SUN OF NOBODY



THE LARGEST DEBT I OWE
IS TO MY FAMILY

PREFACE

I take everything to heart.

That's one of my biggest flaws.

For my entire conscious life I've been trying to frame it so I can convince myself of a great conscience.

That may be true.

Though still does not take away from the fact that this flaw has permeated every aspect of my being.

Perhaps my second worst flaw is my ego.

Which, in tandem with my sensitivity, has led me into being defensive about who I am and what I do, restricting the axes of my own thought.

This restriction has created a self-fulfilling prophecy that extends beyond mere psychological effects.

An example works best.

A friend says you "walk weird". An automatic function becomes so strenuous that your autopilot malfunctions and you actively engage in thinking about how your foot steps of the ground, how you carry your arms under your shoulders and how your hips "sway" as you walk. You may forget how you

walked normally, for a second. If this is constantly repeated, you will start walking in a different way or go toward a different direction entirely.

I bear all responsibility.

I have done plenty of things I am not proud of and although I reserve the fact that I was not conscious for half of it, they remain decisions of my own volition. If there is any one point to the stories you will read, it has to be bludgeoned out. These are reflections, carefully crafted as to not scare myself when they appear across from me.

Everybody, no matter how lucky or privileged, has their own baggage.

What you're about to read is mine.

GIRL, BOY, INTERRUPTED

With her knees bent towards my chair, speaking in a slightly higher pitch, that of the third or fourth drink, she put her phone in my hand and said:

"How do I share my location with you?"

I thought it was cute, for a second. Then, she sharply tapped her nails on the screen and scrolled through the menu pages, and I saw my name at the end of a very long list of people. It's a thing, apparently.

A few drinks and a roach later, I was waiting in the middle of the street, hoping a notification would chime.

I looked up to the sky and instead of stars across from me, saw an eleven-story parking garage. Trees surrounded its foundation but they looked weathered, small, and completely dull amidst the fog. No chime sounded. Instead, cars honked, drunks yelled, and boots squeaked loudly on the ground. When I was seeing her in the past, the moments in between were marked by a lousy paranoia. Each attempt of connection had ego-shattering consequences. I pushed through for a little bit; due to the heat I felt from her body and the thrill of her touch. I've been with women before of course. Plenty. But even elementary contact with her was worlds apart from what I had felt before.

It dissolved into nothingness as soon as I stopped pushing. And now, it was Christmas again, a year later. Last time - I thought - we had not been in sync.

Perhaps one can deceive themselves into thinking time can change the binary.

It was cold outside and I had very little to look forward to apart from a blue dot, slowly moving further and further away on the map.

I deleted her location off my phone because I am an abuser.

But, I am proud to share that I rarely, if ever, voluntarily abuse anybody else other than myself.

Had I not deleted her location off my phone, I would have been, rather quickly, arrested in a state of constant conflict; wondering if I should drop everything and chase after her, randomly and conveniently appear at any moment I deemed opportune, or, again, drop everything and abandon all effort.

Around her, I wanted to be better.

But not in that productive, butterflies-in-stomach way, a lot of people talk about.

More so in that existential angst type of way.

Maybe it was my ego - seeing how close I can get to the fire without being burned.

To warm my hands and body beside it, to stretch and finally relax.

Then I remembered.

I could not rest my head on her chest.

That was submission, to her.

Met with a scoff.

I approached the fire too quickly.

Extinguished it.

Not fit for a hunter.

A strong silent type.

One for the chase.

I thought, and reconciled with myself.

I could hunt. I could chase.

I could wear my heart out on my sleeve.

But not for her.

She wasn't my girlfriend after all.

And I seriously doubt she was ever my "ex".

FEW GOOD GIGS

This really happened.

I'd just been paid—a minor miracle, considering the hoops I had to jump through to get my invoice approved. It had bounced back at least a dozen times: once because I forgot my address, another for misspelling the company name, and again for listing the wrong hours. Finally, with an accountant leaning over my shoulder to ensure every detail was perfect, I sent it off. The next day, the money was in my account. For once, things seemed to be aligning. I'd even gotten my hands on a physical credit card, meaning I could finally withdraw cash, which, admittedly, in Europe, you don't really need—unless you're buying hard drugs or, in my case, soliciting a prostitute. I slid the card into the ATM and waited as it buzzed and hummed, gears spinning to deliver a warm stack of bills, fresh, crisp, and ready for anything.

