

A SEA OF YOU

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I throw my phone across the room, hearing the thud as my door halts its flight. Underneath the sharp sound is something important, something irreversible, something more profound. In the ensuing silence, I hear it. The irrevocable crack that precedes the shatter. A sound that alters this moment, reverberating through my hunched body; a noise that transmutes my world, shaking me to my core. A shift that changes me. I will never be the same.

In the aftermath of the cataclysm, I lay amid the rubble. Broken trust. Broken friendship. Broken heart. Curled in the fetal position, my cheek is pressed against the soft sheets of my bed. My hands push against my chest in a feeble attempt to protect my heart as the dam inside me ruptures, and out pours the dark waters that were locked behind it. A tidal wave of memories, so profoundly mundane, rushes over me, drowning me with its savage force and dragging me out towards an apathetic and unforgiving sea. The jagged edges of my heart impede my resistance—I am so tired of treading these treacherous waters—I surrender.

I let the sea of memories sweep me away from the safety of the shore that day, from the security of ignorance and denial. And I sank.

His voice floated to me through the murk, wrapped around me like a constrictor. A voice I loved, a voice I remembered but no longer recognized, a voice that saved me in my peril only to crush me in my safety. The voice of a ghost. *“I think I’m losing my mind,” I say to him through my hysterical, unguarded laughter. “Can’t lose what you never had,” he replies cheekily.* Once and a thousand other times he’d teased me, laughed at me, with me. His voice was a dog-eared novel in the library of my mind. The echoes of it faded with each passing day, my memory of it washed out by time, like sand in the tide. A deafening silence took its place. In this absence of sound, I heard everything I should have said to him. I should have told him, could have a hundred times... My friend, you’re scored on my heart...

The lost echoes of his voice drifted down the dark, sepulchral pathways of my memory, conjuring images of snow and ice. *Vanilla ice cream, homemade. Two parts white snow from his porch, one part milk, one part white sugar, all pure joy. His house, where I joke with his sister and bicker with his brother, where I play with his dog. Where we laugh together and banter and play Battleship...* As the remnants of the memory lingered in my mind, I reflexively reminded myself to never play that game with you because you were a near-pathological cheater... before I ruthlessly righted myself: we would never play Battleship again.

The tide shifted, and I saw the two of us as we wandered side-by-side through a December morning. *Snow decorates the drooping trees. It coats the frozen ground. The bitter chill kisses my lips. We pelt each other with snowballs, laughing, two kids without a care in the world—until he football tackles me into the snow. I am frozen through. We return to his house to watch movies together, arguing comfortably. We speak with familiarity, and share the effortless silences that come with comfortable companionship.*

What happened to that companionship? I destroyed it. He always liked me as something more, always wanted to be more than friends, and I knew it. I knew it all along. I encouraged him to move on, to find someone else, because I knew that I’d only ever care for him platonically. I thought it was enough. I thought he was okay. Or maybe that’s just the lie I told myself so that I would feel okay, that it was enough for me. How could I not see the pain I caused him? How could I be so selfish? I took his love for granted. Imprudently, I believed that love was, by nature, unconditional and eternal. Until the day came that I received a message that I (unaware) dreaded all along: he didn’t like me in the way that he did before. I should have reveled. I should have celebrated for him, with him; I should have been unconditionally happy for my dear friend. But instead, I turned down a darker path, a road that would lead to a future without him.

Something took root inside me that day, something that metastasized and twisted and bloomed wickedly: fear. The parts of myself that were ugly and broken emerged, Hyde overtaking Jekyll. As the fear of losing him hounded and battered me like a sailboat in a storm, my center of gravity shifted. With the security of his unfaltering love no longer certain, I flailed for an anchor. And as is the law of the ocean, the more you struggle, the worse your situation becomes. Each day, my anxiety increased. I fretted ever more over each minute thing. I fed the fear, the monster within. My insecurities were projected onto him, bothersome and tiring. And he drifted further and further from me.

All objects have their breaking point, can only be pushed so far until they give. I stretched myself further, further, further...until I snapped. I wrote a letter, a letter that contained everything: my pain, my frustration, my excuses in the guise of past experience. A letter that contained nothing, because I didn’t say the thing that mattered most. I didn’t tell him how I felt about him.

