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All of Life's Answers are Contained in this Story

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All of Life's Answers are Contained in this Story

"Were you in love with him?"

How do I respond to that?

I have too many questions to even begin.

Thoughts are fickle, ripped away like the fog of warm breath in a winter wind. That's why I write them down; or at least type them into the notes on my phone. See, carrying around a notebook is a little too hipster for me—have to keep up that 'could be anything, but is probably nothing' style of mine. Jeans, a shirt, maybe a hat or a scarf if I'm feeling really edgy, but definitely not a notebook. That would obviously stick out. And God forbid if anyone got ahold of it. So, in my phone my notes will go.

Currently, I'm working on a piece at the prompting of my friends. According to them, an ended relationship "makes for great art, Valentine!", and I've had plenty of those. Usually I prefer my *'pieces of art,'* as they say, to have a little more substance or *meaning* than angst and pining. I thought about telling them that, but then I found I had already typed the first "stanza," if I could even call it that. In retrospect, I guess I should write about something that means something *to me*, so it's genuine, right? And what means more than love unrealized? For what is love if not baring your soul and asking for acceptance? Yeah, just put me on a Hallmark card already.

It's a 15 minute walk to my first class from my apartment, so I left at 7:30. If I walk a little slow, it's a 20 minute walk, and sometimes I stop to chirp at squirrels, which could make me late if I don't leave early enough. It's a serene walk so early in the morning on a college campus, with most unwilling to brave

an 8 am. It's that perfect time of year where I get to watch the sun climb over the trees during my stroll.

Today, I walk a little more briskly, finding the cold a little much in my short sleeves. When I finally arrive to class I see my friend, Thomas, sitting at our usual table. Papers cover more than half of the available space, all coated in his messy writing. His hair falls in unkempt waves down to his shoulders.

Looking at Thomas, I can't stop myself from thinking about how my friends have always wanted to be there for me, how I wish I were more open with them. How dishonest is it for me to go about my day normally as I feel life is falling down around me like broken shards of glass? If I ignore everything and refuse to address anything with myself, how am I ever supposed to not lie to them about who I am? I'm two steps into the room when he calls out to me,

Little cold out there for that outfit isn't it?

Hey, have to be able to show off my arms, dontcha know? I reply with a smirk, contorting my arms into a very unsexy stance. I join him, clearing a spot in front of me by pushing a few papers towards him. I watch the glass I knew only I could see tumble to the floor with the motion.

Why are you here so early? I ask. Thomas hates mornings and wouldn't have taken this class if there had been a different section this semester; alas here we both. The difference being I have come to appreciate mornings for the clarity it provides me, and Thomas... usually skips. I sometimes think about telling Thomas how beautiful the sunrise is in the morning, or how the squirrels run up to greet me now, and that they would love to see him, too. I haven't ever gotten around to it.

Thomas goes off on some tale about late night drinking, me finally noticing the bags under his eyes and his stale breath. Apparently, Thomas doesn't get hangovers, he gets deep, rewarding sleep and the magical ability to wake up early. Lucky fucker. When I drink I get anxiety hangovers that make me jumpy the whole next day. Or the magical ability of getting head splitting pain. I feel my head begin to ache a little, remembering last week when I drank a little too much trying to forget my current troubles.

Eventually, others start filing into the room. We banter with the rest of our table, or at the unlucky souls that are moved across the room at the professors prompting (as if we're back in grade school and don't pay to be

here). I eventually zone out, my mind wandering back to the piece I'm working on, the piece I lie to my friends about not having.

For one, is it okay to have loved him?

Was the time too short?

Maybe what I thought I felt was fleeting. Maybe it would have gone away,

If the situation had been slightly altered..

I know it went out like a flash for him

Sitting with Thomas, I start to think about how I haven't started a history paper that's due tomorrow, and suddenly I'm twirling a pencil in my hand, staring blankly at a board covered in historical dates and times, barely visible through multitudes of imaginary reflective shards. Luckily, I find a paper titled "Gender Relations in Medieval Europe" in my bag, signaling that I must have completed the assignment sometime the night before, so I turn that in at class's end. In a startling moment of lucidity, I remember I didn't much like being alone last night. A friend's name appears above a text on my phone, and just like that I'm in Elise's apartment with no care for how I got there; all that matters is that I'm here and not home.

No one who has died..." I pause for effect, "would not have died eventually," I say, quoting Augustine at Elise.

She shrugs and clips, "Profound. But I've heard that before. It's not your work."

I laugh, "Sorry, I mean carpe diem. YOLO."

At this, Thomas and our friend Jackson chuckle "Yolo," Thomas mimics through a giggle.

