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Hemingway, the Sky Is Really Beautiful

Aubrey Roemmich

He sits next to me and he is everything and nothing all at once. He has a cigarette in his hand that he is pretending to enjoy. He takes a deep breath and speaks again, "Hemingway was a fraud, and his work is insignificant. I'm not sure why you are so infatuated with him."

He stubs out his cigarette and leans in to kiss me. The acidic smoke burns my lungs and the smell overwhelms me. All of a sudden, I feel really sick and he looks really ugly. I don't want him to smoke and I don't want him to kiss me and I don't want him to talk to me the way he does. His lips meet mine and I hold really still. I used to enjoy this. I used to sit here with him on this rooftop, and he used to listen to me and not pretend he knew more. We used to be in love.

He finally moves away and smiles at me, but it doesn't reach his eyes. I see his eyes. His eyes don't see me. Yesterday he told me I was stupid. That my work was worthless. That I was nothing. I should have cried. That should have broken me, but I am used to his words. I'm not use to this look in his eyes though. His face is really close to mine and all of a sudden, I'm scared. Scared of him, of myself, of wasting away while he takes. Our legs are dangling over the edge of the roof and twenty stories is a long way to fall. Something whispers to me that he would push me without cause (willing and uncoerced). In that moment, I decide I don't want to be afraid. I don't want to fall from this rooftop.

Something must have changed in my own eyes, because he squints at me like he's questioning me. I open my mouth to speak and then close it. I look down to the copy of *The Sun Also Rises* clutched in my hands. I look back into the eyes of the only man I have ever loved.

"I don't love you anymore." I say this calmly, coldly, like I'm not drastically changing both our lives. And maybe I'm not. I turn to get

up from the roof and with my back to him I slowly walk to the door that leads to the stairs that will take me away from this. As my hand reaches for the doorknob, he viciously grabs my elbow and pulls me to his chest. He's breathing heavy and the fear is creeping back up my spine.

"If you do this, I will make you regret everything that has happened between us." He spits these words in my face as his grip continues to tighten on my arm.

"I already do."

He examines me closely and then his face goes blank. He drops my arm and takes two steps back.

"You were always an entitled insufferable bitch." He fumbles with a new cigarette and the lighter he could never truly figure out.

I turn once again to the door, open it, and walk away from him forever.

The sun is slowly rising and I am still walking. I am walking along the river, a path I never shared with him. I know that I should be packing my things, finding a cheap motel till I can lease a new apartment. I wouldn't be surprised if he has already burned my things, or at the very least thrown them into garbage bags on the curb. Yet I can't bring myself to care. My actions have yet to sink in and I still feel sheltered from the consequences.

I stop next to a bench that sits low on the riverbank. I swing my backpack onto it and look for the granola bar that is always hiding at the bottom. Instead, I bring out a pristine copy of George Orwell's *1984*. My breathing becomes ragged as the single eye on the cover holds my gaze. It's his book and now, suddenly, the realization that I'm free comes crashing down. Gently I flip through the pages. It's his favorite novel and one I despise. He was going to make me reread it because I obviously missed the ingenious message. He lent me his copy with the warning that if I even bend a page wrong, I will have to buy him a new one. He was always like that with his books. I thought it made them feel lonely and sterile. He refused to even try to understand my love for treasuring a really beat-up book, one that has obviously been well used.

I open the book to the middle and grip both sides with my hands. With a sudden burst of violence, I snap the spine. It gives a satisfying crack, and a smile breaks across my face for the first time in months. Next, I hold the book at the top and use all my strength to rip it in two. Holding the two pieces in my hand, a loud maniacal laugh explodes from my chest. I sit on the bench by the river hysterically laughing with a mutilated book clutched to my chest. As my laughter dies, the sound of the river catches my attention. I look at the book in my hands, and in the last step of my awakening I chuck the book into the rapids swirling in front of me.

Flustered and slightly out of breath, I lean back against the cold wooden bench. A small yellow bird lands next to me. I smile at her, and she looks at me like she understands. In that moment, I feel grateful that this little bird has witnessed my honesty. Sitting on that bench with that beautiful yellow bird under a beautiful blue sky I feel whole for the first time since I met him.

A month after I leave him, I move to a new city. I've also transferred universities. I've adopted a cat and named him Bilbo. But most importantly I've started to write again. My journal no longer feels like a hollow reminder of my own wasted potential. Instead, it holds all the ink that has been bottled up in my veins, waiting to be released. I like my classes. My professors are kind. I've made some good friends. Months and months have passed, and he is nothing but a bad memory.

Every once in a while I get hit with a sense of despair so heavy I can feel it crushing my chest. His words ring in my head, reminding me of all my faults. In these quiet moments of melancholy, I am overwhelmed with the need to destroy myself. My fingers itch for a cigarette. I feel a thirst that can only be satisfied by cheap, burning alcohol. In one particularly violent episode, I burnt the story I was working on. I really liked that story, too. It held truth.

I sobbed for days after that, disgusted with my own weakness and vanity. Weakness over giving into the doubt that will forever sound like him and vanity for believing that it was a tragedy that my story was lost.

I eventually tried to rewrite it, but I could never remember what words I used to make the original so special. I'm working on a new story now.

