

The Sidewalk

by Hannah Messinger (January 2015)

I walk down the street from your house, hands in my sweatshirt pocket, fingers intertwined tightly in an effort to pull myself together. My breath becomes more rapid the further away I move, my walk turning into a jog and then a run. I feel my lungs burn as I inhale ice. Silvery billows cloud the path before me, but I don't care. I free my hands from my sweatshirt, pausing a moment to rip it off completely and leave it on the snow laden sidewalk. It smells like you, and your smell makes me sick to my stomach.

Your smell, the scent that encircled me during the hours I spent in front of the movie screens we paid to visit. Where you would place your hand on my knee, then my thigh, and on and on until we might as well have not been on the cheap upholstery or in the dark room; we could have been anywhere. Where I never saw what I spent money to see – no romantic comedy, James Bond adventure, or documentary – because you wouldn't allow it. We'd leave together, Googling the plot line so we had something to tell our friends and our parents. "Yeah, it was stupid. I wouldn't go see it," I would say, but, really, I wasn't the one to ask. I didn't even know the first scene, but sometimes I knew the last one. That is, if I was successful in stopping you.

Your hands were always what stopped me from pushing you away. The heavy class ring you wore made my eyes drop and my fingers stop their attempted escape. You always wore it on your middle finger – something about defining yourself, being an original amongst the Fascist-like followers of society. I was constantly careful of that right hand, the one that claimed a sapphire gemstone that I knew all too well for its catch on my upper arm, my knee, my stomach – places I could drape, cover up, or at least play off as something else. When my closest friends began to notice, I'd say, "Oh, I got those from my last tennis practice," I'd smile then across the lunch table, your ring pressed like a warning against the inside of my left palm. "I'm such a ball magnet. It's a problem." And my friends would laugh and I would laugh and you would laugh, because it's so funny when the hurt is unintentional. I didn't even play tennis, but no one bothered to ask.

Your lips said the sweetest lies. In the backseat of your Jeep Wrangler, I realized why I needed you. We'd sit next to each other, perched awkwardly amongst the duffel bags, sports equipment, and sneakers you would leave sprawled on the floor and across the leather seats. Greg Laswell played from my iPod connected to your speakers, and I would say, "This is my favorite part." You'd listen, arms encircling me, before pulling me into your lap and resting

your chin on my shoulder. Inhaling your Axe cologne, I nestled deeper into you. Softly, I'd sing the lyrics in my off-key sort of way, eyes closed. I'd feel you smile against my neck and you'd say "That's almost as beautiful as you." And I'd say "I know," without opening my eyes.

Your thoughts were always troubled. I remember that Sunday night we spent together, not touching. I sat Indian style on my lilac comforter, and you leaned against the cedar backboard across from me. We talked about our days and the days before, smiles and laughs quickly turning into those dusk secrets you regret in the morning. You told me about your mama's sickness, the way it infected her body from head to toe. "She's falling apart," you said, and you started to cry, because for once, you were as scared as I was. I hugged you then, and you said, "Baby, I'm so sorry," as if disease justified violence. I forgave you anyway.

Your voice brought me back to the moment I met you every time I heard it. I saw you somewhere between the pews and the hymn books, your green eyes jutting over the pages of a Bible while the pastor spoke about something I don't remember. For weeks, I daydreamed through church, wondering how deep the tone of your speech was, whether or not you were one of those awkward boys who didn't hit puberty until after it was way overdue. On week five, I asked you if you were doing the next community outreach program, and you replied with a smile, "Only if you're there." and I knew what desire sounded like in four words. After that, I saw you every Wednesday night, delivering food to soup kitchens or teaching little kids how to play Ultimate Frisbee or packing boxes to send to Costa Rica. We did these small projects together consistently until we traded community service hours for hospital visits.