I think about sharing the piece I'm working on, for philosophical debate, but instead I continue, "Look, just turn something on the TV and find something profound in that. I can't be some sort of spirit guide every time we all get high

or it'll lose its novelty. Besides, everything is deep if you read into it too much. So they did turn on the TV, and they did read into it too much.

I look out the window and find even the sky struggles to stay blue today; but in this space with my friends, the world is right. There is no person in my mind, at any time, there is only what I see here and now. Past actions of my own or others can't haunt me here. There is no feeling apart from Elise's gaze on me, or thoughts of Thomas's leg brushing into the space in which I lie, or Jackson's arm lazily draping on the couch behind me, seemingly full in purpose to keep me grounded in the present. His arm twitches as he speaks. We all lean toward him, our attention anticipating his quiet, steady voice,

"Emotion and space, thinking and seeing, time and action? It's all the same." Have I been high enough to monologue without noticing? Could he read my mind? What does he even mean?

"If that is all the same, altering our perceptions is terrifying," Elise quietly mumbles, her stare moving from me and claiming a section of the carpet between us as her own.

Jackson's tone is a tangible cold front, pulling our circle tighter in the war to keep warm,

"As terrifying as being born in the wrong country, our space;

Or American society's influx of media consumption, what we see;

Or anyone who does anything, except something for our world, in its current state of unrest, our actions."

I thought to ask about his perception of love, does he find it insignificant in that it does nothing for our world? But by the time I allow the thought to occur to me I'm not at the apartment anymore, I'm a figure in the dark walking home alone.

So,

Was it too one sided for it to have been real?

If it could be so easy for him to cut it,

Was it just the intensity of the environment?

Maybe the short time frame had an effect.

The urgency pushing me to greater lengths.

I know he didn't feel the same as me.

The voices in other apartments echo off of my door, sounding as if they were coming from within. As if there were people inside enjoying the pleasure of one another's company. But I know there *are* no people inside. It's just my apartment. Empty. Devoid. Without.

I shut the door, keys clanging obnoxiously against the doorknob as I do. I'm sure with my loud mouth, quick to comment, most of my friends would find that I hate the extra sounds I make ironic. I do too, but in a way that just increases how sad I feel when I'm alone

I walk into my room and catch sight of an old note poking out from under my dresser. I try to ignore it, but when I curl into my bed, I begin to wonder if love even has meaning, and if that meaning is insignificant in the grand scheme of existence. Or if it even matters, if it means anything to anyone. I know others find love enough to base a life off of it: the idea of white picket fences, knights in shining armor, a Bonnie and Clyde scenario; they all make for compelling stories, and surely stories reflect some aspect of significant existence... Eventually I fall asleep.

Terrible hanging lights, almost too bright. Music loud enough I know it's there, but not loud enough for me to hear what song it is over the roar of the fryer. The setting sunlight pours into the room, striking the too-white, hospital-like walls of the fast food restaurant around us. A quick after school date, an excuse to hang out, just us.

He steals all of my shake, grinning at something I said. I think I was trying to impress him with some philosophical conundrum. I let a fry hang out of my mouth, wiggling my eyebrows at him. He tries to bite the end of it, but I pull away, feigning betrayal.

He's amazing, how'd I get so lucky? It's not often a deep friendship has the opportunity to turn into something more, and even more rare for it to work as

perfectly as this. Christian looks up at me with those deep brown eyes and the whole world falls away around us. I let myself drown in their warmth.

Suddenly he looks sad. I feel life chip into rain sized bits, falling around me. Into me. Until I worry I might drown.

In my dreams, I'm always walking a wire, but there's some definite gravity pulling me in one direction. Is the weight of how I feel what keeps me balanced or what drags me down?

Besides,

What even is being in love?

What does that mean to me?

"Love" and "in love" is different for me, I know.

I wonder at his personal perception of love.

I know next to nothing, but,

I know he loves another.

What day is it anyway? I can't remember when I last ate something, and I'm not even sure if I'm going to the right class as I walk across campus, a cookie (so nutritious, I know) now hanging out of my mouth. I tell my professor something along the lines of "my dog ate my homework." As it turns out, Political Ideology was the right class but my loss of track of a calendar had alternate consequences to being in the right class on the wrong day.

I remember how some friends I shared with Christian are supposed to message me at some point. I had hoped those mutual friends forgot, but then I'm eyeing a fascinating vase in a coffee shop, having an unfortunate conversation about Christian and how things used to be with Bridgette and Mark—the mutuals. A topic I thought I would avoid while spending the obligated time with the friends that had not forgotten to message me.

Elise calls me about the time I find myself in her apartment, tumbling uncontrollably into the future increasingly more often, correlating directly to the increasing disinterest in being in my own mind at any present time, my personal storm of broken mirror waxing and waning by the moment. I don't care how I got there but damn am I glad it interrupted the coffee fiasco. I begin telling Elise about the encounter she saved me from, but it comes out as I had forgotten I needed to do something; a lie.