With my hat pulled low, I made my way through the district, blending into a sea of gawking tourists craning their necks to take in the half-dressed women posted in fluorescent-lit windows. It was Monday morning— too early to admit to anyone that I was there. I trudged along the canals, dodging the already-drunk Brits stumbling over each other, about to give up on the whole thing, until... I saw her.

She was younger than the others and strikingly beautiful. Her smooth brown hair framed delicate features, and a snake tattoo coiled from her waist to her

inner thigh, its tongue disappearing beneath her underwear.

My hand twitched toward my back pocket, reopening the scabs on my knuckles as I fumbled for the cash.

I didn't have to knock. She noticed me staring and slid the glass door open, motioning me inside.

The room was small but tidy: lavender and tobacco hung in the air, a vintage gramophone stood in the corner, and a king-sized bed dominated the space, neatly made. The fluorescent lights gave everything a surreal, clinical glow. She sat down on the bed, her legs folded gracefully beneath her, and with a flick of her finger, beckoned me to undress and take a shower. I hesitated. My throat tightened as I glanced over my shoulder—the window was still clear, no curtains drawn. I was the unwitting star of this strange little tableau, standing awkwardly in my work clothes. She noticed and patted the bed beside her. Reluctantly, I sat.

Her hand lingered near mine for a moment before she pulled it away, her painted nails tapping softly against the blanket.

"Smoke?" she asked...

I'd quit, but I couldn't refuse. Lighting it gave me a moment to collect myself. She shifted, kneeling in front of me, her voice soft and sweet.

"What do you do?"

"I work at a bar," I replied.

"As what?"

"A bartender."

She smiled faintly. **"That's nice."**

"Not really," I said. **"The pay's crap, and the customers—"**

"Crap?"

"Worse than crap. You wouldn't believe half the people I deal with."

"But it's fun, no? Music, shots, girls..."

I met her gaze, and for a moment, let her words hung in the air. If my life were full of music and girls and fun, would I be here? On a Monday morning? At 11 a.m.?

"There's none of that. Just headaches. Even without the customers complaining, the noise alone is enough. The constant clattering of shakers, the ice being slammed around..." She tilted her head, her accent slipping through as she interrupted. **"You do not have it that bad." "Maybe not,"** I admitted. **"But it's exhausting."**

She straightened, her expression hardening. **"I work here all day. Sometimes at night. This room costs me one-fifty for five hours, and on a good day, I might make four-fifty. Half of that goes to the Gemeente, as I am self-employed. Some I send home. The rest keeps this room running—because even though I rent it, I'm responsible for keeping it clean. If I don't, I get fined or lose my license."**

"Damn..."

"I didn't want this," she continued, her voice trembling. **"I'm not a whore. Or—I don't feel like one. I came here to model. That's what they said Amsterdam was for. I got a few jobs, did a supermarket commercial—**

five hundred euros. It's still running, but I get nothing. No residuals was in the small print. A contract I didn't understand because the language was foreign."

"That's rough."

"Merde," she muttered, shaking her head. **"Rough doesn't cover it."**

Her composure faltered. She stood, her shoulders stiff, and crossed her arms.

"But I'm done. I have a friend—prettier than me. She came here to model, too, and now she has a company. A real one. She walks dogs."

I laughed. **"That's shit work, too. Pays next to nothing."**

"She delivers food, too. On a bike. Picks her own hours."

"Terrible idea. The weather here—constant rain, the wind knocking you over..."

Her breath hitched, and she fell silent.

Then, quieter, she said, **"There's a bar near me. Students go there. They're happy, broke, bohemian."**

"Students? Worse than anyone. Pretentious, entitled, living off of hefty allowances and still haggling."

Her shoulders sagged. She sat down, tears pooling in her eyes, and stared at the floor. The light in her gaze dimmed as her frustration boiled over.

I scratched at my beard, trying to think of something—anything—to say.

Finally, I stood, more cash in my hand than before. I shuffled awkwardly, clearing my throat.