I thought that I could walk away with that goodbye, but doubts plagued me, the what if’s piling one on top of the other. What if it wasn’t delivered, what if the address was wrong, what if, what if, what if.

And finally I texted him. I asked if he’d gotten my letter. That should have been the end, I should have left it where it lay, but I had to

know. I had to know because that letter wasn't really a goodbye at all, it was a plea for reassurance, a shout into the void, a last desperate attempt to hold on. So I asked him. And when he just said "yeah," I said, "and...?"

And the floodgates opened. Torrents of scathing words and accusations and the most horrible, unimaginable belief, immovably implanted in his mind. My last vestige of hope was crushed that day, the pedestal that I had misguidedly built beneath him felled. "And...?" I type, breath uneven. His reply comes, and with it a world of pain: "*And now I see that you were only using me all along. My family tried to warn me, and I didn't listen to them, but now I see.*"

Using him...to like me? Pretending to be his friend? Pretending to care? All the laughter and love and joy was reduced, mutated, obliterated by a terrible misunderstanding. My careless, foolish words twisted into something alien, a wretched and irreversible conclusion. It was the finality that was so difficult to absorb, the immutability of the outcome—I was helpless in the face of its wrath.

The May flowers bloomed as my heart wilted. The world burst to life in a plethora of vivid colors, but my mind was a study of gray. I tried to remember everything about him, to lock it in my heart, where it could never be lost. I found that those memories were guarded like a fragrant rose, surrounded by sentries of unforgiving thorns. I tried to forget, but that was even worse. An ocean cannot be held back through sheer force of will. And always, at the back of my mind, constant as the tide: What if he was right? What if I only used him, him with his short laugh and quick smile and heart of gold?

The month passed in a thousand agonizing minutes, time stretched and lengthened by the hands of regret. By the time I heard from him again, I was changed. Guilt and pain had eaten me away; I was living, but I was no longer alive. The true nature of his final texts was no mystery to me—the message was anything but opaque. "*You weren't a great relationship in my life,*" he says to me. "*I need time to process.*" This was not a promise, not an intimation of a brighter future. It was a goodbye. I knew it even then.

To continue to allow thoughts of him to fill my mind would have been to lose my sanity. Little by little, time and necessity helped me distance myself from my wounds, helped my mind heal. My guilt ceased to consume every waking moment as I gradually restricted thoughts of him to the deepest recesses of my mind, until he was barred from my conscious thoughts. But my heart was not so easy. It is not subservient like the mind, but rather a rebel in the face of logic and reality. Every now and then, my defiant heart would remind me of this. *He stands before me, smiling. He beckons from the doorway, inviting me back into his home. His life. His heart. I wake slowly, feeling at peace for the first time since I can remember. And then my conscious mind shakes itself awake, and I realize: it wasn't real. It was only a dream. Just another dream.*

I've heard people say that pain is learning in disguise. There was no grand revelation for me, no cinematic 'lightbulb' moment. My lesson is a continuous process, a path without end.

Every day, some memory of him surfaces, rising like a specter from the restless waters of my soul. His name, spoken on the lips of my friends, crashes against my heart, and it hurts me. His legacy echoes down the carpeted high school halls at a deafening decibel, and it hurts me. His absence is evident everywhere I turn, the hole he left in my heart immeasurable, this hurts most of all. I feel the pain every day.

The pain is what saves me, my light in the darkest of places. I would not, could not, hurt like this if things were as he believed. My mind might be able to convince me that he was right, that I used him after all, that our friendship wasn't real, but my heart doesn't lie. He believed that I used him, when the truth is this: I loved him. He was one of the truest friends I've ever known. My love permeates every bittersweet memory, is evident in every moment of anguish I feel over his absence, overflows in my wounded heart.

Love and pain are two sides of the same coin. It was because I loved him that losing him hurt so terribly; it was the pain of losing him that made me realize how much I loved him. Pain is not a consequence of love, nor an excuse to harden one's heart against it. Pain is a crude token, won by those who have the courage to open their hearts to *love in all its powerful, incomprehensible, and transient beauty.*

But I didn't know any of this the day I threw my phone away from me, desperate to distance myself from his hateful words. The day I heard the crack of my heart shattering. The day the currents of change swept me out to sea. I would never be the same.