Then I'm saying goodbye to Jackson, who offers to drive me home from Elise's place, also lying when he asks why I'm acting weird. I'm not. Am I? No, definitely not. Everything is normal. My skin pricks against the fragments that fall in an endless torrent around me.

I hope I at least thanked them for rescuing me, but now it's been a while and I'm not sure if I ever did. I might have been too caught up to remember I wanted to. I unlock my phone and scroll to my notes. I don't remember having this thought, but there it is, captured for me directly below the piece I'm currently working on:

If you never lie, you need never remember;

but I lie all of the time, to my friends,

to my family, to myself. I'm a pretty

horrible person. But that's fine;

because, truly, aren't we all?

Elise, Jackson, and I are walking to class. Tuesday's and Thursday's are philosophy and writing and thinking about life; introspection. Who better to be by my side than the ever-challenging Elise and guru Jackson?

Our class is electric. We walk in and immediately our professor shouts at us,

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?"

Philosophy, where everything is subtle, except questions asked by professors. I find I've quipped how 'the raging alcoholism and people watching of a Friday

night frat party are the cornerstone of my perfectly meaningful existence' before I am able to speak any truth.

After the laugh my response receives, the disgruntled professor responds with, "I think we'll give you a pass this time, young Valentine," and turns to Elise, who responds with a passionate monologue best summarized as "making a difference" in a voice of armored steel. To which our professor responds, "Ah yes, young Hitler would agree," and the rest of the class gasps.

Jackson steps forward and responds, "We exist merely for ourselves. Who are we to judge another's meaning?"

"A true relativistic perspective: it means what we want it to mean. Though an answer that can be given with the littlest of thought."

Charged by the insult, we argue that Jackson's perspective is the only true philosophical perspective of meaning for ten minutes before finding our seats. When we finally find our seats, we stay standing for all of class. Our peers jump in. We throw metaphorical daggers, figuratively pounce on the holes in arguments, and chastise circular reasoning.

The professor winds us down eventually. "Good warm up. But here's the actual question for today, as an introduction to the start of our new unit." He paces the front of the classroom and strikes the board with chalk, writing three names, "Where is the line of morality between action, accomplishment, and intent?"

"If Abraham Lincoln set free the slaves just to win the war and not because it was right, does it matter? If Edward Jenner cured smallpox but did experiments on babies to get there? If Harry S. Truman saved millions of lives avoiding war, but did it by dropping two atomic bombs?"

"Killing is never right," a red-headed girl quips from the front of the room.

"Think back to the trolley experiment. What if someone dies either way? What are you going to do, not act?"

"I would kill less people. But if they're all at equal risk of dying by the trolley, it's different. Truman dropped bombs. What if there was another way?"

"I guess we'll never know," the professor says with a shrug. "But what if he hadn't and millions had died in a war? What if the entire world was eradicated by the war to follow?"

"Well Hitler—" she starts again.

Elise shifts uncomfortably, but the professor cuts the girl off, "Nope. No Hitler today."

Elise cuts in, "Lincoln and Jenner saved people that would not have been saved, for sure. So, shouldn't they be in a different category than Truman?"

"Couldn't the slaves have been freed, or smallpox have been cured, by someone else later that didn't do it the way they did?" the professor questions.

This stirs Jackson. "What if Lincoln hadn't freed the slaves and someone else did as an actual human rights movement later? What if that had made the black rights movement happen faster, instead of well into the 20th century?"

I pause my study of a particularly jagged sliver of translucent mirror to quietly mutter, "What if it doesn't matter?" But apparently I wasn't quiet enough

"Ah, yes, what if it doesn't, young Valentine?" responds the professor. "Right back into the topic of relativism, I see." At least he decided to take it that way.

"Isn't holding a relativistic perspective of meaning morally wrong because you're forced to accept others' own dark perspectives? Again, Hitl—" starts the girl towards the front, but is cut off by a sharp look from our professor.

All of this confuses me. If our intentions are good, we can still do bad; if our intentions are bad, we can still do good. So, what is the point of this lecture? I don't bother asking. They continue to debate whether or not what the three names on the board did right by the world.

By the end of class, everyone is at each other's throats or very confused. The teacher commends us all for the passion that fueled our arguments and awards everyone participation points. He smiles warmly and says, "Together, you might light this place on fire." Then he promptly leaves, never bothering to explain what point he had meant to make with his question. I guess that's how you get people to come to class: leave students on a cliffhanger.

I don't want to be crazy.

I don't *want* to be needy.

I *don't want* to be in love.

