

# Meaningless

1

“You know. Everything is meaningless,” she said.

We were walking back to our dorms after a light meal at the café down the street. The sun was starting to paint the sky a deep purple and the sweltering air felt like it was prickling my skin. It was always like this after a few days of rain. The heat would settle in waves, like it was radiating from the asphalt beneath us.

She was walking a bit faster than I was. Her long hair brushed against my arm and shoulder. Every time the breeze flirted with her hair, I could smell her shampoo.

Strawberries.

“Why do you say that?” I said.

She didn’t say anything for a while.

“I don’t know yet. I’m still trying to find out.”

“And you’re saying it like it’s a fact.”

“Shut it. I wanted to try sounding deep for once. Humor me. Just for a little.”

“How long is a little?”

She turned around and threw a light punch at my chest. I smiled. She smiled. She turned around again.

By then, she was walking ahead of me.

2

She still isn't talking.

She's staring past me, off into the distance. At something more interesting than me. And I hate myself for it. Not that it has anything to do with me, she says. It was just her, she's promised, again and again.

Anyone else would think we were a bored couple on a date. She sips her drink, plays with her piecrust, talks about her week. I do the same, and it all feels rehearsed, like we're not really connecting with each other. I stare into her eyes, the ones that aren't seeing me.

It bothers me that I never know what she is thinking. Maybe she's thinking about what she would have for dinner tonight. Or maybe she's thinking my shirt is cute. Maybe she's thinking of something grand, like a revolution. Or just thinking about the evening sky, and the stars. It's impossible to tell. It always had.

And I knew it would lead us to this moment- our differences. She always looked past me while I was stuck in the present. Sometimes even looking backwards.

It was bound to end up this way. It wasn't too hard to figure out. Yet I hadn't given much thought to what I'd do when it really happened.

Coffee mugs clink in the background.

"So. You're going?" I say.

"Yeah."

It burns my tongue. The coffee.

"It's far. Different. You think you'd like it there?"

"I've always wanted to live somewhere busy- where I can't hear cicadas chirping at night."

"You'll hear traffic. You'll be just as annoyed."

"Maybe. But maybe not."

She nibbles on a bit of her apple pie.

"What do your parents think?"

"They're happy. They say it'll be a new start for me. That I'll find a real job."

"Mhm."

"I think you're the one not okay with it."

"Worrying about me, *now*?"

"Don't be too angry."

An exhale. I'm avoiding her gaze. "I'm not. You know that."

Then, silence. One full of unspoken what-ifs and a whirlwind of what I should have said, but couldn't.

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The first time I met her was at a bar near campus. My roommate told me that some of his friends were planning on drinking together and told me that I should tag along with him if I wanted to meet some cute girls. I wasn't so sure, but he dragged me along anyway.

She and I both ended up sitting down at the end of the table, just listening to the conversations of everyone around us. She wasn't particularly interested in anything, sipping her cocktail leisurely, and I was too nervous to approach anyone. She was resting her chin on her palm, elbows propped on the table. She had blonde streaks running through her hair, fake eyelashes, light pink lipstick and dark eyeliner. A pleasant heart shaped face, a thin smile, and eyes like grey stones, shimmering underneath a sunlit pond. I must have stared a little too much because at one point she mumbled something like "Aren't you going to talk to me, for Christ's sake. I'm bored," and I remember saying "Uh, okay." I think my voice had cracked. Later, I said goodbye to her and made a huge deal of getting her phone number only to end up finding out that we had the same ride back to our dorms. My face burned red but she had laughed and laughed and told me I was cute.

We hit it off right away, maybe because I was the type to follow, while she led me everywhere. Which makes sense in a way, even though our personalities were so different.

The movies always told us that opposites attract, but I knew that was never the case in reality. So our relationship really was strange. She dragged me along for a crazy ride, and I did things I'd never imagined I would. But I enjoyed every second of it. Until then, my life had been at a standstill. I'd never even thought of having a girlfriend, until at least after I graduated.

