

Incognizance

Most people are okay with staying in one place. As the world spins around them and the wind gusts those heaping blows, scattering everything untied to the ground into a ditch, or a field of sunflowers, those people are poles; unwavering, nailed to the same spot – a constant. I have never been able to plant my feet firmly on the ground, when that gust of wind comes roaring through, I am the seed pods left from a faded dandelion, and I dissipate. Sometimes I land in a ditch of damp, old leaves, sometimes I soar onto a pond and float, and sometimes I do both.

It's driven my mom mad on several occasions, especially when I was younger because I would wake up every morning and she wouldn't have any idea how I would perceive the world that day. I enjoyed being active when I was younger, on most days, so I went through a lot of sports. When I was seven, I wanted to be a ballerina, so I was, and I was good. As the other girls in my class were awkward and uncoordinated; I knew the limits of my body and how to use it to my advantage. My teacher said she had never seen anyone with such grace in their movement, especially at seven, so she pushed me through things quickly with private lessons.

One day after a private lesson with Mrs. Parker, my ballerina instructor, I came home and saw my older brother sitting on the couch, watching a rather intense game of basketball. His eyes were glued on the television set and he was so interested that I could tell he was not even aware I had sat down next to him, so I watched. The energy of the game was astonishing. It was as if I could physically see the passion of the players erupting from their bodies in order to work together and win something.

The next day I told my mom I didn't want to be a ballerina anymore, I wanted to play basketball. She couldn't understand wanting to go from being a graceful dancer to a sweaty basketball player.

All I said was, “People aren’t allowed to change their minds?”

And the next day I was signed up and ready to attend a basketball camp. I was not as good at basketball as I was at being a ballerina. The way you use your body in basketball is different, and although I had good footwork, it was hard for me to be as aggressive as all the other girls. It took more effort, but by the end of my first year of playing basketball, I had improved quite a bit. My older brother was thrilled I was playing basketball, and when we stayed outside until the streetlights came on playing one on one and horse, it was the closest we had ever been.

But I am meant to move. When I was nine, during one of our basketball league games, we were one point ahead with twelve seconds on the clock, and it was evident what we should do – play defense. The girl on the opposite team came down the court dribbling the ball, and as soon as she stepped over the half court line she passed it to my man. I did something I am sure most people at the game still have not forgotten – I stepped away from the girl I was supposed to be guarding and I danced. I did spins and jumps, and I felt so free.

No one said anything when I went back into the locker room, so I grabbed my stuff and headed to the car in the parking lot, without even bothering to look for my mom. As I stood outside against the car door, my mom approached, and got really close to me, looking at me with both a combination of confusion and anger in her eyes.

“Lily, I just don’t understand a damn thing you do.”

And that’s all she said, and we got in the car and drove home.

I contemplated this instance while racking my brain in hopes of finding explanation for what I was on my way to do. He asked me to meet him at our spot – a narrow stream cultivated

into the ground in a small wooded area. It hasn't rained in weeks, so the stream is dried up and in the place of water lays leaves in the process of drying up and shriveling away. I recall instances, still vivid in my mind, when we would sit next to that stream and do what I thought of as an act of exchanging thoughts, but in hindsight, I realize we didn't do that. We compromised on our thoughts, because as he would express his belief in the ability to find beauty in everything, I would sit silently and shrug it off, observing a squirrel getting his nut he had just obtained snatched from him by another squirrel. Where is the beauty in loss? I wonder if he will still believe that when he experiences a true loss, of something that was never even really his.

It's another fourth quarter, and I am not sure stepping out of the way and letting the other team win the game is a possibility. I have lost sleep over how to go about freeing myself from this repetition, and I have not been subtle about it. I'm distant now, and he knows it, and I can see in his eyes he has hope that tomorrow, for some reason, if we hit six months I will stay, and everything will bounce back up to where it was, but that's not how it works for me. Reaching that line of half a year makes me want to get out more quickly than ever. And so as we sleep in bed together, where I once used to curl up into him, and share a place of unconsciousness, I turn towards the cold wall, and hope I can somehow roll through it, and keep it as a barrier between us.

His life is perfect in all the right ways. His perception of the world is so delicately naïve, and so when he claims to be a realistic optimist, I argue there is no such thing – either you're a realist or you're not. And that's the core difference between us – as his family grabs me in their arms and hugs me tightly every time they see me; my mom has not hugged me in years. And as he avoids any confrontation or arguments, I thrive off of them; it's what injects passion into me.

So, as he has deferred every argument I have tried to present and ignored every button in him I have pushed, I find myself empty.

I just wish there was an easy way to explain this to him, without sounding as selfish as I know I am being, but I know there is not, as I begin walking on the trail and spot him lying against a tree with his headphones on. He is wearing the navy blue sweater I bought him for his birthday last month, and it makes my stomach churn when I realize he is not going to let me go easy. Even if he pretends to be understanding, he will try his best to tie a thin string to me, deceiving us both into believing I am free, when really I am just a kite – I get a taste of flying, but someone is always controlling how much sky I taste, and how much the wind can move me. I can't be tied to anyone's hand, and I decide I need to make him want to rip that sweater off of him and burn it, even if it means hurting him.

