

## Trigger Warning

*(Content notice: sexual assault)*

I'd like to believe that I live in the Lofoten Islands in Norway.

The warmth drizzled in between intervals of that raspy wind. Then, only then, those definite cuts of it would halt to knife my sharpened features. It wasn't always like this here. It wasn't supposed to have snow on the beach. Yet the turquoise water was still preserved by the thickened flakes, without the once prosperous hipsters whistling and strolling the sand nor those alluring blondes in their pantone tracksuits or their plaid skirts and fishnet tights, idling on top of their daddy's Jeep with their legs crossed, assuring themselves that their physiques were always the utter destination of their wannabes'.

He aimed to drown me that night in the water. He didn't suffocate me, but that was when it all went wrong. It was already pouring on the beach, and the firmament was suppressing enough that I could hear myself weep. But I've known him my entire life, and he was so tender, so gentle that to this day, I wondered if I was the one who caused him to become this incompetent imbecile.

Over the years, I acknowledged the beauty of isolation -- mostly placing myself in the center of the ocean to float. That type of tranquility was uncanny. That day, there were snowflakes on the beach. It wasn't anything peculiar, of course, but the uncontaminated ground was marked with

traces of him, one step at a time. Closer and *closer*. His softened lips were against my ear, his coarse voice was in my head, except it ceased to exist in my fascination. His vile words were discerned by the ocean, and his body was pressed against mine. My name on his tongue rolled right off, but his name on mine took a second thought, a successive breath, a succeeding pause. Over and over, over and over, over and over...until the ripples finally halted, and the sea recuperated to its usual self.

By the time I woke up, the snow melted, and the sand was sheltering my body. The perceptible particles engulfed my complete figure, but my brokenness was discernible. The sand clustered in my plunging tears. There was no escape. He was long gone now. His footprints melded with the remaining snow, and they all fused into the void. Perhaps that was the lure of nonexistence.

That day, I prayed. I meticulously drew that cross around my exposed body, and I pled to God to ease the pain. Maybe all those years of stumbling across the words of Christmas songs in the church had finally paid off, I embraced the figure in front of me without a doubt. I could eye the torment in her eyes, I could taste the wrath in her voice, I could distinguish the distaste on her fingertips, but I did not mind. I was three years old again, safe and sound in my mother's arms. Pieces of me were shattered across the shore. The echoes of my trembling voice could testify to that. Yet my mother advised me to surrender, to conceal the truth, and to silence the jumbled voices in my head. Those voices tangled together like the intricate Christmas lights, which were once displayed with so much gleam. Part of that gleam was reignited by those that notified me that they love me, every single day, over and over. Over and over. Over and over.

"I *do* love my body." The voices squeaked.

Reassurance, how endearing. I often felt senseless by those words. I wasn't disbelieving them, I simply stopped to cognize myself in the mirror for a long time.

I left Norway shortly after.

It wasn't until the day of my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday that I revisited the Lofoten Islands. The vicious breeze was still there to scratch my cheeks, the sand particles under my feet were still distinct, and the water...oh the water, it was still the turquoise that I imprinted in my memories, the indistinguishable coziness that once embraced all my dread. The fragments of him were duplicating in my head as I sprinted across the shore and plummeted into the ripples. The voices were shrieking inside of me incessantly, but I didn't bother to terminate them. I just craved to feel. To feel something. Anything.

The sky blazed that day as I floated in the ocean. My face grew passionate, and those voices finally terminated in a howl. Perhaps, the hipsters and the quirky teens on the shore could sense my distress as each of them enfolded my troubles and lifted them away. Step by step. One by one.

I began to write emails to the family of that man. After all, he was still a so-called "family friend" whom I occasionally encounter every five years or so through reunions and was shipped to a juvenile school for delinquents in Switzerland. I did not hear back from them, of course. Until that December.

His mother apologized about how she was incompetent enough to raise a son like this, and about how heart-wrenching it was when she informed her husband, now ex-husband, about the incident.

*I'm sorry. You didn't deserve any of this, but my son is young, so he is still learning.* She wrote.

*You know you can talk to me, right? I'm always here for you.*

*Merry Christmas, L.*

*Best wishes,*

*M*

*I know. Merry Christmas.* I wrote back.

I grinned peacefully as the voices in my head muffled into a reliving sigh. Turns out, the only person that can soothe the ache was me, and only me.

When I asked my mother why she put out a ball of Christmas lights, she told me that since it tied itself up like that, it could unroll itself too. Indeed, the lights on that Christmas tree were untying their own knots. One knot at a time. Over and over. Over and over. Over and over.

*Over and over.*