So she took me by surprise.

Yet everything felt so natural, from our normal banter to curling up together on the couch. Like diving blindly into the ocean, I didn't know how long we would be able to stay together. I was at that age where the moment you're in is everything and you don't think about the future. I chose to see what was in front of me, in my own small bubble, the limit of my consciousness. I wanted to *live* for once. I didn't want to worry about the consequences. For me, the time we spent together was more important than worrying about things that *could* happen. Looking back, I must have known from the start that she would leave me sooner or later- maybe that was why I acted so rashly. I wanted to claim her for myself, even if for a short while. Maybe it was just pure selfishness.

Words don't do her personality justice. It would be like describing a color using that same color.

She was always doing something, wanting to experience things, no matter how ridiculous. Like the time we went to a strip club together.

The moment I walked in, I found it hard to breathe. My skin felt sticky, and the music was blaring, and the air smelled of mildewing carpets and cheap perfume, and she was smiling and fascinated. Honestly, I found it terrifying that half naked women were dancing on a runway while men tossed them money and flowers, but she was enjoying it.

She forced me to sit next to her in a front row seat. I could feel several guys staring at me like I was a jackass for bringing my girlfriend, but I smiled back at them helplessly, because it had been the other way around.

A few times, one of the dancers would catch my eye and come over, leaning forward to give me a short but suggestive dance.

"You have a few dollars on you?" she asked me, grinning from ear to ear.

"No, don't even think about it," I said.

I ended up letting her "borrow" several twenties to exchange into singles. I watched her with a smile as she threw the money onto the runway, flirting with every girl who danced for her.

We left soon after, since they started asking her if she wanted a private show.

"That was refreshing!" She said, as we were walking to my car. I looked at her through the shallow light of the streetlamps and she was humming and skipping and beautiful.

"You'd be better going off to a male strip club," I said.

"What's the fun in that? Girls are *way* hotter than guys."

"Huh. Are you sure you're actually straight?"

"Hmm."

"It shouldn't take you that long to think about it!"

She giggled. "Calm down," she said, in between laughs. "You're so fun to tease."

"I am calm. I am not angry at all. I am just questioning my girlfriend's sexual preferences."

"Cutie."

She slipped her warm hand in mine and our fingers interlocked in the humid summer night. Her grip tightened as we walked through the formless space of the parking lot. Like she was affirming my existence. But I only realized that later.

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They must have been baking a new batch of pastries because the café floods with a heavenly scent. The aroma of cinnamon and butter wafts through the air. The corners of my lips can't help but turn up in a small smile. I glance her way and she's smiling too.

"I feel like I come here just for this," she says.

"Not the coffee?"

"Coffee's pretty good. But isn't it basically the same as anywhere else?"

"You didn't know? They use a special Colombian French roast, shipped straight from Hawaii."

"It all tastes the same to me."

"Should've guessed. You just dump sugar in it and say it's good."

"Right. And you're *so* mature since you drink it bitter."

"You're just insensitive."

"What makes you say that? I think I'm pretty sensitive."

I scoff at her. Even at a time like this, we were joking around. Bantering. Maybe our relationship was fated to be like this.

When I'd first met her, she was mysterious. Enigmatic. Unfamiliar. Surprising. She always seemed to be perfect. She was still beautiful now, but her brilliance was gone. I knew her faults and she knew mine. I knew she wasn't perfect anymore, and she knew the same about me. But that was the effect of sharing memories together with someone. Slowly, I began to understand that she wasn't an image that I'd made up in my mind. She was herself, vibrant and unpredictable, sometimes vexing, sometimes wonderful. Her existence wasn't exhilarating anymore, but my connection with her felt stronger than ever. And now we were here in the café, sitting across from each other as the afternoon sun shone through the windows and reflected off our cups. Here we were, but I wished we weren't.