"So..." I said. **"Will you suck my dick now?"**

BROOMSTICK BALLET

You're in no sense engaged, intellectually or otherwise, back half-bent, mast broken, hull flooding – a mix of phlegm and fizz trailing down the cork of your nose stud and onto the hair of your upper lip, you slip but do not fall. Kept upright by your sole's rubber padding but inevitably displaced, your shoulders rock forward on their own volition, bumping you into your similarly hunched over companion, who, although unnervingly quiet before the impact, now turns to face you, loudly steaming, his features compressed into an angry mulch of skin and cartilage, he gestures, moving up and down in sharp shapes.

On the semi-reflective floor below you, adorned by off-coloured piss stains and marble cracks resembling a mosaic, you notice a fully reflective, metal-plated credit card, strips of protruding plastic, a latter edge gnawed away, and, next to it, what appears like specks of snow or dust or powder and-

You realize what you've made him drop.

You've known this person for some years, and, while his head-on pressure to an honest-to-God mistake does slightly irritate you, causing your muscles to twitch, and your fists to clench, you put your hands back in your pockets. You take a step back, and, assessing now, feel a heavy melange of dubious liquids splashing around in your stomach. Nonetheless, parched, you smack your tongue around your lips looking for an increment of wetness out the

deep well, and you swallow incessantly, yet feel nothing going down your throat. Your friend takes the first step and exits the bathroom. He is quite taller than you, and so, still touching the ceiling, must crouch to go under the door frame.

Opening that door was a terrible decision.

You notice, stretching throughout the entire hallway, a sea of men and women, huddled together in a queue, waiting to reclaim the unisex stalls you unfairly occupied. They are visibly put off by the sight of you and your friend; a pair of fully clothed, reasonably well-kept, quite dully dressed men, who, despite the rising temperatures outside, appear congested, sniffing and huffing as they walk past, paying absolutely no mind to the rest of the patrons. Likely defeated, but more reasonably, tired, you slouch on the revolving stool, your legs hovering, you signal to your friend that it's his round to buy. He offers a social cue, raising his eyebrow somewhat methodically, displaying an emotional range you had presumed absent, and playfully kicks the base of your circular throne, spinning you around to the other side.

At this point, parried, you assume responsibility for the crisis -

Jamming yourself past the crowd, you feel a tingle; the crevice of your ear vexed by the curly end of a barb wire ponytail- you turn back to look, yet not discerning any single presence, see only an indistinguishable splotch.

You wait in a queue now, different from that which you escaped, yet equally boresome. Your fingers rattle, anxiously rubbing against your palms. Your head rocks, your eyes scan the room; coloured lights flash overhead, throwing hues of pinks and reds, you put all your weight on your feet, trying to drive your boots steadfast in the ground, instead shuffling back and forth, in an aloof ceremonial dance. Patrons push past you to order and they speak as if

the bartender is a long-time friend of theirs. They crack jokes and ask for beer by name and volume, and, of course, do not pay up front.

They **"put it on the tab"**.

You feel disappointed in yourself. Where this anywhere else, you'd have snuck to the front immediately and you'd be drinking a beer by now.

You look back at your friend. His neck is bent, welded perpendicular to his chest– dozing off, he yawns, and, even in line, buzzing chatter all around you, you hear the sharp click of his jaw.

"Next please."

"Beers." You say.

"You want two beers?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Small or large?"

You nod and sweep your arms expansively.

He nods too now and wipes his hands on the towel hanging from the strap of his jeans. He pulls the tap open, and the liquid gold starts to pour, slowly amassing volume and spreading around the glass. The barrel sputters out a fart, spraying thick foam everywhere. He stutters back and grunts to himself. You look on, indifferent. He pushes his knee against the fridge propped under his waist and opening it, crouches down to grab a beer. Reaching over, he cracks it open, his ponytail cascading down on a fishnet crop top. Your sigh is cut off by the sight of your friend sleeping.

You take pleasure in the fact you do not have to immediately return to the table.

You sit on a stool opposite from the bar.

