

## **I Remember Valerie.**

My therapist says daily walks can help manage my mental health. Routine and vitamin D and fresh air and all that. She's been encouraging me to go to the park. Confront my memories. Heal. I haven't been there in ten years. I can't bring myself to. The last time I went...

I go for walks every day. Or when I can stand being outside. Most days I watch people pass by my window, and I wonder what my life would be if I were them. Sometimes I'll hang around my garden. It's the best in the neighborhood. Occasionally, I walk a few steps outside the safe confines of my yard. Other times, I manage to make it all the way to the library two blocks away.

It feels good to be out. Until it doesn't.

The weather report said it would be sunny all day. Sixty degrees and rising. But the sun and any hint of a blue sky is blocked by big gray clouds. The sky could be green and meteors could rain down on earth and I would choke on dust until I suffocated and died alone and my body would become dust.

Intrusive thoughts.

I'm getting better at identifying them. My therapist will be pleased.

It's been ten years since I've been here. The park. The unavoidable, miserable park. The birds cower in their bundle of sticks on the mud-brown tree limbs, barren of any leaves, green or gold alike. The grass is dead as tan, waiting for life again. (What month is it?) But people don't care about the apocalypse. Kids run around and scream at the top of their tiny lungs with skinned knees. Their parents gather in clusters with seven dollar coffees to gossip about the latest marriage scandal. (They wouldn't notice if their child gets kidnapped.) Old couples stroll with their arms linked together.

(That could be me if I didn't fuck up everything good in my life.) Teenagers skipping school hang around with smoke billowing from their lips.

I remember high school...

The chaos, the drama, the turmoil, the confusion. Everything is blurry, singed together at the edges. The dark hues covering the faces of people I was surrounded by. But I remember.

I remember Valerie.

Valerie...

"Valerie!" The wind carries her name to her ears. She turns to look at me. I thrust my hand into the air, reaching into the wispy mists above me. "Hi! Hey! Hello!" Valerie—

Valerie.

And Valerie—

God, Valerie.

"Leigh! Hello!" Valerie embraces me into hug. She clutches onto me tightly, like I'm her lover overseas. I inhale her scent of salt and mist. It's enough to be blown into the past. "I haven't seen you since..." She lets me go, and her eyes trail over my whole body until she brings herself to look into my eyes.

"You broke my heart in this very park? Yeah, I don't need to be reminded." My dead, gray eyes, sheltered by my glasses.

"It's been so long." And her live, arctic eyes.

"Ten years." My pasty skin as blank as a blizzard of snow, blotched with patches of blushing red.

“How are you?” Her clear, tan skin splayed with freckles like she’s a reflection of all the stars in the universe.

“I’m doing... Fine. You?” My straight, soot hair pooling into my murky green shirt; an oil spill in the ocean.

“I’m doing great.” Her waves of red hair crashing into the solid gray of her wool coat; the ocean itself. She’s exactly as I remember. Beautiful. Elegant. Perfect. (How could a person like her ever have loved a person like me?) “Do you want to get a drink? Well, I can’t drink. I’m on some medication for... It doesn’t matter. We could get some coffee or tea or something.”

“I can’t. I’m married.” Valerie holds up her ring-bearing hand like it’s supposed to mean something. Like I can’t mean anything to her anymore. Maybe I don’t. Maybe I never did. She never called back. I suppose I know who’s fault that is. Something twists and simmers in my stomach.

“I wasn’t asking you out on a date,” I lie. “I’ve dated a lot of girls since you. I mean, most of the time it wasn’t real. Not like it was with you.”

“We were never real, Leigh.” Her words are sharp enough to push my lungs against a million pins.

“We were real to me... Were we not real to you?” I wish I couldn’t feel my skin crack into fragments. I need twine to hold myself together, but I have none. I wrap my arms around myself. I can feel my skin crumbling into dust against my hands. How could we be anything but real?

“You lied to me. How could we be real?” Valerie stands rigid and serious. Not even a tsunami could knock her down.

“I only lied a little.”

“You lied enough to hurt me.” I wish lies couldn’t be big enough to hurt a person. I wish I could tell another lie. I wish Valerie would lie. (How do people do this?)

“I don’t want to fight with you.” I croak against the gravel scraping across my throat.

“We’re not fighting. Unless you consider an honest conversation a fight.”

“I don’t want to fight with you.”

“You never do.” The same bitterness could be found in dandelions. Valerie isn’t smiling behind that blank face of hers.

“I don’t want to fight with you!” Everything I’ve kept inside spills over.

“Then why did you come here in the first place?” Why *did* I come here? When I’ve avoided it for so long? (There’s nothing here for me.) “What else could you possibly be expecting?”

Commented [1]: Does this belong here?

“I can’t put myself through this again! It took me so long to get over you, and you still haunt my life! And I’m just... I’m done. I’m tired of this.” I’m tired of seeing her face every time I close my eyes. Of reliving the same moment over and over. Of the shame and guilt eating my body peck by peck.

“Do you honestly believe you’re getting better?” Valerie’s mouth twists into something of loathing. Skepticism. Repulsion.

“I’m trying.” All the words that have ever existed are fogging together. Better. Fight. Honest. Lie. They mean nothing. (Should they?) “Do you forgive me?” I whisper. I can’t be hurt more than I am. (Can I?)

“For what?”

“For what I did to you.” I wouldn’t forgive myself.

“I don’t know if I can. What you did was messed up, Leigh.” The world is closing in. Like a star imploding.

“I know! I... I know.” How many times have I thought about all the ways I’ve hurt her? I never meant to hurt Valerie. How could intentions matter when you can see all the hurt you’ve caused? (I can never take it all back.)

“It’s inexcusable, no matter how much you claim you’ve changed. You’re still the same person from high school.” I hated who I was in high school. I dug a six foot hole for her to lie in, but she keeps crawling back.

“Can’t my word be good enough?”

“Considering how you’ve used them? No. That’s the truth.”

“I’m sorry.” I don’t forgive myself.

“I know you are. It doesn’t undo everything you’ve done. Goodbye, Leigh.” She says. Then she’s gone.

And I’m left looking after her memory. She was as clear as she was ten years ago. Clear enough to sting my eyes useless. I can taste the salt water on my lips and see its small mark dripping into the green of my shirt.

I can’t remember the last time I felt happy.