"I guess I *am* pretty insensitive, now that I think about it," she says, breaking the silence. "I'm not going to pretend that what I'm doing is right. But it's the only thing I *can* do."

My gaze catches hers and I can tell she isn't lying. She's been thinking about. Hurting over it. It isn't only me agonizing over the fact that our relationship is over.

"Do you remember? I told you everything was meaningless."

"Yeah."

"I think I've found my answer."

"What is it?"

She plays with her hair, twirling and uncurling, like playing with a ball of yarn.



"Time flies, doesn't it? It seems like only yesterday I met you. It really does."

"...Yeah."

She turns to look out the window. "We're graduating in a few months. You're thinking of applying to a grad school in business, right? Then you'll think about joining a company. You'll get married soon after that and have a wonderful family. Probably live in the suburbs, in a nice middle-sized home. You've got it all planned out for yourself, no matter how much you think you don't."

It surprises me that she thinks I look ahead. Maybe we both give each other too much credit. But she's right. I was thinking about our futures together. She was looking forward in a more timeless sense. She was looking at reality.

"I'm here, close to finishing an English degree I don't care about. After this semester, I'll try to find a job and won't, you know? When I was a first year, I thought I could write professionally. I'd already lost all passion for it by my second year. I was so close to giving up, always wondering if what I did would impact anyone or if I even had a purpose in life. That's what I was thinking."

She takes a long sip from her mug, like she's hiding behind it.

"But, then I met you. And it was fun. It really was. And I'm sorry that it has to end this way. But it has to. Right now I feel like if I'll disappear if I stay with you any longer. Then you'll be left with a bitter aftertaste when I'm gone. I don't want to leave you with any bad memories. That's why I'm leaving now."

"Is it my fault? Did I do something?"

Her cold expression fades, like snow melting in the sun. "You made me think."

"I don't know whether to be happy or sad."

She shifts in her seat, crossing her legs. "I'm grateful for it. I started thinking. You know?"

*There's meaning in meaningless.*

*So it's okay if everything is meaningless.*

"That's your answer?"

"It's a shitty one, I know. Maybe I'll look back in a few years and think I was stupid. Maybe, I'll call you in the middle of the night, sobbing. I don't know. You know I'm selfish."

"You are. But so is everyone."

"You're completely wasted on me. Don't you think so?"

"I've never thought that. Not once."

She smiles faintly. Like seeing a fading star through the city lights.

"Thank you."

We sit in silence for a little longer.

"Hey, I've got to get going." Her chair slides back as she stands. "Thanks for the treat."

"Yeah." I stand up as well.

"I'll call you, okay?"

I nod.

She leaves briskly, the chimes on the door ringing.

I fall back into my seat.

An hour later, I'm still there. Listening.

### **3**

I found a pair of her socks in my drawer.

"Hey, you might want these," I say.

"What is it?"

"Your socks."

"Which ones are they?"

I can hear the embarrassment in her voice.

"The fluffy bunny ones. I never knew—"

I hear her groan,

“They’re real comfy, okay? No judging please.”

I can’t hold my laughter.

“It’s cute. No need to be so flustered.”

“Shut it. I’ll pick them up on the way back from work tomorrow.”

“That’s fine.”

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s strange.”

“What is?”

“That I’m actually leaving.”

“Don’t be having second thoughts now.”

“You sound so bitter.”

“I’m not.”

“Well, so am I then. I just thought I’d be here longer.”

“Don’t we all?”

It is early spring and there's wisps of the clouds in the sky. Like streaks of white paint. A humid breeze blows at us as we walk. Her skirt flows behind her, and she looks very chic today.

"You look like one of those celebrities. Is airport fashion really a thing?"

"I'm not dressed *that* nice."

"But I feel so awkward walking next to you. People are giving me some strange looks."

She raises her sunglasses and glares at me.

"Well maybe if you'd had the decency to wear *anything* other than some old sweats and a tee, they wouldn't be."

"Then—speedo?"

She grunts. "You're hopeless. You know that?"

