

All That I Can See

Molly McCarron

Steel doors. A drunken security guard in a plexiglass booth. The kiosk outside the building that sold vodka and potato chips and pistachios and cigarettes named for the tsar who'd built the better parts of this crumbling city.

The university residence was on the stormy grey waters of the Gulf of Finland. I called you in a panic from a pay telephone at the hotel down the street, a bright red phone at the reception desk of an Intourist hotel gone seedy. I'd had to dodge a pack of stray dogs on my way there. These dogs looked mean and I'm afraid of dogs, but they turned out to be sad and hungry, less frightening than well-kept North American pets. Everyone in the lobby looked like a gangster to me: shaved heads, long leather jackets, missing teeth, tattoos. There was a rocky beach in front of the hotel that we avoided after one of the Swedish students heard gunshots somewhere close by.

"I can't stay here. This was a mistake," I yelled into the phone. The connection was terrible, a crackle of static for every mile between us. I'd been in St. Petersburg a few hours at most.

Jetlag. Discombobulation. I'd only left Tokyo, where we'd been living and teaching English, a week ago. Then I'd gone home to Toronto for a half-asleep dream of a summer week, and now I was here, almost all the way around the globe again and so many worlds away.

The language program at the St. Petersburg State University had forgotten about me. No one was waiting for me at the airport and I'd waited, silently panicking, until I overheard a reluctant administrator who was picking up some American students and followed her to the parking lot, my only hope of ever getting to where I was supposed to be. The program charged by the week. I paid for two, even though I'd planned to stay for twelve. There was no way I would last.

I missed you so much I felt like my arm had been ripped out.

That's a cliché.

I missed you so much my heart ached. I missed you even though for the last couple of months I'd been missing you even when we were living together. I'd missed you on the nights you came home late, after I'd fallen asleep on the thin futon I'd rolled out after reading dust-covered manga from the Kinokuniya bookstore. I missed you even after we'd officially split up and were just biding time until I left.

You missed me too. You packed a bag for me with empty notebooks, the tidy black-bound ones that I liked, and you slipped a note into the front of one of them. We both cried at the airport. I kept crying, all the way back on the plane. Maybe you did too.

I stayed. I stayed longer than two weeks in one of the most beautiful, melancholy cities in the world, in fall, the most beautiful, melancholy season of the year. St. Petersburg is made for heartbreak. There are beautiful words about loss and sadness and longing from Pushkin, Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Dostoevsky. There are delicate bridges over canals with views made for looking off wistfully in the distance. There is a rough and steel grey sea where you can stand and feel battered by wind and spray.



Tom Waits

"Grapefruit Moon"

Closing Time

03/1973

Asylum

All the Russian pop songs on the radio were about the fall: this fall, the rain in the fall, Pushkin's last fall. The things that fall away in the fall. In September, leaves were yellow and the light was golden. Fall turned wintry in mid-October and the nights were noticeably longer than the day, dark nights with vodka and moonlight shining on the river and the muffled sounds of a city newly covered again in snow.

And every night, in the single bed in the residence with the steel doors, under heavy blankets weighed down with generations of Soviet dust, so much dust I couldn't tell if it was grief or asthma or both keeping me from breathing, I sobbed myself to sleep listening to Tom Waits.

The CD must have been yours. I don't remember ever listening to it in Japan, and I don't remember packing it to go to Russia. In fact, I left a lot of things behind, other CDs and books and tapes, thinking I would return sometime, or that you would mail them to me when I finally returned to Canada, whenever that might be.

(Really, I left things there in case we reunited, in case we realized there had been a terrible mistake.)

Somehow the CD of *Closing Time* was with me in St. Petersburg, a reliable shoulder to cry on. Misery loves company and there was lots of it around, but Tom Waits gave me English-language company every night, a voice I could be sure I understood. I always stopped the album on "Grapefruit Moon." I sometimes played it more than once, but it was always the last song of the night. It was last call.

Piano and bass first, so before the first words harkening back to it begin, you've heard the melody:

*Grapefruit moon, one star shining,
Shining down on me.
Heard that tune, and now I'm pining
Honey, can't you see?*

I held myself together through that part. Wistful. Wise. But then came:

*Everytime I hear that melody
Something breaks inside*

And by the last line of the verse,

Can't turn back the tide.

Tears in the tobacco-infused pillowcase, night after night. I'd been swept on a tide to this island on the Gulf of Finland, and there was no tide that would take me back to a life with you in Tokyo. Or anywhere.

Then the break. Strings. Piano. The melody again on the piano, now with strings and more ornamentation. A reprise of the melody on strings -- a cello, I think, maybe its higher strings, ones you might find on a viola, too, the ones with real resonance.

And then I slip like the stars into obscurity.

You'd met her before I left. You half-heartedly denied it, but she was the reason you were coming home late. I was the one who suggested breaking up; you were the one who fell in love with someone else.

It was dark at four o'clock. It was dark in the morning when I went to class. It was almost dark when I got out. But when it was clear, the stars shone for hours. They started early and they got higher and the moon was still there when I woke up in the morning, after falling asleep to the final words:

*Grapefruit moon, one star shining
Is all that I can see.*