

Sea of Heartbreak

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It was what I titled the gown, with its flowing deep-blue silks. I had discovered it thrown haphazardly over a lime-green children's trash can in a Salvation Army downtown. Must've been used previously as a curtain to cover a window. Now it would cover my body and my shame.

As I raised my hand to grab the dress, I caught a whiff of musk, of man, emanating from my now outstretched palm, lingering towards the gown. It made me think of nights and yesterdays, in which I was certain nobody loved me. They had no idea that the night-black velvets that I was folded within actually gave me comfort, the comfort that hid me. My outstretched palm closed around the fabric, pulled the silks and the memories towards me. As I pulled it up and over my head, the gown caressed me like his hands had, and I let myself revel in it, but only for a moment.

I made my way over to the jewelry rack, littered with falling paper cards stuck through with old metal, 99 cents or less, but I picked a pair worth 50. I would've felt self-conscious, if there had been anybody there but me. I walked in front of a mirror, stifling a grin with the back of my hand, and put the earrings in.

I remembered sunshine, a white light bustling against the back of rough scratchy dorm room curtains. I hadn't slept at all, wedged like a little naked clementine between him and the wall, but somehow it had seemed worth it. I smiled to myself, my eyes closed, a drunk and dreaming girl. *Is this what true love is?* I felt myself wondering. It was, surprisingly, the exact

thing I had been thinking a few short hours earlier.

Whether it was the dead of night or the wee hours of the morning, I could not say for sure, but he was there, and I was rocking back and forth

on the balls of my feet, in the dark, without my clothes and the familiar scent of dread lingering in the air. It was obvious that it was only I that could smell it. He was soft, his words made of light cotton, but there was a part of me that could not trust them.

"I want to," I found myself saying, tears sliding down my cheeks, pooling under my chin. My voice was level, calm, but riddled with pangs of uncertainty and fear. It gave nothing and everything away.

"You don't have to if you don't want to. I won't be upset." He was being understanding, gentle even, his arms tried to pry me apart. I was locked up tight, my arms cracked, a rigid board laid right up against my spine. A straight line, direct, but scared. I knew he was being tender and kind, but the words always got twisted somehow. Lost in translation, or something. The wind through the windows whispered, "He doesn't love you."

I knew it was true and I almost laughed in spite of myself. Angrily, I jabbed away at my steaming tears; incessant leakage! Someone said, "Yeah, let's do it. I'm not scared." "So you're saying yes?" He probed.

"Yes."

I felt as if I had been slapped.

I tried my best but I knew he didn't think I was good enough. And somehow, weirdly, I found myself

not completely depleted by that knowledge. My atoms merged with his atoms, or something godly. An angel, light as a feather, and strangled in phantom rope pearls, a kiss daintily, a hushed word whispered across two lips.

Bites racked up my spine. Bruises and love bloomed.

I am dramatic. He felt none of this, I am sure. I am almost always sure.

You are doing this solely for experience and nothing else played in my head like a lullaby. It lulled me to sleep, my head knocked appropriately on his bare chest. Playing with my hair, drenched in sweetness and tumbling towards sleep, I smiled again. Sometimes I am amazed at how successfully I can lie to myself.

He was tired, but not from lack of sleep. From keeping up the act.

In the morning, I could not help but feel like I was a rabbit ensnared. I wanted to lurch out from under the covers and run for the hills. I wanted to never look back. I wanted to never fall in love. But we still had so long until the night would end. I guess I just wanted him to wake up too. I was tired of being alone.

Twenty minutes later, the alarm went off. We sat up at the same time, awkward and shifty, me shying away from his touch. He got up, searching for his clothes. I was ashamed at how cold I felt without him next to me.

We still couldn't find my missing earring.

"When you find it, you can put it in an envelope and mail it to me," I said, trying to grin. "Okay," he replied.

I wonder if he knew I was joking. *Or you could give it to me. And then you would see me again.*

He said he prides himself on being honest, but I had the strangest feeling he was lying to me the whole time.

He stopped his wobbly truck at the curb. He kissed me on the cheek. A nice gesture, I thought. I got out, swaying slightly.

"Thank you for playing pretend with me," I said.

"Goodbye," he said.

He never found my earring, and I never saw him again.