A lot of the patrons leave. It's a weekday, and almost closing time. Your friend lets out a wet snore as the ponytail dusts off the stands next to him. And there she goes. You're not sure what you saw but it looked bright and vibrant. Like something you'd want to see again. The doors slide open, but you catch yourself before turning back. You hear a bag being set down next to you. You cup your fingers on the glass and inhale deeply. You're certain that this here air, is the cleanest air you've breathed.

"Is this taken?" You hear her speaking and turn around. She is gorgeous. Her voice is familiar, although you've never heard it before. Your stool screeches against the floor.

She sits down and softly taps her ring on the counter.

You look to your friend.

The ponytail has done his last call now and swept up all the dust for the night. To not be rendered useless by a running clock, bored, or irritated that your friend is drooling over the furniture, he batters the broom against the ceiling, trying to wake him up.

You do not care.

You check your watch and take pleasure in the fact that you still have twenty minutes to go before the bar closes. Twenty minutes more with this girl. There are not too many other people now other than you, your friend, and the girl. You are at a dive-bar and it's a weekday and you are out of your mind,

skiing off-season, and the floor faintly smells of piss, but she is next to you, and she seems utterly suited to mute whatever else is going on here.

You look into her eyes and feel portals of ether shining brightly upon you, pulling you closer. You think that it is almost impossible for a stranger to feel so familiar.

If not impossible, rare. If not rare, at least special.

You're certain that this girl here is the girl you will marry.

She edges closer to you and her lips, as if orchestrated by the cute curl on her nose, dancingly whisper.

"You might want to wake up your friend there before my boyfriend wakes the neighbours"

You hear a broom come clattering down on the floor.

SUNBURNS & ESPRESSO

I loved her for a while, and spat in her mouth, and even got a little less high because of her. And she was wildfire, in every sense - her curly locks in chaos, her brows arched downward as if to look at every misstep, and lips that, only slightly open, could inhale the world entire. And she found me in a displaced trance, my head banging to any shrill notion of music my ears picked up, huddled against a wall, my hands on the inside of my hoodie, cupping myself, rocking back and forth.

Then on a stage wide and open, blasting beams of light hit the floor below us, illuminating specks of dust and sweat in the air, I forgot how I had gotten there, who had come with me, and when I was to leave – and saw only her across from me, possessed, gliding on the floor, her waist pulsating, vibrant sweat smoothly trailing from her chest down to her abs and behind her belt, into the crevice of her jeans.

It wasn't long before I figured out how to flick her strap undone, and she learned which joint I get drowsy on. Then I watched her dully climb on top of me. Her curls now wires; irritating to the touch, her empty gaze hovered, then rolled back. Surely, if the sun had fallen flat on the street, and dimmed its rays, the world would stop turning.

For that I bear all responsibility.

It didn't end in some tragic, somber way—a low buzz of noise and mutual parties I stopped showing up to.

We drifted apart not long after.

Then I was burned by the sun in the summer and hoped my bronzed skin reflected also some deeper work within my mind - refurbished and newly vibrant.

But back north, lying in bed, curtains tightly pulled, I preferred pitch black to that disgusting gray light that often creeps up inside the studio.

I smoked myself into a panic and ran out to the city, looking for a job.

Lurking around one of the 'clubs' near opening hours on a Sunday morning seemed to do it.

The people who usually hang around that kind of "business" before the blinds are raised aren't exactly prospective employees.

So I stood out.

I had been standing over the coffee machine, shimmying a spoon into the feeder tube of the grinder, attempting to dislodge a bean of Arabia Black, its base rotated into the edge of the grinder, perfectly stuck - when a colleague politely reminded me that we have: **"another machine in the back that we can also use."**

I lit up indoors, an affordance of the establishment, and perhaps the only reason I had braced through the high-pitched barrage of hardly enunciated babbling from colleagues and company - during a short yet painfully dull hiring process. Across from me was a couple. Tourists. It would have been in no

other way apparent if not for the man's thick Timberland jacket and a linen scarf seemingly interwoven with the hair on his neck, indoors, in a coffee-shop, in Amsterdam, in October. His hands were folded into themselves, his elbows sharply bent on the table, and he stood there, silently blinking.

Next to him, two olive green tints dancing below the decisiveness of her eyebrows, blonde and brown thin curves orchestrating the rest of her gaze, a woman arched forward on the supporting cushion, puffing on a house special, looking around for what she thought was long enough to catch his glimpse.