I am about a five feet away from him now, and I know even though he is looking down he has to see me in his peripheral vision, but he doesn't have the strength to look up at me. Why am I doing this? It's not as if I don't care about him, because I do love him, I know I do, but I realized I can't be here. I have to keep telling myself it's my life, and this is the right thing. I can't decide who I am lying to, or if I am even lying at all.

“Hey Lily,” he finally slides his headphones off his ears to the back of his neck, looks at me, and almost whispers when he speaks. He is also forcing an apprehensive smile, he knows what's next. This is the problem; I can read him too well.

I don't say anything, and instead just sit down next to him and look out towards the stream. I stare at the leaves that have had their run, as they changed from green, to oranges and reds, and then fell from the branches, scattering into their new location – a dried up stream, washed out of color, that's all it is. I forget I am actually on a mission right now, and when I

remember why I am sitting next to him, my blood screams for nicotine, but I shake it, since he hates smoke. It seems inappropriate to have this conversation and blow smoke in his face at the same time.

I look at him, his facial features so simple, his skin smooth, his hands soft, and his movements as delicate as his perception of the world. I don't want to be the person to change his false reality, and alter it into something real and as bitter as the air we are sharing, but I also don't want to be the person to continue holding an important position in his false reality, when I am not a reflection of him or his ideals at all. I start, "Hey Joey. I think it's become obvious something about us and our relationship has changed, and I am not really the type of person to ignore things like that, so I wanted to sit down and talk." Sit down and talk. I know that was not what I meant to say, but the hardest thing is telling someone you love the truth.

"Yeah...it seems like you've been really distant lately, Lily," he is looking down at the ground again, drawing lines in the dirt with a stick. I feel like I am telling my younger brother he has done something wrong and I am disappointed in him. "I don't know how to respond to it. I have tried to give you space, but it seems like it's just allowed you to become even further away. I just want to stick my arms out and grab you, but I am afraid you won't even be there if I do."

"Joey, I don't think I am there anymore. I don't think I can be there anymore. I'm sorry, I do love you very much, but I realized.... in these past few days I haven't seen you, I haven't missed you. And that says more to me than I would like to admit."

He finally looks up at me and nods; I can physically see the knot in his throat, and the coating of water beginning to layer his eyes. "Is there someone else?"

Shit. I wasn't prepared for him to ask this question. I know the answer, but I dismiss my goal of wanting him to hate me when he leaves, and lie, "No, there isn't anyone else. This is just about you and me."

He stares out blankly into the trees. For the first time in months, I am not sure what he is thinking. Does he believe me? I feel like he does, because he doesn't really know me. He doesn't know how manipulative I can be, and how I am not really as grounded as he perceives me to be. I decide this has all just caught him off guard, since it is not mutual, and since I finally said what I have wanted to say for weeks, but that we have both ignored.

I stare out for a second as well, sharing our last silence together, I decide it is time to snip the string, and so I stand up, and tell him I have to go.

As soon as I removed both feet from the woods, I felt free. I contemplate if everyone feels that way when they just break someone's heart or if it is just those people that enjoy being blown by the wind, which has already swept me off my feet and begun blowing me towards my next location—Conor's arms. I pull a cigarette out of the pack and laugh to myself because when I was nine I never would have imagined I would be an incessant smoker, but here I am, thirteen years later living off of a diet of caffeine and nicotine, as if they were the base of the food pyramid.

After I light my cigarette I check my phone, and see I have a missed text from Conor. He asked me how it went, genuinely interested. I send him a text back, telling him I will tell him about it in person in about five minutes, as I am heading to his house now.

I walk the couple of blocks to Conor's apartment, feeling both nervous and excited to see his dark hair and eyes, and to wrap my arms around his tiny waist. It only took me a couple of

exchanges of conversation to know I wanted to wind up next to him, creating an uncertain, inconsistent, space we could hang with a sign labeled “home”. I see so much of myself in him; so much of whom I have been, and who I want to be – both good and bad, both beneficial and self destructive.

I approach the side door of his apartment; there is clay pot, meant for a plant, being replaced with about a hundred cigarette butts, some of which are mine from the nights we have recently spent drinking cheap vodka and smoking cigarettes until either our throats burn, or the sun rises.

I text him saying I am outside, since it always feels more convenient than simply knocking, besides one of his roommates is a pretentious asshole and I don’t want to run the risk of him answering and then listening to his presumptuous remarks about the new Pitchfork ratings and how they are biased. But it’s too late, his asshole roommate Nick spots me at the door when he walks past the kitchen and comes to the door, greeting me.

“Well look, it’s Lily! You’ve been hanging around here a lot lately, eh? Does your baby boy Joey know that he’s lost you to the depths of ‘ol Conor’s sweet charm, scruffiness, and alcoholism? Heh.”

