

Soaring Home

From my early days of toddling around on unsteady legs I've been constantly berated with glares and reminders of how it was better and more respectful to be quiet. I probably deserved the lectures most of the time; because, with my attention issues and the energy that was constantly running through my veins, it was like someone had turned the radio on and couldn't get it off again. Everywhere I went, fingers would be pressed to lips and the adults would look at me with tense smiles while murmuring over and over "use your inside voice" and "silence is golden."

Now I can't help but think they were all a bit lost, all wrong about how precious silence is because the silence that kept surrounding me was suffocating. Next to me, Sam shifted in his chair but did not speak, choosing instead to wrap his fingers around his water glass and take slow, measured sips. I could feel the muscles in my shoulders twitch each time the ice clinked against the glass. The awkward tension between us was so thick that it was almost painful, and the grimace that had been stuck on my face since I arrived must have shown my discomfort, but Sam's face remained blank as he stared ahead of himself watching the horizon.

The sticky heat of the summer city air reminded me dimly of our childhood together; of days spent soaring through each other's backyards with our arms spread wide as we pretended to be fighter planes. Those were good, simple days that would be nice but impossible to reclaim. Sam had been my best friend since diapers, and we'd both been overly-adventurous. Our minds had constantly overflowed with thoughts and ideas that were too large for our tiny town. I could never even stretch the stiffness out of my limbs without having my fingers scrape against the tangible presence of another person.

Everywhere I had gone there had been people watching me with this knowing look in their eyes as if they knew all the tiny details of my life's inner workings. Sam and I had both grown restless, thoughts of escape springing up around our feet like weeds, and eventually I bought a car, and we drove out of the city with Sam perched behind the steering wheel as if he had worked day and night to buy it.

The moment we drove over the city limits we knew that we were offering our souls up to the metropolis and that we would never leave again or at least that it would be incredibly difficult to disconnect ourselves. Physically, we had left many times. Holidays were spent back in the country with our families, surrounded by bright smiles and Virginian accents that rolled smoothly off the tongues of our relatives but stumbled out of our own city tainted mouths. There was always the lingering discomfort that something was tugging at our souls, quietly corralling us back to the city.

Adventures out of the city kept getting shorter and shorter until, for the most part, we remained confined in its expansive walls. Holidays were reduced to static blurred conversations over the phone that involved assurances of later visits and mutterings of excuses that were flimsy with transparency. Three years after the first day Sam and I had driven away from our home town, our relationships with our families were reduced to ashes.

Slowly but surely each aspect of our old lives fell away and was replaced with new pieces that fit into the city's environment. We were content for a while, a bit nervous because of the new

surroundings, but still content. Life was no longer a puddle of binding rules and smothering silence. The city was alive with noise; it's heart pounded through the shrill honks of thousands of cars, and it's mind whirled along the wires that connected the technology.

Somewhere along the way the city became too much; the mesh of noises and lights confused me to the point that I often wandered around lost for hours before stumbling my way home. Sam was also slipping; pieces of the new city shell we had formed around ourselves had started to fall away. I can't recall exactly when those pieces also started to chip off. All I know is that when I finally realized that the shadows of the city had coiled themselves around Sam's neck, he was convulsing on the floor of my apartment, his mind reduced to a jumbled mess from the concoction of drugs he had been lacing his blood with. I had panicked, fumbled with the buttons on my cell phone, and felt a shocked fear tremble it's way up my spine as I babbled hysterically to the emergency operator.

The aftermath was what sat beside me, a once bright and adventurous man turned into a man who only visited reality about once a week on average. My entire schedule now revolved around my best friend's inability to care for himself. I worked third shift and slept for the bare minimum before phoning the facility Sam now lived in to ask them the details of his daily persona. Predictability was never a word that Sam's life embodied, but now he could go from being the best friend I had known for my entire life to a government agent to a wandering traveler without a destination. I would dress according to his persona and trudge off to reinstall my position in his new life.

Years had passed since the seizure and all the doctors did was flash their bright, sickly sweet smiles at me and spew endless comments about needing patience. I wanted to scream at them, to crack my knuckles against their arrogant jaws so hard that they'd have purple splashes decorating their skin for weeks. I had been patient; I had waited for over two years for my best friend to be returned to me, but all I received was bits and pieces of the man I had once known.

