

I met her somewhere I had never been before.

She seemed to appear out of nowhere, as if her body manifested from the fog that hovered over the path. The way she moved, the way she laughed, I thought she was a spectre. Or my imagination. Surely this girl had to have come from my mind.

But no, when she touched me, she was warm and rough and so, so human.

“I think I'm going to explore the whole world!” she exclaimed. She tossed her arms up to the sky and let them fall to the ground next to her head.

“The world is a big place,” I said.

“I know,” she replied. “That's why I need to see it all. Someone has to. Otherwise how do we know it's real?”

“What's real?”

“The world. How much of it have you seen?”

“More today than I had yesterday.”

She laughed at that; not a genuine laugh, but the way you laugh at a child who thinks they'll grow up to be president. A pitying laugh.

I turned my eyes to the sky- or rather, I tried to make out the sky from between the thick canopy of branches. I mostly failed. From high above, a pale green leaf spiralled down and down, avoiding every branch below it, so it could land on my forehead. I tenderly brushed it aside and refused to look at her.

“The sky is so beautiful, isn't it Mackie?”

The way she said my name was unique. I never thought anyone could make my hard name sound beautiful.

I ignored her question, not out of contempt, but because I couldn't begin to know what to say. I stood, shook the dirt and the dew off my clothes, and took a running leap at the tree. My left hand caught a low hanging branch, and I nimbly swung my legs up to hook on another outcropping.

Two hours ago- had it been that long?- I left my house with the cries of my parents calling out behind. My father's cutting shout, my mother's wails, my little sister's confused questions. I tuned them out and focused on the crickets. I focused on the only other sound in the night and followed it. Followed it to what felt like the end.

If the end was an unused railway tunnel with a single towering alder, taller than any alder had business being. The fog settled like a cancer over the grass, eating away at any chance of a dry place to

rest. A thick blanket rolled out of the tunnel, so thick I dared not enter if I wanted any chance of going back.

Back? Back to what exactly? To parents who would rather a broken daughter than one who kisses girls? To the shouting and the crying and the ever looming threat of homelessness if we didn't shut up and let dad do his work.

Back was gone. Back wasn't in the past, it was historical fiction. And not the good kind. No, it was the kind you pick up from the 99c table and scoff at before making it three sentences on the back. The kind that collected dust in used bookstores by the dozens.

Nineteen tomorrow. Nineteen in two and a half hours. Nineteen and a chance to leave with the last shreds of my sanity still intact.

I took a step towards the tunnel, and came face to face with a freight train.

“Are you going to make me follow you?”

I glanced down at her, still lying on the ground, only this time she was face down in the grass.

“I won't make you do anything,” I called. I hooked a heel around a sturdy looking branch and hefted myself up. “It's easier to breathe up here is all.”

“Breathe! Breathe? Mackie my darling, breathe in the grass why don't you. It's good for something, right? Has to be.”

“You can breathe in leaves up here.” It was the first and only thing to come to mind besides the next branch to pull myself onto.

“I don't like getting high.”

Could've fooled me.

I paused halfway to my next handhold, my eyes fixed on the trunk of the tree. The crickets were screaming, but I could hear the crunch of the first branch loud and clear when she dug her fingers into it.

“See Mackie, I think you need to accept that you like living,” she huffed. She clearly wasn't a climber like me. “You say you'd rather die than stay home, but you're climbing a tree at eleven-thirty at night because you want to. You like to be alive.”

“I like to get away from freight trains,” I replied. I flew up the next few metres to the highest branches I deemed safe, and poked my head out through the leaves.

Above me, the sky opened up into a mural of stars. I didn't know the name of a single constellation, so I picked the brightest star and let it's light drown out all the rest.

Sooner than I expected, she was beside me. Her floppy winter hat sat crooked on her head, and her worn bomber jacket was covered in leaves and bark. She gave me a brilliant, toothy smile and let out a real laugh this time. One born from joy, not pity.

“This is even better! This is the world, Mackie, I can feel it!”

A brighter star caught my eye. I turned my attention to it and watched her whip her head every which way, trying to see every molecule of the sky at the same time. Her breathing was heavy, so heavy that she fumbled for an inhaler in her pocket and took a deep breath in through it.

After she did, there was a single moment of calm, a moment frozen in time, where she opened her eyes and stared directly into mine. Constellations swam in the deep blue, stars connecting in all possible combinations until they formed one. One star and one constellation and one girl who breathed too heavy and laughed too loud.

And she was so bright. So bright I wanted, *needed* to turn my head away. But she was also a black hole, and my gaze couldn't go anywhere else.

The moment broke, and she blinked several times. She came out of her trance, the train powering back up, and smiled wide.

“It's prettier up here,” she said simply. She smiled all the while and her eyes flicked between the sky and my face a thousand times a second.

“It's prettier when you don't have to think about it,” she continued. The light dimmed, but it did not go out. “You know, when your parents love you for you, and mine are alive, and the world is done being explored. Except it's never been explored like I'm going to explore it. I'll do better. I'll find the better things.”

“What's better?” I whispered. I hadn't had a sip of water in hours and even the moisture in the air could not lessen the dryness.

“Better is knowing where you are. It's understanding what you need and who needs you. Who do you need, Mackie?”

Who did I need? Who needed me would have been the better question. Who needed Mackie. Who does Mackie need.

“Water,” I answered.

“Oh. Can't say I have any of that.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay,” she said.

Okay, the sky said.

A million light years away, a star we would never see in our lifetime ignited in a supernova and bathed the cosmos in light.

A million light years from where I had ever been before, a star cupped my face, cupped my heart with its tender, soothing gaze, cupped my lips in liquid starlight. I drank so much I thought I could get drunk on it and never be afraid of the downfall. A star caressed my cheeks and smoothed my hair, painted my face golden yellow and brilliant silver.

Star pulled her lips away but kept her hands on my face. I breathed in light and sighed into her. I made water from my eyes, the kind I couldn't survive off of.

Her eyes fluttered, and the tenderness evaporated like the morning fog when the sun rises over the horizon.

“It's not so hard, is it Mackie?”

“It's not, Star.”

Star missed one more beat, a beat I captured in my heart and vowed to hold onto as long as I breathed. She giggled, a soft twinkle, and raised her chin.

“I'm not a star,” she said. “I'm a supernova, silly. I'll cover everything.”

One day, Star, you'll cover the world, and I'll cover my life in the light that trails behind.