Whistling in the Dark

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**Sidewalk Kingdoms**

*(You tell me that everything will be fine and I want to believe you, because I want to believe everything you tell me. But how can everything possibly be fine when the sky above us is crumbling like asteroids and the night is so dark that I cannot see the craters and you’re walking away from me with the only umbrella, my semblance of safety?)*

A girl stands on a football field in the rain. A kite dangles from her limp hands, the tail sodden and dragging in the mud. The weather had been fine when she’d ventured forth from her house all alone, having just recently been deemed old enough for the privilege, the evening just blustery enough to be perfect for kite-flying. Now, the rain has plastered her hair to her cheeks and neck. She’s pr­­etty sure her sneakers are stained for good now.

She hears the squelching of boots and turns to see a boy with a football clutched to his chest like a toddler’s teddy bear: an interesting choice of cuddly companion. No doubt he too had been anticipating a wild romp of an evening and had been similarly foiled by the rain. Who had he been planning to play with, she wonders, all alone in this tempestuous dusk? She makes a choice then, and trudges towards him through the muck.

*(First love is a lovely delusion, like sidewalk chalk blanketing grimy city blocks, like the palaces we used to draw together on the pavement outside my stoop. We’d pour entire afternoons into crafting our kingdoms, rinsing the chalk from our hands with the garden hose and trying not to let any stray droplets splatter onto our creations.)*

The boy looks up at her approach. The rain has speckled his glasses to uselessness, making him look peculiarly freckled. She tries not to stare at the miniature rivers formed by the droplets trickling down his cheeks, then decides she doesn’t care if he thinks her rude anyways. She tries to think of some way to explain her presence in this field in the rain with a useless kite, but before she can, the boy shoves his football under his arm and rummages through his pocket. Triumphantly, he holds up a slender silver cylinder, like a pen snapped in two.

“My dad gave it to me,” he says. Evidently, he does not think introductions are necessary. He flicks a small switch and a red beam blossoms, cutting through the night like a sword through tissue paper, and suddenly he is touching the sky.

*(Have you ever felt a raindrop hit your forehead and held your hand out, convinced you were imagining it, until your sleeves and the collar of your coat were drenched through? That’s the kind of denial I’ve been living with until you approached me tonight. I didn’t see the rain clouds lurking, even though the thunder should have been a sign.)*

The girl drops her kite, her eyes wide as planets. She stumbles closer, palm extended, words forgotten. The boy offers her the cylinder, and she marvels at its brilliance between her dirt-caked fingernails. She lets the laser dart from cloud to heavy cloud, wishing the rain would cease so she could play at connect-the-dots with the stars.

 “You can reach higher with this than a kite,” the boy says. She wants to protest, but he continues. “And the sky is a perfect place to tell stories.” She watches his head tilt to the side like a question mark. His rain-spotted gaze remains transfixed on hers.

*(I cannot look at you, so I shut my eyes tight. Your voice tugs at my ears like the tin-can telephone we once constructed before remembering that our houses were a quarter mile apart. I block you out, plunging into my mind’s whirlpool, letting it sweep me away from this time and this place until my lungs are flooded with our distant innocence.)*

 “Shut up,” the girl says, then realizes that’s a terrible first impression, and anyways, he’s right about the sky. People have been telling stories there for centuries. So she takes another step forward, letting his feather-light fingertips wrap around hers. The rain makes both children blink as they tip their heads upwards. Gently, he guides her hands, the beam above them curling into words.

**Numerology**

Unlike you, I have never liked the sharp finality of numbers. Long ago, we set our lives to tick to the beat of a calendar, each day a box to check off before the inevitable. We spent two months maintaining a text conversation and exasperating everyone around us by trying to pretend we weren’t trying to flirt. When we finally realized what was happening, we had five months left to spend together, almost to the day. Five months of striding across campus, knuckles brushing, hands not quite clasped. Five months of lounging on couches, legs piled on top of each other, the hum of the television the subtle soundtrack to our lazy afternoons and contented nights. Five months of laughing as we drove, of eye contact and grins as we tried to maintain composure while working. Five months together. One hundred fifty-one days.