I glare at Nick, and begin conjuring up a smart ass retort when Conor walks into the kitchen and smirks at me. He says so much with his eyes. So much I don’t understand, but so much I want to learn. My mind forgets where it was going with the Nick comeback, and I decide it doesn’t matter anyway.

“Hey Lily.” He is still speaking to me with his dark brown eyes, and my heart jumps a little bit, like when you’re on your first date at the movies and he grabs your hand and you’re nervous you’re not doing it right, but you’re just holding hands, you can’t be doing it wrong. I

attempt to say something as sly and suave as he just did in a simple greeting, but instead I just try to speak with my eyes as well, and he turns towards the stairs and I follow.

We get into his room - a typical boy musician room, full of band posters, amps, guitars, and a bunch of other shit that really is not as intriguing if you really look hard and pay attention to it. It's all just filler – stuff to make a room look more “legitimate” than it really is, stuff to fill up space and by ownership, represent some sort of identity, even if it really means nothing to us. And I begin to wonder if that's all I am – a filler, and if I even care if that's all I end up being.

I sit down on his bed as he shuts his door, and then comes and sits down next to me, smelling of smoke and sweat. He is wearing his usual outfit, a white T shirt and dark skinny jeans. I am aware that he only changes his shirt once every couple of days, and his jeans even less often, which in some weird way, draws me closer to him. Until this point, only mentally, but today I am free, and I grab his hand and rest mine in it.

“So did it go alright? I mean, break ups never go well, but did he seem completely destroyed over it?”

“It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be actually, I kind of kept it short, ya know? He did ask if there was someone else though, which I was not expecting at all. I lied. I had to. I hate hurting people.”

He nods his head and replies, “Mhmmm. Joey doesn't seem like a dumb guy. He is definitely in love with you, but he isn't an idiot. I think anyone walking by could probably physically see the distance between you two, without even knowing you. Plus, I mean, you've spent a hell of a lot of time over here lately. Even though he probably wanted to ignore it and remain blissfully unaware, he is not dumb. You can't always ignore the truth just for the sake of protecting your heart.”

Protecting your heart with lies, what an easy thing to resort to. Like the time I woke up as my mom exchanged the tooth under my pillow with two dollars, and I shut my eyes tight and wished more than anything she had been quieter, or I had slept harder. I lost more than just the idea of a tooth fairy that night.

I didn't say anything; I just leaned my head against Conor's shoulder, and in turn he put his arm around me. Protecting your heart with lies. I remembered the time I was riding my bike through the park a few blocks away from my house, and in the distance saw a man who looked like my dad. He turned around at the same instant I realized it was him, and when I looked into his eyes I didn't know him or the woman beside him. Going home, sharing a secret, I lied. I tucked it deep inside of me until the fights started a year later, and then my dad packed up everything and left in the middle of the night. I found my mom sitting on the kitchen floor, crying, and in each tear I found a fragment of a lie she had told herself, being forced out of her onto the floor with the truth. Thirteen years old, holding my mom in my arms – hearts unprotected because the truth had shattered our false perception, and our family.

I started sobbing in Conor's arms and he just held me, tighter than I have ever been held.

After I finished crying, we sat in silence, and I finally broke it with, "Let's go for a walk and get some cigs."

We headed out of the door and the November wind filled my lungs, each particle of air a little more bitter than the last, each one lingering a little bit longer than it should. Conor and I walk in silence, but it's comfortable. I know he is not trying to find a way into my head and extract my thoughts in front of me, on a table for us both to stare at, and then be forced to look away. He just holds my hand.

He is already smoking a cigarette once we reach the gas station, so he stands outside and I go in by myself. “Can I have a pack of Parliaments please?”

The cashier grabs them off the shelf and rings them up. “\$6.30.” I give exact change and leave.

I open the pack and light one up as soon as I get outside.

“You know, those recessed filters aren’t doing anything. If you’re going to smoke you might as well do it right. It’s killing you either way.” Conor says jokingly.

“You know, that Diet Coke you’re drinking has aspartame in it. So you might feel skinny now, but that shit is bad for you. Plus it taste horrible. If you’re going to drink a Coke you might as well do it right.” I retort.

He shakes his head with a sinister grin and we start to head back towards his place. Within a block of our walk I see a navy blue sweater, and my heart sinks. It’s Joey but he’s looking down at the ground, listening to music as always, and he doesn’t notice us. He looks so sad and empty, like someone told him his whole life up until this point was irrelevant, and he had just wasted his time. I realize I had force fed him poison - the truth on a spoon. He tasted every ounce, and I want to go back and suck it out of him, revive him of his altered perception, and make him naïve again.

I almost turn around, and call out his name. But instead, I pull Conor close to me, and wrap my arm around his waist. I hold onto a pole I know will snap if a strong enough wind comes along, and I will cover it with a lie, until it hits me and I can’t ignore it any longer.