

I sway back and forth on a swing in a playground in Stirling, Scotland as I think of you, hating myself for doing so. It's a morning much like every morning has been since I got here: cloudy, but not cold, foreign, but somewhat familiar. There's trimmed grass, and a tin slide, and a paint-chipped rocking horse, and a pair of what to my Canadian eyes are soccer nets but are in fact football nets which is what reminds me it's not home. Not that I felt I knew what that word meant anymore.

When my family had first announced this trip, I'd been ecstatic at the thought of seeing someplace new, and yet this morning, after waking to my alarm's familiar "ping", I realized that all I really wanted was to escape being someplace old. A place where, in the timeline that should've been, you and I would be celebrating our anniversary. A place where you, quite alive and quite at peace and likely quite apathetic about me, couldn't possibly be giving me a second thought. But still I cared too deeply. And felt too much. And gave you more of my attention than befit the one whose heart constricted mine so forcefully.

As I sucked in the air and swung myself upwards, I thought of the first time I yearned for your presence like this. On that day I was turning 20; my second straight birthday spent restricted by a virus that conveniently kept flaring up whenever it was time to celebrate me. Moody and with my face shoved towards my phone, I felt myself sink into bed as I yearned for everyone I wouldn't be seeing, and for the party I wouldn't be having, and for the presents I wouldn't be getting. But you were still texting me. Not to talk but to listen, allowing me time to expel my frustrations towards someone who wouldn't pass judgement, allowing me some sort of distant connection to someone who always knew just how to get me to smile.

*"Alright that's enough grumbling. Tell you what – Next year we're gonna take a trip somewhere, ok? Just the two of us. We'll find some good food, do some shopping... drink too much..."*

*"Well I don't know about that last part."*

*"Uh, excuse me? I'm the planner here."*

*"Says who?"*

*"Says your Bestie."*

*"Oh my God. Who says bestie?"*

*"Besties."*

*"Ugh. You're lucky you're cute."*

*":-p"*

I breathed out as the swing swung me downwards, creaking the whole apparatus to crack the still air. I was being ridiculous, I knew. I'd be going into Edinburgh soon with my

family, and I couldn't be bogged down by this nonsense if I were to enjoy the good food, and the good stores, and the distance from you, who outside of my head had done more to isolate me than to make me feel known. But my feelings had become less simple with time. And time couldn't be turned back to when things were simpler and I hated you, to back when I believed you'd come into my life just to teach me some lesson on suffering through heartbreak. But my longing was too unconditional. I missed you. And I missed knowing that you missed me, and knowing that our time meant something to you, and knowing through that glimmer of hope that I'd felt when you talked about taking a trip somewhere that things could feel "normal" again.

I dug my feet into the dirt to stop swinging. A part of me had thought of reaching out long before this, but that required a bravery, and a vulnerability, and a sense of certainty that I couldn't give to you anymore. I grabbed my earbuds from my pocket and haphazardly plucked out my phone, but Nico's "These Days" didn't drown out the sound of me asking myself what I'd say if I did try to talk to you.

What more could there possibly be to say now after how you had called me that night, not even brave enough to break the news to my face? After so much time together, after seeming unbothered by my shunning of you over the past few days, you'd simply said, "I just don't think I can do this anymore." I'd felt us slipping for a while before then of course. For much longer than you probably had, if I had to guess, but I'd been fighting. And I knew you hadn't, but I hoped you at least recognized my fighting so that, seeing me struggle, you'd find some strength of your own. But then again, you never really gave any effort to anything if you didn't have to.

So I simply sat there. Stunned but unsurprised, rocked but quite still, my face buried in my hands as you sat there, solemn. It was all matter of fact to you by then of course, since what I'd felt was a fire had only been a spark to you. "Are you ok?" You asked to ask something. "You know I still wanna be friends, right?" The tears came then, like a downpour in a desert. But still he sat solemn. And that's when

it sprouted, a dandelion.  
flowered in its face but sour in its stalk  
as if conceived from curdled rain, a plant unsatisfied  
from being sired into petulance. A seed blown through the dirt  
by frigid winds breathed from a storm whose proper dues were stolen, tempering  
its tantrum within dandelion stalks  
not meant for coursing spoiled nectar, stemming  
from a staunch facade designed to desecrate  
its roots whose tangler mangled hearts that once beat  
deep inside the earth  
where pride was purity  
now pride that grows before a fall  
from graciousness that walls  
the garden to what chokes it out.

I know that tears can be unsettling – so your silence was hardly surprising – but it still hurt. Especially since when I'd first seen you cry, I'd managed to push past such passiveness.

“Just let it out. It’s ok. Just let it all out” was what I’d said as your body, not unlike mine did when you gave up on me, shuddered with your gulping, gasping sobs.

My job then had been to comfort. You’d only just come home from school and were as usual, feeling unappreciated, displaced, and disrespected by your family, and loving them as you did, even if they didn’t deserve it, the abuse was becoming hard to handle. You’d needed someone who could listen to you, someone to tell you that you were valued and appreciated, respected and at home with them, and that person was me. It had always been me. And what was my thanks for being that for you? Being left alone to cry, not spoken to but stranded in soundlessness. I realized then that a trust had been shattered, as suddenly and sharply as a broken glass one witnesses by sound rather than sight. Turning away, I mumbled some sort of apology – my own act of speaking just to speak, and knowing in my heart that it was true, told you that I wanted to be friends again one day, but that I just didn’t know, summarizing the source of my sadness into one single, terrifying statement.

“This might be the last time I talk to you.”

I snapped back to reality and checked my phone, the song in my ears having changed to Jack Johnson’s “I Got You.” Not funny. The time at which I was supposed to head back had long since passed, but I got up slowly, still clouded as if fighting to stay upright in a sea of sleeping gas. As I rose my hand grazed the swing-chain, soaking in the touch of its cold metal as I let it rock back-and-forth behind me without looking to see when it stopped. I think I still hope you’re ok.