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In a Tent, Under a Bridge

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My tent was green at one point. Or, maybe it was blue. I can't quite remember. It used to keep out the cold Boston air. Now there are holes in the top and all over the sides. The cold whispers to me. It tells me things and I listen at night when I am all alone. My lips hurt too much to talk back.

The last time the blue and red lights broke through the dark night was when Buddy died. He lived under the tarp next to my tent. Buddy liked to talk about getting his girlfriend back.

"I just have to get my shit together. Then, she'll take me back. She loves me." He would tell me around the fire.

"Where is she, Buddy?" The red embers lit up Buddy's face. His sunken cheeks made him look like a starving soldier.

"She's waiting on me, I know it."

Sandra found Buddy's body on a sunny January morning. He looked like a mummy, all bundled up in his green sleeping bag. She screamed and I wobbled over. Buddy's eyes were open. They were cloudy. His mouth was cracked. A thin line of saliva covered his chin. I was too scared to touch him so I wobbled back to my tent. Sandra's cries echoed under the bridge.

The next morning, Buddy was gone. Another one was there. I didn't ask what his name was. I didn't care to know.

Buddy never got his girl back.

...

There is only this moment. This feeling. Nothing else matters. The rush enters and I am overtaken. I am falling deeper and deeper into this space. I want to stay here forever. This place is warm and nice. Out there, it is cold and people hurt. Buddy is dead out there. I have to stay here where there is no pain to be felt. Yellow. All is yellow and fuzzy here.

"Get up, motherfucker." The yellow is gone. The high is over.

"Wha—what—get the fuck outta here, man." My mouth feels like sandpaper.

His nose is red and big like a balloon. I stare at it for a long time.

"I said, get up. Seriously, Ralph?" Balloon nose moves closer to me. I can't find words. I am still coming down from that yellow place. I never want to leave it.

"Who," I start to say. The 'o' sound feels thick in my dry

mouth, "Who are you?"

Then I see the rest of balloon nose. My vision is becoming clearer. I take in all the details I seemed to have forgotten. The big lips that used to always smile, the green eyes and the thick, Italian eyebrows. The brown beanie with the faded North Face logo. The rough hands that taught me how to defend myself years ago are unzipping my jacket. His fingers feel cold on my neck.

"Steven?" It comes out as a whisper, but he hears.

"Shhh, don't talk." I feel his fingers find my pulse. Now, everything feels purple. Nostalgia. Memories come back and I feel heavy.

"How long ago did you use, Ralph? Tell me the truth." He takes something from his bookbag. I want to lift my head to look but am too weak, too tired.

"How did you find me?" I stare at the holes in my tent. I see the sky. The clouds are feathery. They are moving away. I hear Steven rummage through his bag.

"Answer my question, first, Ralph. How long ago?"

"I don't know, a few hours? It doesn't matter. I'm fine."

"Don't say that. Never say that again, okay? You are not fine. You are fucked up."

He crouches over me and pulls my head off the ground. There is a plastic water bottle in his hand. Slowly, my hands reach for it. I have never wanted anything more in my life.

I want to say something to Steven. Emotions are rising within me, long forgotten emotions. The hot summer afternoons spent exploring the creek in our childhood backyard, the fights over who got to pick what to watch on Saturday mornings, the look of pure happiness on Steven's face when he told me about Pam's pregnancy. All these and more come back to me and I feel light headed. I want to tell Steven how much I love him but it is hard to cross that bridge that stretches between us.

"Are you scared?" My voice is stronger now. I push myself up off the ground with my hands. Steven does not sit down. He just crouches.

"Of what?"

"Dying."

Silence. I see the corner of Steven's mouth turn down. I know him. I know he is scared of dying. There is always caution with Steven, despite what strangers think. He is a man of comfort and caution. Still, I ask.

"Why are you asking me that?" There is a flicker in Steven's eyes. He is angry that I brought it up. He messes with his jacket and I notice his fingernails. They are neat and clean.

Our Grandma died when I was fourteen and Steven was sixteen. Death

was around her for three years. I noticed this. I watched Death play tricks on her. Hospital visit after hospital visit, Death dragged her to the edge and dangled her there, letting us look on with tears in our eyes. He always brought her back to us, though.

This is all Steven has seen of Death. How do I tell him that Death is my friend? Would he understand? How can a man that isn't dying understand the beauty of Death? He can't.

"I'm just curious, is all."

"Fuck you, Ralph. What are you trying to do, huh?" There are tears in Steven's eyes. He balls up his fist and roughly wipes at them. It doesn't look natural, seeing Steven cry.