I did not want to know Sam the archaeologist or Sam the diplomatic representative; I wanted to know Sam the off-kilter photographer with a penance for neon colors and a hand that always itched for a bet. I wanted to be able to return home one day for the holidays, look Sam's mother in the eyes, and not feel guilty for having ruined her son.

“It's not your fault you know.”

Jerking my head up, I stared at Sam with wide eyes. We'd been sitting on the patio of the facility for two and a half hours without speaking. At first I had scrambled frantically for a conversation starter, but everything was too risky. All I wanted now was to restore that awkward silence and hide under it's heavy weight.

A hollow bark filled the air, and it took a few minutes for me to realize that it had been my own laughter. I shook my head and shared a self-deprecating smile with Sam.

“You don't know what you're talking about Sam.”

I flinched away from the furious glare that filled stone grey eyes. Once he would have laughed off

every critical or derisive comment I made, but these days he tended to retaliate more often.

“Of course I know what I’m talking about; I’m living it Nathaniel! I *know* I’m not right in the mind. I *know* I spend most of my time living the lives of imaginary characters, but I also know that it was my own fault that this happened, so don’t try to tell me I don’t understand!”

The tension that had filled the silence sparked and increased with every word that was spoken. I could feel the strings of my limbs draw tight. A part of my subconscious was screaming at me to just shut up, to just return to my seat and continue staring off into the distance, but I merely shoved it away to the back corners of my mind.

“It’s not your fault, it’s this metropolis’s fault, and I’m the one that was stupid enough to insist we move here. The entire time we’ve been here I could feel it moving in on us, a power-hungry king who taints his subjects and keeps them in line by poisoning their minds, their bodies, their *souls*. For God sakes, I delivered you to his clutches!”

Nurses peered their heads around the corner and skittered away at the very twitch of our eyes towards their direction. My voice had been reduced to a hysterical shout and my hands had been flying in different directions, trying to force Sam to understand the truth. Tiny rivulets of tendons were pressing against the skin of my wrists and hands like they always did when I became too worked up over a subject.

Sam’s eyes flickered down to the blue lines and a frown creased his mouth. “Have you ever thought that you need to be in this place more than I do, Nathaniel? The city isn’t a king. It’s just a place that’s all. If I had not been willing to come here I would not have come. If I had not wanted to get hooked on drugs, I would not have gotten hooked. If I had not wanted to allow this so called king to poison my mind, I would have locked him out, but I did not.”

As I searched for something to say, I turned my own gaze onto the tiny footprints that were scattered in the crook of Sam’s elbow. “If I had wanted to see your faults I could have,” I murmured in response still staring at the marks.

Sam’s hand rubbed over the spot I was staring at; he was ashamed of them. I had seen him in so many incriminating positions that these tiny dots should be nothing more than a bump in our conversational path, but somehow they registered on a different level of Sam’s mind. He would squirm and scratch at his elbow every time I spared the space a glance. I tore my eyes away and chose instead to focus on a point behind his shoulder to make him more comfortable.

“Go home, Nathaniel.”

There was no question about which home he meant. I wanted to press further, to continue our conversation, or at least to restore some sense of friendship between us. Sam tensed his shoulders and shifted away. I was left staring at the back of his head covered in the fiery red hair that his entire family possessed. His blatant disregard of my presence left me with no other option than to shuffle away from the facility and back towards my car.

Once inside the vehicle I let my head fall forward and rest against the steering wheel. I think it was then that I resigned myself to giving up on Sam. It wasn't that I wanted to stop trying to search for my best friend. Of course I wanted to continue searching every dark crevice of his mind for the man he used to be, but even if I was able to find him, he would never be completely the same. The drug incident would always lurk behind his eyes and taint his every decision with hesitation and regret.

For the next three days I stepped back out of Sam's personal boundaries and surrounded myself with work. The clicking of pens, the snapping of staplers, and the quiet rustling of papers became embedded into my mind so much that even when I slid between my sheets I could still hear the office noises echoing around me. I called Sam's home- I hated to call it that, it was nothing more than a glorified hotel- every day to at least have some form of contact with him. It was probably not a good thing that without the daily visits with him I was completely alone; if anything ever happened to me, my belongings would be given to a man who couldn't even have shoestrings on his sneakers.