The smoke escaped her mouth like a strong current, tugging on her lips.

She closed her eyes loudly, her lashes gripping on her skin. She moved forward, tiredly flicking her wrist towards company, passing the roach.

As the man reached out to accept it, her gaze lingered on him, and their fingers briefly touched in the exchange, and he put the joint to his lip and turned back around as she rolled her eyes and bit her bottom lip, controlling its twitching.

I looked on as the chatters in the room were drowned out by the couple's silence, a crowd of people incongruent with each other and apparently so, some with flashy jackets or wool hats, sharply dressed or in t- shirts, faces hidden in a blur of smoke, an inaudible melange of noise, a horizontal tower of Babel smack-dab in the old Gothic center, under sea-level, meanderers all united by a pungent delight.

Nobody moved. People blinked and opened their mouths and drank and gulped but nobody moved. She stared at him still. He, elsewhere, possibly counting up the notches in the painting framed up in the hall across from

them. I had for a moment an unfamiliar desire to know more about this couple.

Surely that was not the sum of their relationship. There must have been a movement, a shift. I could not think of a real life example of such an abrupt change. One doesn't wake up and abandon all they know without explanation. No other pursuit bears such responsibility. A shared presence by definition entails a consensus, it requires, at least, a similar pursuit.

The way she looked at him inside that cramped up musky space.

Her glaring eyes.

It made everything around them appear more clear around the smoke.

Even to me, almost melting into the register now.

Jan affably pushed my shoulder. He put the new machine down onto the table and passed me the cable so I could plug it on the outlet next to the register, as he lit a joint and flicked a small plastic wheel fastened on the wall, to increase the volume of the music.

The machine growled and I propped up to look around its side - I saw the woman walk past me, following the man. I heard my co-worker say something in the back.

"Adios."

The woman stumbled on her step, and turned around to look at us, if only for a second.

Jan approached me.

“You meet them bro? Very good people. Spanish. He’s getting married.”

“Who’s getting married?”

“The guy. He’s here for a Bachelor party or something.

Like all of these guys.” he whispered.

“**He brought his wife with him?”** I asked.

“**That’s his sister, man.**

Cute...right?

Look.” he said, grinning, holding a small piece of crumpled up paper.

“I got her number.”



I unplugged the new coffee machine, even though the other one was out of commission, because;

It was 5 PM, the machines were off, and the dull routine kicked in: clean both, pack one up for inspection. I still had to lock up for the night and be back early to open. Hours like this stretch endlessly, one task bleeding into the next.

I patted Jan on the back for his good work, and thanked him in advance for covering for me as I went outside for an extended smoke break.

I did not see him or anyone from the shop ever again.

HIGH-FLYING PLASTIC

I met Sophie at a time where my mind and thoughts were rather malleable and when even a brief encounter could leave a permanent etch. And she, although not loud and quite timid, only in my company for a few days, penetrated so easily through the early fugazi steps of conversation that I could do no other than to keep seeing her. She was on the island willingly and very apparently happy, covering only the necessary, opening up the rest to be kissed by a sun that had escaped her prior, her skin pulsing, brilliant and eating up the heat - offering no reflection back. She had sat next to me on the pretext of awaiting her father's return from inside the water. On the vantage point; really a hut on the sandy bulge across the beach, she could not only enjoy his gliding but also relieve herself of the stress of his safety being next to the station of a professional - really a dazed youth, born just moments before.

And those first moments were silent as each sentence the girl attempted was cut off by a prospective rider waiting to be launched. These are synthetic dragons, high-flying balloons of air and nylon, connected by ropes that extend and become as tight and sharp as metal strings, rightly magic to an unsuspecting passer-by

They'd line up their ropes, some excited, some heavy, walking back into the sea as I lifted their wings to pull them up, and you'd see, if across no layman, the flying structure completely obey and only slightly sway against the wind,

and the adept glide through the water, in full control - underneath its shadow.

On a third or fourth trek to where the water met the sand and weeds, with the company behind me still not acquainted, I met the man in question, almost gliding, the beam of his board pattering the water, rotating the dragon swiftly above his head, looping it to the left, shooting airborne in graceful pirouette, landing with his back to the pilot. The girl rushed forward in applause.