"Hopeless for you."

"Stop it. You're never cheesy."

I take her hand and our sweaty fingers intertwine. "Let me be. Just for today. Hm?"

She doesn't say anything. She's hiding behind her dark frames. But she doesn't let go.

"Hey," she says. We are walking into the airport to catch her flight. The smell of jet fuel lingers in the air, gasoline fumes mixing in.

"Yeah?"

"Did you see that tree on the way here?"

"The huge willow tree?"

"Yeah."

"It was just blooming, right?"

"Mhm."

"What about it?"

"Didn't you think it was pretty?"

"I've seen enough willows in my life. Maybe I've gotten too used to them."

She giggles.

"You're right. You've lived here for what, twenty years?"

"Yeah. Something like that."

"I can't imagine staying in one place for that long."

"Is that why you're going?"

"Maybe."

We walk past the automatic doors, feel the cold air blowing into our faces. The airport is crowded with spring break travelers. We find her terminal and sit down, waiting for the line to thin out.

"I was thinking, you know? That tree really was beautiful."

I listen.

"But don't you think it's more beautiful in the fall? That vibrant red and orange, a little bit of green in the background."

"Maybe it's just you."

"Maybe. But don't you think things shine the brightest before they wither away? Like fireworks."

I don't say anything.

"Sorry. I'm talking a lot today."

"I like the sound of your voice. So it's okay."

"So it's not because you love me?"

"That too, I guess."

She hits me, a small punch to my arm.

She smiles.

I smile.

"I better get in line," she says.

"Yeah, you should." I get up to go with her. She stops me.

"Hm," she says.

"What?"

"Since I have to wait in line anyways, mind getting me some coffee? I'd love some hazelnut roast."

"I thought the flavor didn't matter to you."

She pouts at me, curling her lips into a small frown. "Hey, I really took it hard when you called me insensitive, you know? I went home and bought seven different coffee packs and tried all of them. Hazelnut roast tasted the best. Sweet and creamy."

"You *do* realize, hazelnut isn't a coffee bean, right?"

Her face burns red. "Shut it! Are you getting me coffee or not?"

I can't help but laugh. "Alright, alright."

Her eyes meet mine. Her expression is bright but there's a subdued sadness, lingering, like mist.

"Thanks."



I walk and walk, passing families and flight attendants and janitors and porters, and until I reach the coffee shop, I don't look back.

The barista asks me what would I order today? I tell her I would like a medium size, hazelnut roast coffee. She tells me they're out of hazelnuts. I tell her, it's fine, just make it a mocha. Iced. The lady says okay, that it'll be ready in just a minute.

By the time I'm back at the terminal, I don't see her anywhere. Maybe she's already waiting for me by the escalators. I look for her blonde streaks, her flashy clothes, her sunglasses. But I can't find her. Her flight, what was the number? I can't remember. It's like she's disappeared from existence.

She should be in the line. She should be waiting for me.

She would get angry at me for getting her a mocha.

"I told you to get me a hazelnut roast!" she would say, hitting my arm the whole time. I'd patiently explain there weren't any hazelnuts left. That I didn't know what else she liked, except that she liked sweets, so I just got her a generic mocha. She'd *hmp* and drink it anyways, trying to hide her smile. I would take her up to the security lines and she would hug me and kiss me and I'd run my fingers through her hair. Tell her I'd miss her. She would say the same. I'd watch her roll her bags through the x-ray machine, watch her raise her arms, walking through the metal detectors. She'd put her shoes back on, turn around, wave one last time, wagging her fingertips. I'd give her a small smile maybe, and do the same. She would turn around and walk through the terminal- until she disappeared from view. Maybe I would cry, feel sorry for myself. I'd think about her on the drive home and stop at the willow tree that didn't really look so special.

But she is already gone.