"We have been working hard on serious poetry this entire semester. Now I think we should have some fun." Professor Wilde is exactly as her name suggests: wild. "While I have a deep love for sonnets and limericks and all forms of poetry, I think this class needs to really feel and stop thinking so much. Your final assignment will be a slam poetry piece. In two weeks, you will all perform your piece in front of the class, and those that do well will not have to take the final. I don't want to offer any instruction on this work, because I don't want you to be preoccupied with rules and rubrics. Have fun and really feel the words. Remember you will be performing this piece in front of the class out loud. Don't worry about what it looks like on paper, worry about what it sounds like in your unique voice."

She's my favorite professor. While I think I write better fiction than poetry, she has been the most encouraging person I have ever encountered. She sees me and my work, but she doesn't coddle me. I feel like I can be a real writer when she reads my work and smiles (or cries or laughs or gets angry). She's a very real person, who feels deeply. Her love and passion bleeds into everything she does, but especially in the way she teaches. She has the great ability to make a class feel infinite. I've discovered I want to feel the way I feel in her class every day.

"I'm ending class early today so you guys can get a head start on your work. You're welcome to stay here and work. I will be in my office till three if you guys find yourselves stuck." Professor Wilde leaves the room and eventually all the students follow after her. But I'm stuck in my chair staring down at a blank piece of paper that for the first time in months feels foreign. My stomach clenches and suddenly that nauseous feeling that usually accompanied his appearance is back.

Before I realize what I'm doing, my feet are dragging me to Wilde's office. She's the only one I've talked to about him. She's the only one who will understand the panicked thrumming of my heart like a little bird

trying to escape.

"I'm not brave enough for this. I'm not honest enough. I can't write this." I begin speaking before I'm even fully in her office. Throwing myself into the only armchair in her office not buried under stacks of books, I feel like a pouting child telling a parent they refuse to eat their vegetables. My arms wrap around my torso as I try to keep myself from falling apart.

She looks up at me and her eyes remind me of the sky. They are a startling blue but tinged with yellow around the pupil. Her eyes see me, and I feel safe. She removes her glasses, closes the anthology she was reading, and slowly leans back in her chair.

"Who's your favorite author?"

"I hardly see how that matters. I'm telling you I don't know how to write." My eyes are filling with tears that are close to falling as I rock myself back and forth, arms still clinging to my person.

"I think it matters a great deal. Our favorite authors become our friends, our confidants. The people we go to with all our troubles and somehow, they make it better by simply existing. Usually, they have a great deal of influence over how we see and experience the world." Her voice is soft.

"Hemingway. Ernest Hemingway."

"Don't write for yourself. Write for him. Tell him all your secrets and he'll write it for you."

"I don't understand why you have to be so cryptic all the time," I huff with a laugh.

"It's my right as an old poetry professor." She laughed along with me before taking a deep breath. "I meant what I said when I told the class I didn't want you to overthink this. Don't get caught up in the logistics. For once, just let yourself feel uninhibited in your writing. Get everything out. Even if it doesn't become a masterpiece, I have a feeling you need to be vulnerable. Even if it's only for a few minutes."

"I don't like this feeling in my chest."

"It's the feeling you and Hemingway need to get out."

Something in the back of my mind tells me I won't survive this, but if I don't, I think this is a good way to burn. I stand on shaky legs as I approach the front of the class. Professor Wilde's classroom has always been welcoming, but with the lights dimmed, it feels especially intimate. I look around at my classmates and realize there is an unspoken understanding between us all. They won't crucify me for my short comings. I catch Wilde's eye and suddenly I am filled with a gust of bravery. I can be courageous long enough to get this over with. The little bird is fluttering in my chest again.

"I got the words, 'Isn't it pretty to think so?' tattooed on my ribs under my left breast when the sky was really beautiful. Afterwards, I cried not because I was sad, but because I was lonely. As I cried under the beautiful and gentle sky, she embraced me and wiped my tears away. She whispered in my ear that I was loved. In that moment I believed her. I went home and picked up a pen.

"Hemingway told me to, 'Write hard and clear about what hurts' but I cried, 'What if you do not know what hurts? What if I do not have the words to describe the slow, ebbing pain my heart feels every day?' Hemingway rebuked me, 'All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.' Then I asked Hemingway, 'What if I do not have a typewriter?' He smiled at me and in that moment, I hated him for the ease with which he produces words, because I think Hemingway forgot that blood is not pretty unless you make it pretty.

"A boy once told me he loved me, but then he turned around and made me bleed. He said Hemingway was a fraud, but Hemingway is my favorite. Now I am standing in front of a mirror bleeding. I love you. I do. I really, really do. But I cannot share my words because they are mine. I cannot share my words because they hurt.

"But my words cannot hurt me when they are on pages. They hurt when I say them out loud. They hurt when he said them out loud. And I do not think this really counts as poetry because honestly, where is the beauty in my blood. I don't know how to write pretty. Hemingway, I'm sorry, but I can't bleed words I just make a mess.

"Because the sky is really beautiful right now, but I have so much

to say, and it's all been said before. I've learned that love is a luxury not a necessity. I can survive alone. I can thrive alone. But my own words scare me. The gentle sky surrounds me in blue and yellow, and whispers love into my skin. And all of a sudden, I'm not scared anymore." I take a deep shaky breath as I look into the crowd of my classmates.

There are tears openly running down my face, but I cannot find it in me to care. My eye catches Professor Wilde and I see her openly crying as well. She slowly stands and gives me a slight nod.

Aubrey Roemmich is a sophomore double majoring in English and Political Science. She plans on going to law school after graduating from UND. She hopes to work with intellectual property and copyright law. Her hobbies include reading, writing, and listening to music.