It wasn’t a shock when you left. Neither of us trusted a five-month relationship to survive the distance that accompanied college. We’d been counting down to it: for you, a new start in a new state, the beginning of an adventure. For me, an emptiness in my chest, a cage suddenly quiet without its songbird. Yet somehow, I didn’t expect that when you boarded that plane and the moments and minutes between us became miles across state lines, the steady ticking of days would continue. It’s been ninety-seven days since we said goodbye. The twentieth and twenty-third of each month come with a jolt now: the anniversaries of the first day we kissed and the last. Though I’ve never recorded them, the dates when you will arrive home to visit and when you will go again blaze like fireworks behind my eyelids whenever they are shut. Despite your proximity, I likely won’t even see you – I won’t have a good enough excuse. Our work will be closed; the holidays will keep us ensnared at family dinner tables. So we will quietly exist beside each other, congruent lines on a graph fated never to cross.

You have permeated every part of my calendar. 2019 will be the Year of You.

**The Nine Stages of Heartbreak**

*Shock*

I walk in the front door. My mother’s brow is furrowed. My little siblings’ heads are bent together, watching me take off my shoes, hang up my coat. My mother holds out her arms. The gentle pressure of her embrace sends fissures streaking across the eggshell-thin dam I’ve so carefully maintained as you hugged me goodbye, clinging to me like a lifeboat, as I turned my back on you and your face disappeared from my view and my life, as I listened to your door click shut and walked back to my house alone for the first time in months. And the floodwaters come rushing.

*Escape*

I buy plane tickets a few days later. The embraces of my relatives aren’t quite as world-shattering. I bury myself in novels about faraway places, trying to cram my mouth with the earth of alien heartbreaks, to water my veins with the earl grey tea my grandmother brews. But like the invasive weed that travels thousands of miles on the hem of a skirt or the sole of a shoe, you keep taking root just deep enough that I cannot pry you loose.

*Denial*

Phantom midnights where my arms stretch blindly across sheets. Drowning myself in a scalding shower to feel something like your warmth. Intertwining my fingers to see if I can trick myself into thinking my own thin, cracking knuckles could feel anything like yours. When I turn the corner onto your street or push open the door of our once-shared workplace, I keep expecting to feel a glimpse of your gaze or catch a tendril of your scent, a lingering ghost.

*Bargaining*

I make a list for myself to recite every night before bed. Do not call. Do not text. Do not reread all our old conversations, even the ones that make me feel warm inside. No sad songs. No crying. No pity. I am my own warden. My cuffs are hard and vicious, leaving bruises around my wrists.

*Third-Wheeling*

I perch myself on the countertop so I can chat with my roommate and her boyfriend occupying our barstools. I lean forward in the backseat of the car so that I can talk to the couple sitting in front. I trod a few paces behind my friends with arms linked and shoulders pressed together, shoving my hands in my pockets and tugging up the collar of my coat to stay warm.

*Anger*

When I find myself shouting at my roommate for something innocuous – she keeps leaving half-finished water glasses all over the apartment – I know this has become a problem. I shut my door, get out a notebook. Scrawl every fuming remark I’ve wanted to spew at you, every sarcastic jab and pitiful mewl. When I’ve finished, the pages look as though they’ve been attacked by an angry squirrel. I turn to a fresh page and write an apology to my roommate, which I slip under her door.

*Loneliness*

The rest of the apartment is dark. The weekend is a blank canvas. I could choose anything I like for dinner, make my dishes packed with vegetables that you always grimaced at, take myself out to that Thai place you refused to try. But listening to the water bubbling on the stove barely stirring the blanketing quiet of the kitchen, I think I would eat your beloved pizza every night if it meant eating it with you.

