunlit smile and a southern Indiana twang on his tongue. We met in the library café on the day our country elected a new president, and ended up talking all night. I was in love before we even had our second date, as was he. We fell hard and fast, diving head first into cold water. With his heart open wider than the blue sky, he'd loved me so completely, so unlike anyone had before; and I, well I give him my entirety.

The problem with the past is that you can't go back to it, no matter how hard you try. We were so young and vivacious then, so utterly alive. We talked constantly of traveling the world together, joining the Peace Corps, and living in Greece. We made never-ending bucket lists on

scraps of paper, and dreamed of the day we would cross off the last one. It was going to be amazing, and we were going to be together.

But then we graduated, and the financial burden of the real world slapped us in the face. We delayed those pipe dreams and took the jobs we could, moving into an apartment in the Old City, and here we'd been for all these years: still in these jobs, still in this apartment, and still together.

And I still loved him. I did. I loved him from the time I woke up until I went to sleep at night. I loved him now, as I watched him brushing his teeth in the dim light of the bathroom. But here we were, two and a half years since we'd made those promises, and I was still waiting on them to come true. I wanted to travel, to join the Peace Corps, to see Greece. I wanted to leave Louisville and never come back.

He, however, was settled. He had a great job at the local high school that was building his tenure, and he loved his students. And he loved me, and our little apartment in Louisville, and he wanted marriage and a family. And I had tried to tell him, and myself, that everything was okay, that it was fine, because that's what I wanted too.

But if I knew anything for certain as he leaned over to give me a minty kiss goodnight, it was that I was lying. Every day that we continued this domestic dance, I was lying to him. I was lying to the person next to me, and lying to the person in the mirror.

And he knew. I saw the hurt in his eyes when he thought I wasn't looking. I felt the pain and worry he thought he was hiding from me.

There had been a time, nearly a year ago, when we had discussed the subject, and made our way through the arguments that ensued. Eventually though, we turned a blind eye and pretended it didn't matter, because we were scared. We had come too far, we were too familiar,

and change meant pain. But even if you close your eyes when you pull the trigger, someone is still going to get hurt.

The truth doesn't like to be kept quiet, and right now, in our darkened bedroom, the truth was a roaring monster that was devouring me from the inside out.

I rolled over and closed my eyes.

I opened them again a measly two hours later, feeling wide awake and terrified. I'd had a dream during my doze, a nightmare of white satin and ribbons and suffocation and demons escaping from my mouth. I stared up at the dark ceiling, trying to breathe, trying to calm down, but it was no use. These satin sheets were suddenly burning my skin, and the few inches of bed between his sleeping frame and mine seemed to stretch for miles. Panic engulfed me. I sat upright, trying to quietly catch my breath.

What is it about the night that makes us so irrational?

I sat there for a moment, gulping down air and the truths that were coming with it. I was a liar, lying about how I felt about him and our relationship. I had always, quietly, judged him as the anchor to my sailing ship, the one thing holding me back, but I saw now that I was wrong. He was just a man who loved me, a man who yearned for more than I was willing to give. And I had become nothing but the thorns slicing open his hands as he tried to pick the rose. I was hurting him, and this knowledge hurt me.

In that moment, a sense of relentless loathing seeped into every corner of my heart. I was utterly disgusted by my own emotions. The tears came then, as they do, and soon I was drowning.

Silently, I slipped from bed, the rain pouring on my face. Lost in the depths of my own guilt, my hand was around the suitcase from the closet before I even realized what I was doing. I stared, eyes wide in disbelief at the luggage I held. Was I really going to do this? Was I this woman?

I closed my eyes and listened to his soft snoring across the room. He loved me so much; he was so good to me. And yet, my hands moved of their own accord, laying the case over and quietly unzipping it.

He was too good for me, and I didn't deserve him.

You never see the end of a relationship coming until it's staring you in the face.

I once read in college a quote that said, "This is the way the world ends; not with a bang but a whimper." And as I stared at the disheveled, tear-stained woman I saw in the bathroom mirror, I had never understood that quote better. But she refused to meet my eyes, refused to comment on this knowledge or answer the thousands of questions racing through my mind. All I could see in that reflection was the face of a coward, one who refused to face the truth: that the one she loved could not give her the life she wanted, and she could never settle for his. I was not a brave woman, but a scared, selfish little girl running from the future. I turned off the light, unable to watch myself any longer, and opened the door.

Stepping back into the dark bedroom, I approached his sleeping silhouette. He was on his back, his hand drooping lazily over his rising and falling chest. I closed my eyes so tightly until stars appeared, trying to grasp the finality of what I was doing.

Was this really it? Was I really going to just walk away?

I picked up the suitcase, hand shaking. How could I do this? But then again, how could I stay? How could I continue this façade now that I'd admitted the truth to myself?

I gripped the handle tightly. A small part of my heart screamed then, yearned for him to hear me and wake up, for him to demand an explanation. But on he slept. I thought to wake him myself, to talk to him, but I couldn't. I couldn't face him like this. I couldn't watch his eyes as I broke his heart.

With this thought, I made to leave, but in an ironic twist, my cold feet became solid ice. Unmovable. So I stood there, my breath shallow and eyelashes wet, watching him sleep.

I tried not to think of how he would feel in just a few hours, when he reached out to find I was gone.

I wish I could say that I stayed. I wish I could say that I dropped the suitcase and got back into bed, snuggling close and whispering apologies. I wish I could say that we talked and he wiped my tears and it all worked out in the end. That we made it work.

But I can't. I can't, because in that moment, I was scared. In that moment, our love was too weak to support the lies I graciously handed out. In that moment, I couldn't hurt him anymore.

And in that moment, the ice holding my feet in place melted, and I did what all cowards do.

I ran.