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Palace

Jesse Rowan

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PALACE

Jesse Rowan

For Ian and Eli, and for Lucy

It's always hard to know where to start.

Right now I think I've found happiness—or at least, I don't know, some level of acceptance, hope, the brighter future syndrome. It took a long time to reach.

At first when it happened she said there were no fireworks. She said she enjoyed it but there were no fireworks—and at the time maybe that's all it was: a night on a field on the fourth of July, a brief and explosive celebration of beauty, but disappointing—or rather, not disappointing, but not particularly exciting. It was something to see for an evening and then to let slip by, its fading colors still alive when you shut your eyes until the next beautiful day. That's how it must have been for her—but it's always been different for me. Because of where I am. Because of where I'd come from.

I was lonely for the first time in two years, morbidly lonely, dragging around my terrible, terrible—but not lonely—memories of that other girl, with deep and at last healing scars, as the snow melted and the world thawed out. And this, the final heat wave, the moving glowing bodies, that pulled me out from under the years of ice.

It started when I got back from the trip. She sat down with me and we drank honey whiskey and I told her all about it, like some passionate bard, strumming my fingers on my boots like a lyre. That night she said she likes a lot of things about me when I'm happy—and that must be why it happened, because I was happy, in that moment, a little drunk, talking about the trip that saved me, feeling refreshed and relieved, but road-weary, like coming home after a long, long, vacation, ready to lay in bed and watch the sun crawl through the window over your legs. That must be when she decided she wanted to.

But first—the trip. The God damn trip is what saved me. I wasn't close with either of the two kids I went with, but now I think three people have never seen each other through more. We drove three thousand miles, south and then back up north, running away from all that shit—that boy, my best friend, who fucked up so bad I can still hear his desperate voice in my head as he yelled at me before I said he was a piece of shit

and he broke all his windows and dropped out of school—I can see the blood on the floor and imagine his grin in the ambulance, drunk and proud and not really sure about anything but confident in whatever he thought happened, and now, months later, who knows what he’s doing or how he’s feeling—I’ll never see him again. We had to run away and we drove down south and saw the most beautiful things I’d ever seen. That God damn trip is what saved me—I was about to break. I carved the letter N into my arm when it rained the next day and I just had to leave.

I never really knew her when I was happy until I got back from that trip. She met me on a hard night—it was right at the end of that other girl, wintertime—she held me and said sweet things and I must have fallen in love with her a little bit. We sat on the ground and talked about our families and love and God it was like the sun rising after a cold night.

And then I had to grieve—nothing could work while I was grieving. I got worse and worse and then that boy fucked it all up and I left on my trip and when I came back and showered off the dirt and sand I was so ready to stop feeling everything from before. She indulged me—briefly, and she cut it off before it grew, a flower dying in bloom, possibly in its most beautiful state—and there is some perfection in that, in letting something die before it has time to run its course downhill as all things do—but it was hard. I remembered after that how hard it really was, how lonely I was but how used to it I’d become, and this little glimpse of the warm surface haunted me for three weeks. We drank and it didn’t make me feel different enough, so we took molly and it didn’t make me feel different enough, so we bought an eight ball it didn’t make me feel different enough—but at that point, moments from letting it all go and begging God to let me go home, please, please let me go home, something happened.

I couldn’t really tell you what it is. Things changed. I realized that I wasn’t still inside of it, the wild weeks, but that it was all behind me—and this summer I’ll be leaving, going home at last, and then she’ll be leaving and I won’t see her for a long, long time. But things have been different now. There’s a lot more to it than I thought. There’s a lot more between us and I don’t know what any of it is—but I guess that’s the beauty of it. It’s still over, just the way fireworks end on the fourth of July, but it’s beautiful to

know someone. It's really beautiful to know someone. I know that there's some place somewhere inside of her where I belong, and maybe she doesn't know it, or maybe she's not ready for it, or maybe it's an illusion of my romanticism—but whatever it is, well—something's there. And in that place—and I'm not there, and God knows if I'll ever be there—but in that place, it's beautiful, and it's sunny.

I'm sitting here about to have a cigarette looking at all these things surrounding me that paint a portrait of my past few months. My life is a palace of artifacts. The leatherbound Faulkner that first girl—the ice girl—gave me, and faint traces of coke in the small veiny grooves. The keys to the car that took me on that trip and saved me. A white lighter, an empty acetaminophen bottle, old and heavily worn boots, and a jewelry box full of little things. Inside the jewelry box there's a broken pocket watch, a beautiful poem written to me by a friend, a ticket to see the National, and a pack of smokes with three left, and a name written on each one that I wrote when I was home over the winter, to be smoked when I'm home again this summer. When I wrote those names—I was sitting on my bed thinking about where I was and where I'll be when I'm finally home again to smoke them. That was before everything. I never could have known what was going to happen. I could never have known things would end with that other girl, and I'd get out of the ice—what that boy would do to me, that I'd go on that trip with those two kids, two of the best people I've ever known, and then what that girl would do to me, or rather, what that girl would become to me. On the twenty first of May I'll smoke one of those cigarettes—the one with my name on it, and my two close friends the two others with their respective names—and I'll be home. I'll be home in the East. I won't see her again for a long, long time. I'll think about her, and I'll look at a photograph of us, and I'll say, at least it happened. I love it for happening. And God—it was beautiful to know someone.