

Sorrow Shared

The moment I think this day can't get any worse, I hear the tell-tale crack of thunder rumble above me.

Why me, God? Everything is so bleak that all I can do is laugh. I get concerned looks from the people sitting around me, and for a moment I wonder if this is how it feels to be a clown—draped in rainbow hues, all eyes on me and my pristine... ah. *Not-so-pristine makeup*, I suppose, as I feel a tear roll down my cheek.

Raindrops smack against the windows of the tram as we glide along tracks. When the city started construction on the tram system some years back, *everyone* had something to complain about. People protested about how blazingly loud it would be, running 24/7 every day of the week. Turns out the city got the last laugh: the electric train was built to be eerily silent, minimizing noise pollution and replacing the need for a car altogether. If anything, the tram system has helped quiet the city down by ridding us of half the cars *whooshing* by.

Usually I'm pretty grateful for that, having moved into one of the newly-built tiny-house communities right next to downtown. Right now, I almost wish it was a little louder. I mean, what a cliché, right? Breaking up through text, all while rain falls around me.

I pull out my phone again, like any second now my boyfriend will text me that it was just a prank. *Ex-boyfriend*, I correct myself bitterly, letting the ache of the prefix sink in.

It's still open to the message he sent me 10 minutes ago. The text reads:

Theo, I'm really sorry to do this to you, but I don't think you deserve a relationship where I can't be honest with you. Haven't you felt it too? The spark between us has faded.

I'll always love you, but I don't think I'm in love with you.

I'm sorry. I know we made plans to go to Pride today. Are you already on your way? You should go, still. I want you to be happy, but I don't think we'll ever be happy if we stay together.

Below that, a string of unsent texts from my end:

ashwin??

ash please

*can we talk about this
call me please*

ash did you block me

At once, this is too much. My breaths pick up in pace, static fills my ears, my throat closes up... the expansive walls of the tram seem to close in 'til I'm the only person in the world, breathing shallow, heart pounding, knees weak, unfocused—

I spill out of the tram with heaving gasps, dropped off on the sidewalk unceremoniously. I barely catch myself on a sapling of a tree, which trembles under my weight.

Beneath gloomy grey skies, the thriving greenery seems to taunt me with its vividness. Twirling vines dance freely, and the newly-planted trees on every block drink up the rain greedily. In a moment of sobriety, I wonder if beautiful, ambitious Ashwin, who would fall asleep blueprinting his dream eco-city on call with me, would smile at the sight.

I begin to run, directionless. The pain in my muscles, at least, distracts me from the thoughts in my head.

Forward-forward-forward—

I don't know how long I spend mindlessly sprinting. Everything burns: my eyes, my lungs, my heart. It takes me a moment to break free from the reverie, taking in my location: Lake Ontario Park.

Breathless, I stare unseeingly into the lapping waves. The stormy spell has made the lake restless, surging waters crashing onto shore. I'm drawn towards the eroded rocks, slipping over ragged stones until I'm teetering dangerously over volatile tides.

“Scuse me, would you mind moving out of the way?”

I flinch, turning to see a sheepish-looking boy around my age. He's carrying a large garbage bag thrown over his shoulder.

“Sorry! I'll clear through here quickly, but the trash pickup crew has to scan the area.

We've found a lot of broken glass, and I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"Mm—no, I'm sorry, I'll get out of here. Sorry for getting in your way." Stumbling stiffly through an apology, I brush past the boy, seeking somewhere completely empty to wallow in my sorrows. To my surprise, he catches me by my sleeve, steering me back around.

He coughs, looking aside. "Are you... okay?"

When I stare at him blankly, he lets out an awkward chuckle, gesturing wordlessly at my soaked figure. Once he realizes he won't get a response, he huffs.

"I mean, what are you doing out here in the rain without a jacket or an umbrella? You'll freeze yourself to death."

"I..."

My tongue feels too lead-heavy to articulate a response. After a short stare-down, he backs away. Startled at the abruptness of his departure, I stand there in his wake. Before I have time to turn away, though, he comes dashing back in my direction, sans garbage bag.

I can't do much but blink, overwhelmed as he whirlwinds towards me. One second I'm just standing there; the next, he's unzipped his raincoat and thrown it over my shoulders.

"It's not much, but it'll last you the run. Don't worry, we're not far."

With a wide grin, he slips his hand into mine, and with an insistent tug, we start running.

"Huh—wait, what?"

He barely lets me speak as we run down the sidewalk, charging without a care for the puddles that splash over him. To his credit, it really isn't a long run until he slows to a halt, dragging me to a fumbling stop.

Arriving at a homey-looking bamboo building, he pulls me into a dining room. Heads turn at our rushed entrance, but after a moment everyone turns back to their food, a low hum of mellow chatter filling the space.

"Hey, Mr. Wang! Think you could fix up a bowl of soup for me?" The boy calls into another room.

“Ace! A pleasure to see you—of course I can, but it’s not your usual time, is it?” A warm, booming voice returns his greeting.

“Oh, it’s not for me!” the boy—*Ace*—says. “I’m just stopping by to say hello.”
“Well, as long as you’re not busy, we could use some extra hands on deck.”