"Did you see that?" She shouted excitedly

"He's been trying that for ages."

She looked at the water and stretched her arms behind her back, rolling out, she perched on her heels and fluttered her arms up, and then closed back up again, as if in that moment of release she had forgotten anyone was there. But now done and relaxed, she was conscious again, and looked back, to see me staring.

She cleared her throat.

"Do you ride?"

I had spent little time in the sea and even less trying to master it, though I'd been around it enough to understand the art and feel its spray.

"Not really" I said.

I stayed on the hill a while longer, watching as people came and went, drying their kites, packing up, and leaving. Meanwhile, Sophie was still out on the water, riding nearly to the edge of the bay, while her father sat just a few me-

ters away from me, engrossed in his book. I tilted my head toward the sky, hoping the sun's rays might jolt me from my daze and bring some clarity to my thoughts, but it was late afternoon, and the light was already retreating behind the mountain.

I picked up my canteen and headed towards him. He was a lanky man, tall but not overly so, his face ripened by the sun, skin puffing up forward in layers, a nose mostly red, accentuated by the steel sting of his glasses.

"Sorry sir - Excuse me?" I said as I approached.

He spoke in a heavy German accent.

"Yes? Hi. Hello! How are you?" he uncrossed his legs, and lifted his book, greeting me.

"I just wanted to inform you that soon we will be closing up, and our rescue boat will be off-duty."

"Ah right, yes. No need - I have the van here and Sophie is a very good little rider. Yes."

"But with the wind, with how it's changed now, it may be difficult to return."

"Ah. Not difficult. Impossible. For her, with the size of her kite. With her skill. She will not make it back upwind. I'll pick her up with the van.

Over there!" he said, pointing to the church where the bay folds back into the land.

At night, after me and my roommate had tended to the caravan and moved it back behind the lot next to the generator, we thought to reward ourselves

with staff dinner, graciously offered once per week by the dominion chain.

It was an all-you-can-eat spread, featuring two types of meat, occasional fresh fish, pasta, salads, and various sides. Rumours hinted at a special Turkish delicacy, but all we found were fruit bowls. Later, we learned that a commis had been severely reprimanded and held accountable for the missing Turkish delight, having left it out to be ruined by the heat. I made myself a simple plate of pasta and chicken, and my roommate wisely followed suit. With no guidance on the best choices, sticking to the basics turned out to be the smartest decision

We ate quickly, threw another portion on, and after inhaling that too, each lit up a smoke.

I spotted Sophie's dad first and instinctively glanced at Mike. He must have thought I was signalling something because he immediately stood up, ready to manage the kind of public relations the dominion consistently claims to welcome—if not explicitly reward. Playing it safe, he pretended to recognize the Dutchman from somewhere near the water. With a laugh, he introduced his daughter. Her gaze briefly landed on Mike before shifting to me, her expression brightening as she approached the table.

Sophie and her father sat down across from us.

She had crossed her legs and rested her head in her palms, trying to hide her awkwardness. Robin, deep in conversation with Mike, glanced to his left and saw his daughter slumping into the chair, her discomfort evident.

"You want to go?" she said.

I heard her, but pretended I hadn't, glancing around to see if anyone else had noticed what she'd said.

"Dad...?" she nudged him.

"Can we be excused from the table?"

I turned red almost immediately, feeling as though my face had been momentarily inflated, puffing up like a balloon. Even Mike, who I'd seen remain unfazed by almost anything—even the oddest of situations—was biting his tongue. I was fifteen at the time, Sophie maybe sixteen or seventeen. Mike was closer in age to Robin than to me—not old, but not too young either. It was that strange in-between time of the teenage years, where asking to be excused from a table of four felt a little dubious—neither innocent nor playful, yet not quite mature or inevitable either.

Besides, I could have waited, I thought, munched on some banana and honey, made some more conversation, and then later, we'd talk freely. Before that, we really had not exchanged many words, she had sat down with me, asked me my name, of course, and what I do on the island, but not much more.

Her father's ear only slightly fluttered, lifting at the tip, but his eyes did not move from Mike, as he was mid- conversation.