*Friendship*

At a football game in the pouring rain, atop bleachers buzzing with excited young people, I meet another girl whose smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes. I send her a text afterwards. She splatters her heart through the phone to me like a child painting with watercolors, and I find myself adding my own brushstrokes in kind. We make gingerbread in her kitchen a few weeks later, spilling flour across the counter and dancing to all our favorite songs.

*Acceptance*

I wake up to find that you haven’t cropped up in my dreams. I stride down the most direct path to class without being haunted by your footsteps. I flood my calendar with brunches with my sister and late nights lying on my best friend’s floor despite her abundance of more adequate seating options until the steady stream of happy moments dyes me rich and honey-gold.

**A Midnight Tale**

*It is not you who hates me. It is fate who hates us both.*

My mother used to tell me a bedtime story. I told it to you once, on one of our last nights together. You couldn’t sleep, tossing and turning yet trying not to wake me, until I finally rolled over and twined your fingers into mine. I wanted to still your restless thoughts for a moment, bring you comfort in the same way you always did for me.

Time and Fate were born sisters, I whispered to you. No one could say who emerged first. Their mother, Memory, only remembers how they weren’t and then they were, twin souls shimmering into existence like bubbles rising to the surface of a pond.

Time was the solemn sister. Her footsteps were as steady as her name, her posture as straight as if a rod was strapped to her spine. She was never spontaneous, never flighty, though the unfortunate around her loved to label her such. Time was not fearsome, but neither was she easy to love. Fate was Time’s foil, her counterpart. Everyone was drawn to Fate, but few realized the danger she worshiped and wielded like the blade of a knife. She glowed like a firecracker, bright and alluring, just before the explosion that turns everything to dust.

Unlike many of the immortals who surrounded the sisters in their strange ether-space, Time and Fate were fascinated by the humans whose brief lives flickered beneath them like fireflies. While the other deities scoffed at their obsession, the sisters concocted a game together, each choosing a competitor from among the shimmering souls. The rules of the game were wily and ever-shifting, impossible to describe, but both sisters understood them innately, knew that one way or another, the winner would make themselves known. Ever competitive, Fate would attempt elaborate interventions involving every human whose hair or fingerprint crossed the game’s path. Time would only sit and watch, occasionally scribbling down thoughts. But the game was cosmic and certain, oblivious to the activities of either sister, rules impossible to defy. And in all their millennia playing together, never once had Fate’s champion prevailed.

After each game concluded, Fate set fire to all Time’s notes and musings, vowing to never again participate in such an impossible trial. But years would pass and eternity would press and Fate had never been good at ignoring temptation. Inevitably, she would sidle up to her sister, pressing her spire-sharp nails towards the glow of an impossibly brilliant heartbeat, and their challenge would resume once more. And Time won, again and again.

Fate hounded Time’s champions. Millenia of attempting to alter the game’s progression had made her a master of intervention into human affairs. But study and subterfuge and even outright stalking revealed nothing at all. Fate let loose a scream so violent and heart-wrenching that it made the stars quiver. She channeled her fury towards every one of Time’s champions. These souls felt a shiver, a cold river creeping beneath their skin, before they returned to their coffee cups and newspapers, rolled over and resumed their slumber.

That was the end of the story as my mother told it. But the part that always bewildered me, made me tug at her fingers as she tried to kiss me goodnight, wasn’t the abrupt conclusion. It was Time’s champions. How were they chosen, these cosmic victors? And what did Fate’s wrath do to these glowing souls? What happens to someone who Time venerates and Fate abhors?

I tell you all of this in the darkness, my darting eyes seeking yours. My mind has already spun our conversation that will spark from this story, the spooling threads of your words that will bring me clarity, as they always do. But you kiss my forehead, and your eyelids flutter, and you are lost to the slumber I’d been trying to bring you all along. I am left alone, staring up at the ceiling in the dark.