5

She had left me a letter. Somehow, she had slipped it into my sweater's front pocket. When I found it, I was drinking her iced mocha, sitting down at a table near the food court. Her familiar scrawling letters brings a small smile to my face. So she hadn't ceased to exist. She is still here. She must be on the plane by now. Maybe she's already plugged in her earphones, listening to Rachmaninoff, or maybe Nujabes. I take a sip of the sweet watery coffee.

*I am sorry. I really am. It wasn't my intention to hurt you in any way. But I guess I just happen to be selfish, until the very end. And it has nothing to do with you. Or our relationship. It's just me.*

*Maybe others had somehow felt this when they approached me. Maybe that was why you were the only one that dared to even come close to me. You walked into my life, anxious and nervous, but you were brave, and it made me so happy. I am only hoping you don't regret any of it. And I'm sorry for being so selfish. It must have been tiring for you. I am sorry for pulling you in and never giving back anything.*

*I felt like life was meaningless for the longest time. And it wasn't self-pity or anything of the sort. We talked about it in the café, but not enough. I wanted to tell you more, but it wouldn't have been fair for you. I tried to kill myself two years ago, a few weeks before I met you at the bar. I was standing on a chair, at my parents' place, a rope tied to the ceiling fan. I let go. It's embarrassing now, but the fan broke off, and I was left with a sore throat for the rest of the week. That's what I get for binging on sweets, I guess.*

*I know this isn't something you should ever deserve hearing, but I felt meaningless.*

*Did you know? The universe is expanding constantly- at the speed of light. As infinite as it seems, there's a point where space and time repeats itself- because there's only so many ways particles can be rearranged, within a finite world. That means there could be another universe out there, where you and I are laughing together, where I'm not such a bitch- maybe we'd even get married.*

*The point of this is, I felt meaningless because it didn't matter what I did. In the end it would amount to nothing in the grand scheme of things- hell, what if the reality we're in now isn't real? What if the other universes mattered more? Which "us" would be real- which wouldn't? We'd never know. And I know that's a really pessimistic view on life. But that's just how I was.*

*Then I met you. And I tried to find meaning in something as meaningless as my existence. And you were amazing. Being with you was comfortable, yet exciting. And everything seemed to fall in place, even though we didn't seem to fit the perfect picture. I always enjoyed our conversations together, and our long nights together, and the stupid things we did, and... everything. Because I love you.*

*Have I ever mentioned running away? Moving from time to time- travelling, going places? Well this is absurd, and as you know, many of my ideas are. And it really is, because there is always this urge to leave everything and run somewhere else- I can't help it. It never mattered before, but now it does, and that's why I'm sitting here writing this letter. But even as I'm saying that, I've still decided to leave you, and I know I'm going sooner than I should, and I'm sorry for that. But this is the best for us. And I don't mean to sound like I'm doing this for you, because I know I'm not. And that's just how selfish I am.*

*It's not like we can't contact each other. I have your phone number. Mine won't change. We can video chat each other. I could fly there on breaks, or maybe you could come here. We could have a long*

*distance relationship. Yet there's always this fear in the depths of my being, and it's not the fear of change. It's fear of staying the same. Because if I do, I'll become what I was before I met you. And the thought wakes me up at night, and I'm so scared I'll be meaningless again.*

*So let me change. Let me try to become something meaningful to myself. Like I said, I might be wrong. I might break one day, and maybe call you, and cry, and ask you to help me. And if I do, I just hope that you can somehow forgive me. Because it has always been about me, and I know it has. So let it be about me for this one last time. Let me try. Let me be a firework, a flower of light in the sky, before I fall back down to earth.*

*I can never express how wonderful it was to be with you—it really was.*

*Just don't be afraid, not anymore, not about everything at least. Not everyone is going to leave you the way I did. Someone is bound to stay—most of them will. I am just sorry I couldn't.*

*I hope you can find a way to forgive me someday.*

*P.S.*

*I actually bought two pairs of those bunny socks. For the both of us. Check your drawer when you get home, if you're not too busy. They're really comfortable and I really hope you like them.*