"Go. No problem. Enjoy yourself.. I'll park at the beach however. You'll need to bike back."

We sat on the deck in the center of the grounds, overlooking the beach beneath the arbour.

The island, free from industry and traffic, untouched by light pollution, offered an unobstructed view of the galaxy above. She leapt up a step to where a

hammock stretched between two pillars, settling into it, her legs drifting above the wild night flowers creeping up the platform.

"This is a lot more comfortable than a chair. And it's more quiet." she said.

"This is one of the best spots on the island, I think" I replied.

Did you feel as comfortable to speak before, on the table, as you do now?" she added.

"No."

I looked down for a second.

"I'm going home in three days and I still haven't really seen the island."

"But, you go around, no? With the van and everything?"

"Yes, I mean, I don't know, I haven't felt the island."

I let out an awkward chuckle.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm here with my dad and it's fine, we eat out every day and ride for hours, but what's the point when there's literally no one my age to hang with? The only person close to my age is you, and even you are always with the older crowd because of your job. I get it, but still. My dad's cool, he lets me do whatever, but it's just me by myself all the time with no real friends or fun. I just wanna get drunk, party, and actually make memories on this island, because when I get home it's gonna be

nothing but days stuck inside, raining non-stop, and my hair will be brown again and I'll be whiter than milk."

"You're not too tan to begin with" I said, trying to lighten the mood.

She playfully kicked me and as we laughed, my hand absently reached for the joint in my pocket. I lit it and took a deep drag as she continued talking. My thoughts drifted away from her words, wondering if anything I said would actually help or if I was just too green to offer any useful feedback.

Now in retrospect I regard the matter very differently but that is solely due to having lived through it.

"Are you smoking?"

"Yes." I softly nodded.

"Can I try?"

I took a good last puff and handed her the smoke.

On her last night, we slept in the caravan Mike had amicably unburdened.

In the morning, she sat on top of me and shielded me from the wind as I rolled.

The contrast of our bodies was striking: my dark, burned skin against her pink skin and light hair.

My shirt stretched tightly over my round waist - her exuding the radiance of a flawless complexion.

I held her, but now in retrospect I regard, not very tightly.

The next time I heard from Sophie it was via surrogate, her father, Robin.

It was some years later and while during the winter other parts of life had transformed and in places, even completely altered, my summers were always the same. I found myself returning to the island, trying to freeze myself in time, in sentiment of what I had first felt being there.

I was sitting on the bench by the beach, the wind blasting directly at us, pushing the seaweed closer with each crashing wave. The season was almost over, and Deejay, who was in charge of rescues on our side of the bay, and I, now promoted to teaching others how to ride, were sharing a smoke. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a kite fly past, then felt its rope tug lightly on my chin just as Deejay shoved me down. The kite's wing crashed into a group of beachgoers and their picnics, scattering everything in its path.

Robin was one of the first people to notice the entire debacle. He calmly landed his kite from inside the water, and approached the rider liable of taking a few heads with him. These dragons, thankfully, are man- made, and man makes, and learns, and by time gets better. Robin pulled down on the rider's pilot and unlatched his connection ropes while Deejay ran to deflate the falling wing.

Robin bought us a beer after and when Deejay checked out, Sophie soon came into the conversation.

"She asks about you all the time, you know."

I had seen Robin almost every year, but Sophie, never, since then.

His voice faltered slightly, the weight of her absence hanging heavy between us. Her disappearance had spiralled into a self-destructive pattern. She had

locked herself away for some time, starving, then turning to drugs for an escape. Robin mentioned that Sophie was his adopted daughter, and I couldn't help but wonder if he said it to distance himself from the weight of her suffering—to remove any sense of connection. Was he trying to say, **"I am not the father of that junkie"**? Or was it his way of explaining that her struggles were the result of never truly feeling at home?

He continued, explaining how she eventually got better and started going out again. But the cycle repeated itself, each time with more intensity until Robin finally intervened and admitted her to a treatment center.

I struggled to find a productive response to his words. Instead, I simply nodded in understanding.

The last time I heard from Sophie was through a phone call. She was traveling with her boyfriend, living in a caravan near the beach. The thought filled me with a quiet joy.