Time passes quickly when I decide to think about only one thing, and my mention of Friday night frats was a great reminder of that. I'm wallflowering a loud room of strobe-light lit, dancing people, Thomas and Elise included, when I notice two relatively cute future victims of... friendship and fun... wallflowering across from me. I wonder if it was Jackson or me that persuaded them to follow us out, but I'm too busy thinking about how Christian was a great planner and how I fucked that up by not being enough, while everyone else has "barely a buzz" on the way to Thomas's house from the frat because of the lack of pregame planning. Finally, I'm able to hear over the static sound of the reflective splinters falling around me and tune into an easily disrupt-able silence.

"I wonder if my family would stop sending me money if they knew I spent it on alcohol," I throw into the silent void.

The void answers, "No, probably not. They probably want you to enjoy yourself, and this *is* college, ya know?" The void is voiced by Thomas.

"They probably would stop sending it to you if you actually bought the weed for once," states Elise, who then hits my soul with a piercing look.

I respond with, "Look, look. I don't even want to smoke it, just stop passing me the blunt if it's a problem that I don't contribute. I can't help my lack of self-control. If something's put in front of me, I gotta put it in my mouth. Like other people we know." Almost everyone thinks I meant Elise and they laugh. I smile, playing along.

"Free rider," she replies in a disgusted tone, totally ignoring the insult the others thought I threw her way. She nudges me with her shoulder.

"Careful with the touching. I'm bisexual, no one's safe." I wink, but she doesn't seem worried. She just watches me carefully.

We move off of the street to the sidewalk that leads to Thomas' house. It is small, red, and framed by stoic pines. Thomas mentions that his housemates are too cool to be home on a party night, so it will just be us. He unlocks the door, steps in, and gestures wide, "Welcome to my humble abode."

Before I am shepherded in, Elise pins me firmly to the porch, "We need to talk." She walks to the corner of the porch, opting to lean against the wooden railing rather than use the perfectly good patio furniture Thomas and I had painstakingly garage sale hunted the previous summer.

"Finally admitting that crush, huh?" I turn to follow her, not yet stepping from the doorway.

"Wha—No. Shut up." She turns from me, hands gripping the railing as if for support. "You're acting weird and I just want to be sure you're not going full philosophy-nerd-emo on us."

On impulse, I close the distance between us. "It's been pretty cold lately. Other than that, it's been life as per usual. And I guess the cold is pretty normal, too."

She turns back to meet my eyes. "I'm not so sure about that."

I think about making some comment about how it is *definitely* normal for it to be cold around here, but instead I say, "Your eyes have this impressive ability to freeze people to wherever they're at. Have you considered teaching as a career? Child rearing in general?"

"Have *you* considered a career in avoidance?"

"No. Why? Do you think it pays well?"

I brace myself for more banter. Maybe a comment about my mention of her procreation abilities, or the sexist connotations of my statement in general. Instead, she turns again. Maybe the trees are more inviting. I can just barely make out her expression in the dim porchlight. I don't know if it was the shadows, but I don't recognize her expression.

"Yesterday's class was weird, don't you think?" she asks.

"What do you mean?"

“Usually Professor Mark asks a question that leads us to some conclusion, but I have no idea what he meant this time...” When I don’t say anything, she continues, “Do you think Hitler thought he was doing the right thing?”

I shrug. “I wonder if it even matters. All of everyone else’s meanings for things. We can’t ever know what exists in someone else’s head.”

“But couldn’t we be susceptible to committing great evil like him?”

“I think when people do things that hurt other people, they have to know they’re hurting them while they do it.”

“Even by accident? Just once?”

“I would never do things I thought were hurting other people like he did, especially to someone that trusted me.” She turns to look at me, I curse Freud and his slips, and continue quickly to cover,

“...and I don’t think you would do what Hitler did. Even if you thought it might make a positive difference. Which—just to point out—was *obviously* not a positive difference. And *obviously* was *not* an accident, just once.” There is no judgement in her eyes, just concern; comforting care.

“I can’t believe what people do to each other sometimes. Makes me question everything. Everyone.” Her words imply a question I’m not sure I can answer.

“Maybe it’s okay if we keep questioning? Better even. All that matters is that we keep trying despite what other people have done in the past.

The wind cuts through the trees off the porch, the sound haunting, but at least it isn’t raining anymore. I shiver and tug at my jacket. Night is upon us, the streetlights and the windows at our backs our only sources of light. It is still bright enough to see the look of realization as it crosses Elise’s face. “Maybe the lesson wasn’t as hard as I thought it was,”

Her hand finds mine in the dark. Its warmth calms me.

About Cassandra Gustafson

Cassandra Gustafson graduates spring 2020 with degrees in public affairs and mathematics. Though it may be odd to see a math major in a fiction writing magazine, remember it’s 2020 and anything can happen at this point.

