

Bigger than my Bones

Jessica Nirvana Ram

The flight from Athens to Philadelphia was ten hours long. Ten hours of tight seats, airplane food, and breathing the same air as the boy who only saw me as body two nights ago. Was it two nights? Time's linearity ceased when he let my *I should go* cascade over the balcony railing and into the street. It made a shattering sound as it hit the concrete, I'm almost certain.

I couldn't see him from where I sat in my middle row. But that didn't matter much. There was a film of his skin plastered over my own. I could smell his sweat, the oiliness of his hair, the tequila on his breath. I let Halsey's "Control" play in my ears on repeat for ten hours. It started with the entirety of the *Badlands* album, the haunting cadence of her tracklist sitting comfortably in the tightness of my chest. But there was something about "Control." About hearing *I'm bigger than my body*. About believing *I'm bigger than my bones*. If I could convince myself he wasn't seeping into my pores, maybe I could get over this.

Somewhere in the middle of this flight, somewhere along the Atlantic, all the windows are pulled shut. Most of the lights have succumbed to shadows, blending with the silhouettes of passengers. The couple beside me who couldn't quite figure out how to work their headphone jacks earlier are asleep, leaning on each other comfortably. I hoped my light wasn't bothering them, but I couldn't close my eyes. Not here. Not so close to him. Not while he lingered.

I'm well acquainted with the villains that live in my head, echoes in the hollow of my thoughts. It made sense, the idea of reacquainting myself with the nightmare who set up camp in my head. I run my fingers along the spine of my journal. When I bought this blue-gray notebook to use as a travel journal I knew it would hold names of wine, of Greek food, of the language I'd learn. This international escapade I was embarking on with strangers felt noteworthy, the idea of friendships forming out of this shared experience of going abroad—even for such a short time—it left me hopeful. I wanted these pages to hold them, to hold me. I didn't think it would hold him, not like this. The pages fill fast, the space between my thumb and wrist aching as the pen slid from line to line. I'm trying desperately to document it all, to analyze what I did, to pinpoint what I missed. Hotel room wine, red lipstick, his eyes, beer, his hands, shot, his voice, beer, haziness, hands, hands, hands.

There were signs pointing to the conclusion that he'd been planning to get me alone later that night. It had been a death anniversary of a friend, I was hazier than usual. And he saw it, I let him see it. I let him see me. I scrutinized the details before me, I wanted to prove somehow that he'd orchestrated it all. That he'd picked me out of the lineup of vulnerable girls, that he'd groomed me to want his company, that he put his hands on me because he knew I'd be scared to scream. But see, it wasn't clear. I wanted to cast him as calculated, as cold, as the boy I trusted because he wanted me to trust him not because I should. Wouldn't it be easier that way? For him to be precise? There's too much gray area in "It just happened, I'm sorry." There's too much to unpack if he simply decided to jump at the opportunity. Be evil. Be my villain. Be easy to mark as rapist.



Halsey

"Control"

Badlands

08/2015

Astralwerks

I know better. I know the best evils don't look like evil. They don't carry darkness in their step. It would be too easy that way. They carry it tucked behind their ears, folded under their tongues, gathered beneath their fingernails. It only moves to their eyes after it's too late.

He's wearing his red sweatshirt during the flight. I watch him walk through the aisle to the bathroom in the middle of our aircraft's simulated night and find myself short of breath. He wore a pink shirt that night, a button down. It matched the color of the wine he'd bought from the street cart outside the hotel. Four euros for a two-liter bottle of wine. By the time we'd all maneuvered to his room to head out together, he'd drunk more than half by himself. He liked liquor too much, this I knew from the two weeks we'd spent together. He liked liquor and attention and the air of carelessness. He had a heavy laugh. He was a cutout of every boy I'd ever turned my eyes towards the sidewalk for. He said we were alike, him and I. *I couldn't stand the person inside me, I turned all the mirrors around*, the lyrics are searing themselves into my skin on every play through. They make me wonder what kind of darkness now lives inside my bones.

He doesn't see me when he walks back to his seat even though I'm the only one for four rows with a light on. I find it both relieving and insulting. How dare he ignore me. But what would I do if I had to look him in the eyes again? There's water in my lungs just thinking about it. Water in my lungs, spilling over into my chest, trickling out of the corners of my mouth. He makes me want to split my skin open, as if a steady enough hand could remove all the pieces of him clinging to my organs.

I write him letters. Letters I never send. I want to tell him that for the next year, I cower at every approaching red sweatshirt. I drown in the empty air. I want to tell him I dream of bringing my fist to his face a thousand times over until the red matches his clothes. I want to tell him I've never dreamt of violence before him.

He bought me a water that night. At some point between separation from the group and returning to the hotel, he bought me a bottle of water. I bought him another shot of tequila because I felt guilty for making him watch over me. I remember the way I sifted through my wallet for three single euros. The way his smile was crooked. The way he smelled like lime and tobacco.

The other girls, they tried to tell me. Tried to warn me. Tried to get me to go with them, not him. But he overheard and stormed off and in the city of Athens we were five thousand some miles from home and we weren't supposed to let each other run off alone. There was so much alcohol in my body I went after him, because I was supposed to. I stood there in the overly fluorescent alley convincing him that I believed he wouldn't do what they said he'd do. That he wouldn't do exactly what he did. I kept my head down the next day when whispers of "what happened, why is she so quiet" came from the lips of the girls who'd walked away from us.

The lights flicker back on and passengers start to wake up. The woman beside me lifts her head off of her husband's shoulder and stretches vertically. *Wow, look at all that writing*, she says in awe at the pages and pages of black ink. I smile and shut the book. What would have happened if he had let me go that night? If, after we'd talked and sat and talked on the balcony of his hotel room, after the look in his eyes shifted and I jolted forward to say *I should go*, he let me go? I think Athens would hold a different place in my heart. I think it would have let me fixate on the emptiness of the cobblestone streets at

three in the morning, at the surreal feeling of having a whole city to ourselves. That's what it was like. Our universe. Ours.

The lights were few, the moon was full, the stars were bright. My vision was cloudy but I remember the stars. I remember stopping to sit on the brick wall by the church we'd used as a landmark. I remember swinging my feet like a child, head back and gazing. I had cotton ball brains and paper limbs, like the right breeze could come by at any moment and sweep me away into the night. Imagine if it had.