“Of course, I’ll be with you in a bit!”

Ace turns to me. “Welcome to Martha’s Table! We’re a newer branch here, but set-up has been going well.” A softer smile decorates his face. “It’s nice, seeing more soup kitchens pop up around town.”

It takes me a moment before I understand. An embarrassed flush washes over my face:

“I’m not homeless.”

Ace fixes his gaze on me. “So?”

“I mean... I’m just, I—I *have* food,” I append dumbly. “I don’t want to take what I don’t need.”

“Really? You seem like you *do* need a nice, warm bowl of soup right now.” He gives a flippant shrug, gesturing at my wet hair. Speaking of...

“Thank you for lending me your coat, but I should really...” I cut myself off. *I don’t have anywhere to go anymore.*

Ace seems to catch onto my hesitation.

“No, hold onto it. I’d feel bad if you went back out like that.” He continues. “You shouldn’t feel bad for using a soup kitchen, you know. Turning people away is the opposite of what we do.”

He ruminates over his next words carefully. “It just seems you’re having a tough time. I know you don’t know me...?”

“...Theo.”

“Theo. If you’ve got time, I wouldn’t mind hearing out your troubles.”

“I don’t understand... why are you...?”

“Isn’t it enough to want to keep you far out of that storm?” His tone is jovial, but shifts as he goes on. “That, and... you just looked so dreadfully lonely out there.”

For a moment I’m speechless.

“You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want to! I hope I haven’t overstepped. At least stay for the food—Mr. Wang makes a killer wonton soup. Really, it’s not a big deal. Helping people without question is kind of our whole thing.”

I let out a choked laugh.

“You seem really nice... Ace. I think you would get along with my boyfriend.”

“Oh!”

“Ex-boyfriend, I mean.”

“Oh.”

Pause. “Do you... want to talk about it?”

Ah... why not.

“I... I guess it was a long time coming. We’ve been drifting for a while... but I never wanted to acknowledge it.”

I talk for some time, letting ugly truths spill out of my mouth and land against Ace’s quiet nods and *mhms*.

“He wanted to change the world—but I was content letting him be *my* world. And I guess that’s just not enough for him, ‘cause he—he—he had the audacity to break up during *Pride Month*.”

“Hey—”

“And it’s so stupid! Because I have no idea what to do with myself, but he’s—he’s probably out there doing *fine*!”

“Are you—”

“And you know the stupidest part? I spent *hours* planning out the perfect outfit to match the fireworks and learning how to do graphic-liner to match—and somehow that’s all I can think about! The stupid fireworks!”

By now tears are fully streaming down my face, until I can’t distinguish them from the raindrops trickling from my hair. Somehow it’s more mortifying now than it was earlier on the tram, even though he’s the only person looking at me.

Suddenly, I find myself wrapped up in a hug.

“!!”

I sob heavy, unbridled tears into Ace’s shoulder. Every shallow breath seems to ground me closer back to reality, until I’m barely shaking. He pulls away, one hand resting on my shoulder, as he faces me.

“...It’s a drone show,” he blurts out. My surprise quickly gives way to amusement as I watch his self-assured demeanour slip, hand reaching to cover his face in embarrassment.

“I’m so sorry, I have no clue why I said that.” He doesn’t meet my gaze, but rambles on, flustered. “Ahh, I’m so sorry! I’m so bad at comforting people.”

The shock of it is enough to stop most of the flow of tears. Almost delirious, I let out a wet giggle. “No, please, tell me more.”

“Ah, well... it’s something they’re trying out this year—my sister’s on the team setting up the event, and she says they had sponsors who were willing to give them a lot of money, so they were gonna try out something less loud, and I thought it was cool so it came to mind, but I get it’s really inappropriate to bring up right now...”

Feeling a warm surge of gratitude, I speak:

“It’s okay. Thank you, Ace. I mean it.”

He looks at me, wide-eyed. Emboldened, I continue.

“I’m... glad, that you were there when I needed someone to talk to.”

It takes a moment, but he smiles something radiant, like the Sun coming out from behind the clouds.

“I’m glad too.”

We look at each other for a heartbeat, before a spark of laughter comes out of me. Before long, we’re both laughing. Something seems to free itself then, a joyous sensation fluttering out of me.

There comes a lull in our laughter. He smiles, soft.

“Look, Theo... if you’ve got nothing better to do, wanna help out in the kitchen?”

Maybe, even on the worst day ever, I still have the choice to make it a little better.

“I’d love to.”

“Theo! C’mere!”

“Huh?”

“Ah, sorry, Mr. Wang—I’ll be more careful with the plates, yes—hurry up, Theo! The show’s starting!”

“Oh! Coming!”

“Hey, no pushing! Angie, you’re too tall, Theo can’t see a thing! Here, here, beside Talia! You can’t miss this!”

As I fit myself into the tiny space beside the window, I see flashes of light painted across the sky. Breathtaking stories of love and friendship and new beginnings dance amongst clouds. Though the thunderstorm rages on, the dazzling lights seem like their own radiant sun.

Through a tiny kitchen window, the colours look more vibrant than ever.