Your arms were always ready to hold me or grab me, whichever came first. I remember sitting on your bed, cuddled into your chest. It was midnight, and my phone began to ring. A boy's name flashed across the screen, and that's all you needed. Suddenly, an embrace became a yank, and I was pulled under. I receded into the deep ocean of your brown blankets, hoping that maybe if I melted away, you would forget I existed, and maybe forget that boy existed, too. My hands made fists in the sheets, and my eyes squinted shut. The next day, the boy wasn't in school. Neither was I. It would've been okay if that had only happened once.

Your hair was always in your face. Four months ago on the boardwalk I pushed it back, saying you should cut it. You shook your head and freed your blonde tresses from my grasp. "I like it this way," you said. Then you bought me chocolate ice cream, and I dropped my case. Your hair got longer and longer as time went on, and I wondered why you wouldn't trim it. Then, one day, you took me to meet your mama, the blonde you inherited nowhere to be found. I never asked, but I assumed you were afraid of losing another piece of her, even though she had already lost the pieces herself.

Your ears were always full of other people's words. I remember the congested conventions you took me to on the weekends, the ones where crunchy, sweaty teenagers would gather to save the planet a speaker at a time. I always thought they were silly, but although in all reality these get-togethers made no difference in anyone's life, they made you feel like you had some sort of power over the future. "Do you hear that?" you'd shout over the noise. "That's genius. That's fantastic. If I had the money..." According to you, if you had the money you'd save the world ten times over and ten different ways. You'd tell me about your plans as we lounged in white plastic chairs, and I'd clutch your arm, look up at you, and say, "You'll have the money one day to make a difference." Looking back, I wonder if our logic was correct. I wonder if I was wrong to agree with you, because maybe money isn't a necessity for rescuing the world.

I run out of breath, slowing down and then stopping. I grasp my side, panting heavily at the cement sidewalk before turning around and looking back for the first time before I began to flee. Your Wrangler is nowhere in sight. I almost begin to walk towards your house, to say, "I'm sorry, I take it all back babe. I'm yours," but I know it's too late for that. I'm too far away to let myself fall, tumbling backwards into your chest, feeling your heartbeat again angrily or softly or however you choose to be. It suddenly hits me that I'm not even crying, and I look up at the sky, avoiding myself. Snowflakes drift, catching the wind and swirling where they please. I know how they feel, and I know you do, too.

I remember that time, our six month anniversary, when you took me for a drive in your Jeep. The humidity was almost unbearable, but you insisted on having the windows down while I reclined in the passenger seat, the leather heating my skin. You accelerated until we were in the middle of nowhere, and then stopped, pulling the car off to the shoulder of the highway and looking over at me. "You know, we could go anywhere." you said. But that's what all teenagers say. We talk about how we want to leave and become something we're not and do something we don't. You kept talking about finding ourselves, as if I were lost. It made me sick, this stereotypical "let's adventure" attitude that I denounced as ridiculous. I never thought that you might be casting a plea to get away while you could. Then again, I never thought much about your problems.

My feet trample the snow that has fallen, untouched on the sidewalk ahead, and I wonder how in the last few minutes of sprinting I didn't fall. As I walk out of your neighborhood, I enter downtown. I pass the movie theater we used to sit in, the boardwalk we'd walk down now deserted in the snow, and all the other places I used to get nervous or excited, depending on your mood. I tuck my head down so that I can't see anything but the frosted concrete, and I feel the snow burn my skin with its kisses, and it reminds me of you.

I'm all at once exhausted. I let my knees buckle and my hands catch me, right there in the middle of the walkway. I feel my breathing become heavier until I'm hyperventilating, grasping at my stomach, lungs aching and wheezing and sick. I sob, my body wrenching forward until my forehead grazes the slush spilled across the floor. My throat squeezes and contracts like I'm going to vomit, but there is nothing left in me to give up to the earth. The noises emitted from my abdomen are unfamiliar and terrifying, but my eyes remain dry. My tongue tastes like acid, and my nostrils fill with disgust. I deserve better. I deserve better. I deserve better, but I'll never deserve better.

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