The conversations were a mix of normal and odd topics just like the visits; the second day's phone call was the downfall. Sam's mind had sent him fifteen years into the past when we were still kids in the tiny Virginian town.

"C-can you come get me Nate? I want to go *home*. I don't know these people and they keep telling me I can't go home. Please, *please* come get me." His voice had been raw from crying and I could still hear tears thickening his words.

"I.....Sam, I can't. It's a long story but that is your home now; you don't know it right now but it is your home." The only response I received was a half-choked sob and the dull tone of a phone line being disconnected.

On the fourth day of the newly set boundaries, I threw all my resolution of giving Sam his space out the window and made my way to the facility. My arms were full of random items that tended to bring a smile to the man's face: a packet of juju beans, a sloppy neon green sweater his little sister had attempted to make for him, a picture of both our families scrunched together and a tiny glass chess piece he had carried with him since he was eight. I would try once more to restore him to normal just once more.

I knew from the moment the secretary saw me that something was amiss. Her face had crumpled into a mix of fear and sadness when she spotted me approaching; the words that tumbled from her cherry red lips sent the happy memorabilia in my grasp crashing to the ground. I watched with a sort of morbid fascination as the chess piece cracked against the ground and spread out into numerous little pieces.

Sam, the receptionist said, had been distraught the rest of that third day. He had begged, screamed, and cried at the top of his lungs for someone, anyone, to take him home. Home to his family whom he hadn't seen or talked to in years. Everyone on the staff had explained to him the circumstances of why he couldn't go home at the time, and he had quieted but still had walked around with his upper body bent over as if he was shielding himself. Sometime during the afternoon or night he

had managed to sneak a bottle of pills from the medicine counter, and during the early hours of the morning he had let death creep down his throat and settle in his heart.

I stood in front of the secretary for a good thirty minutes before her slim hand rested on top of mine as she began to talk about how I needed to discuss funeral arrangements. Most of her words crawled into one side of my mind and seeped out of the other, but I managed to stumble my way through a halfway decent conversation.

I arranged for Sam's body to be sent back to Virginia and kept the phone call to his parents short and detached. His mother had asked if I was coming to the funeral and I managed to grit out a feasible assurance although I knew that I would not be heading home anytime soon. I needed to take a look at my surroundings and somehow convince myself that there was more to the world than the two places I had lived. There had to be somewhere that I could be able to plant my feet and finally settle down without any discomfort weighing down my soul.

So, I packed up the contents of my tiny loft into cheap cardboard boxes and shoved them all into my car. At 5:00 on a Sunday evening I freed myself from the cities hold. It felt wrong to be leaving without Sam in the seat beside me and every few minutes I would glance over to talk to him only to see nothing but the crisp black leather of the seat.

When I drove through the smallest close-knit communities people glared at me as I entered their towns. Their signs boasted home-cooked meals and hospitality, but their eyes cursed unwanted outsiders. My travel wearied appearance wasn't very appealing, especially to people who weren't fond of strangers anyway. Forgoing shaving was probably not my best decision, but then again the majority of my decisions weren't really the best. Travel rumpled clothes were paired with my growing beard, and the brittle smiles I offered never did anything to alleviate their suspicion and distrust.

In the overpopulated cities, including one nerve rattling trek through New York City, people slipped pity into my half-full cup of coffee and looked at me as if to teach themselves a lesson; "If I lose my job, this is the way I will end up." I merely tossed the ruined coffee into the trash can with a scowl, drove away as fast I could, and whispered a thanks that all the traffic lights decided to color themselves green as my car approached.

Somehow I ended up nestled in the crook of an ocean town with a population that just barely managed to reach the three digit range. A house that was for sale in the area was positioned in the middle of a vast open field with no other buildings in sight. It was quiet enough that I didn't feel the uncomfortable pull I had in the city, but the houses were spread out so that I could tilt my head back and scream without a single person hearing me.

I smiled at the hazy image of Sam perched on my new porch and grinned brightly when I craned my head around the corner of the plain white house to see a younger version of my best friend zooming around the backyard with his arms spread wide. This place was not perfect, but it was a place I could finally, truly call home. I laughed and listened to it fill the windy air as I spread my own arms wide to fly with my friend.