"Do you want to die, Ralph? I can't do this anymore. I can't keep getting up every day with my first thought being "Is Ralph alive today?" Do you know how hard it is, huh? Do you? No, you couldn't begin to fucking understand. And I come here and you ask me if I'm afraid of dying? Yes, Ralph, I am. I am afraid to die and I am fucking terrified that you're going to die here in this fucking tent under this goddamn bridge. Man, what happened to you? You had fucking everything and now? This? You are fucking okay with this? We are trying to help you, Ralph, and you just brush everyone away! What about Grandma, huh?"

I can't bring myself to look at him. This tent feels like a prison now. I want him to leave.

"Next time you put a fucking needle in your goddamn arm, think about Grandma."

My body is empty now. I feel Steven get up and leave. He places a box by my feet before he does. I push it away. Steven brought with him emotions I did not want to feel, dumped them in my space.

I want to feel yellow again.

There is none left in my tent, so I must walk outside and ask around. I see Sandra laying next to the new guy. They're out. I step over their languid bodies. Buddy's tarp is still up, so I crouch inside and look around. Buried in the corner, I find his rusted Altoids can that has what I need inside. My fingers clumsily grasp it. I stuff it in my jacket pocket and return to my tent feeling lighter. Soon, Steven and all the heavy emotions will disappear.

My fingers are purple. It takes a few tries to get the flame going in this cold. I am shaky as I watch it melt. The veins in my arms are drained. I sit down on my sleeping bag and pull back the top part of my pants. My needle feels so cold but it delivers so warmly. I press down slowly and lay back on my sleeping bag.

All is yellow once more.

In this place, I meet Death once more. I am drifting and I feel Death encompass me and then all is blue. I am sinking further and further away from all that I know. There is no time, no way to tell how long I have been sinking into this blue space. I feel warm all over. My body is not mine anymore, it exists only as fragments.

I am at peace. I am blue.

But Death does not want me. Death brings me down as far as he can only to push me back up. Death takes me away from this beautiful space and returns me to the tent with the holes all over it. I am cold once again. I am alive. The wind whispers through the holes around me. I can't understand what the wind says, so I just lay there and wait.

...

The box is still there. I blink and it doesn't disappear. Whatever Steven brought here is bound to bring up the past. I don't want to remember anything. It hurts too much to remember. Slowly, I rise up on my elbows. The needle is still in me. I take it out. My skin is purple and dotted with little marks.

My hands shiver as I reach out to grab the box at the bottom of my sleeping bag. It is square and heavy. There is one word on the top. Grandma. I trace each letter with my finger, allowing the word to form on my lips. I whisper it to the night.

"Grandma." The word feels unnatural on my lips.

Time passes as I hold the box. I hear the cars passing over the bridge. I imagine the many people stuck in rush hour traffic. How many are going home? How many are leaving somewhere? Suddenly, I feel overwhelmed by the amount of emotions humans are capable of feeling. I shake my head. Tears are forming in my eyes as I clumsily tear the tape off of the box.

Wrapped in bubble wrap, I find a miniature photo album. The cover of it says Ralph. I shudder seeing my name written in that familiar handwriting. The smallness and precision of each letter, the way the curves of each letter flow romantically into the next word or sentence. It is my Grandma's handwriting. Each page represents a year in my life. I close my eyes and imagine my Grandma's small, delicate hands creating this book. There is a picture of me standing on the school stage after winning the spelling bee in the fourth grade. Underneath the picture, there is a detailed description of the event in that same flowy script.

I flip to the end of the book, past miniscule achievements and awkward school photos to see where my Grandma stopped. Her handwriting is jagged and sloppy from the morphine that they gave her in the hospital. I feel my face growing hot. This is too much. Still, I read on.

It is a letter...

...to me.

Dear Ralph, you make me very proud. I love you so much. Never forget that...

There is more, but her words turn big and loopy. I can't read it and I am glad for that.

The colors are too much. I am used to feeling one color at a time. Yellow. Green. Purple. They exist by themselves. But now, they are blending and creating new colors and I feel so small. I forgot what it was like to feel like this.

My body falls in slow motion. I curl myself into a ball on my sleeping bag. This is what it is like to remember. It hurts like a motherfucker. I love you so much. The words feel red and purple and green.

The cold air whispers to me as I lay there. I find my voice and respond.

"I—I remember. I remember who I am."

This tent is too small now. I have let the colors blend and expand and now, this tent is confining me. Death lingers here. It is in my needle, buried in my sleeping bag, it lays like a thick fog over the people who live under this bridge. I have lived with Death as a roommate for too long.

I crawl out of my cell and breathe in deeply that cold Boston air. The cars above me are going fast, so fast that the bridge comes to life with vibrations. I pick myself up and walk. My knees are shaky and I am weak. Still, I see the colors around me and I know that I must walk on.