

Fall

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I remember once, you asked me, ‘Why aren’t they called falling stars?’
I don’t know why, but that question never quite left me, hanging onto the back of my mind like a thread that I just can’t pick loose.

I can hardly remember the day we met. Time has a way of blurring together into a hazy mist of what seems to have always been, that I sometimes forget what once was.

I think it was autumn.

The gentle crunch of the leaves against the soft soil always reminds me of your laugh – that sweet tune I know so well it makes the back of my hand jealous. My hand misses yours.

I was always too afraid to ask, but that was never a problem. Before my turbulent thoughts could form the words, your fingers felt their way down my palm and through the gaps in mine. Selfishly compassionate. You showed me how to love like that: to care so much but so carelessly, the ‘I don’t need your permission to love you’ kind of love.

We often picnicked under that large oak tree in the botanical gardens. I adored the way your eyes lit up each time a squirrel skittered past.

‘Don’t you wanna buy me a pet squirrel?’ you asked dreamily.

I laughed in response, but I knew that if I could’ve adopted one at that moment, I would have done it just to see your eyes spark into that incandescent joy once more – that familiar joy that always baffled me. My happiest thoughts were always shrouded in doubts but you, in your uncaring ecstasy, swept them aside so effortlessly.

I couldn't dance – I still can't – but, almost falling over, you pulled me to my feet and we spun and whirled to the music in your head.

'But what if someone walks past?' I protested.

'Fuck them, they don't know you,' you laughed, 'I know you and I want to dance.' So we spun and we whirled; the music in your head invited itself into mine. It never left. Time danced away with us and soon the glimmering rays of sunlight began to fade – draping your left side in a quilt of crimson and amber so beautifully complementing the foliage it poked through. I ran my fingers through your hair, watching the dying light play auburn through each blonde strand. If perfection doesn't exist, that came close.

But we didn't need perfection. We had each other and we didn't need anything more than a blank canvas upon which we would paint our scars into the most brilliant artwork.

'Perfection is overrated,' you said, 'Nothing perfect is beautiful and nothing beautiful is perfect,' with that thoughtful crease etched momentarily into your forehead. Then your gaze found mine and the back of my hand throbbed jealously while you let out a shy giggle. There was something about the way that when our eyes met, yours would whisper wordlessly into mine saying they couldn't wait until our lips did too...

Moving down to this side of the country was jarring. I was alone amongst the crowds and everyone spoke a different unfamiliar tongue. Surrounded by strange faces and words I couldn't understand, I lost my way. I lost my way all the way to you, and I never wanted to find it again.

Between classes we caught each other for a quick coffee or, if time was short, you just pulled me aside to taste the wine-spiked coffee on your breath before you were whisked away again. I cherished those coffee dates. We told each other about our problems and laughed at their triviality – your hand cradled in mine; or mine in yours. There were dozens of coffee shops to choose from, but we always ended up going to the same one: just across the road from your apartment. You loved their lemon meringue. Even though each slice was about the height of my hand, you refused to cut them into small bites. You liked the challenge. Instead, you played a balancing act, using your dessert fork to carefully fit each piece into your mouth without it falling off – so many fell. By the time you were done, the tip of your nose and the corners of your mouth were smudged with bits of meringue. I told you that you looked silly; you stuck your tongue out playfully.

I had never been one to read much, but you're a bookworm, so you always asked me how far I was in the book you gave me.

'You have to finish it by next week 'cause the next one is so good, you'll love it!'

You said that about every book, but that typical glint in your eyes each time told me that you genuinely believed it. It was that belief that kept me reading, even if one or two of the books were a little bit boring – I always pretended they weren't.

Sometimes, when it was too late for a coffee date, we had wine at your place, instead. You liked the view from your veranda, so we dragged the couch outside and lay under a blanket together, chatting idly while the cold evening air bit at the tips of our noses. Those nights were nothing less than magical. We lay there, laughing at jokes we never told while you answered all the questions I didn't know how to ask. We dreamed all our sweet nothings and drew them recklessly into the sky because, for a moment, we could be those sweet nothings. We didn't have to worry about the turbulence of time ticking on uncaringly as it does, or the futures it might whisk away in the process. We could just dream, in all our selfish compassion.

When conversation died down to comfortable silence, you asked me to tell you something; anything. So, I told you about what I learnt in physics class, and you listened. I reminisced about all the weird and wonderful things I did in my childhood, and you listened. I told you the story of how my parents met, and you listened. You listened, like actually listened. Why did you listen? Why did you even care? Why? I don't know. But you did. Well, most of the time.

Sometimes, you just told me I was talking so much that I must have been running out of breath – so you gave me some of yours. It was sweet, your breath. Must have been the rosé. You always told me you were only having one glass but ended up drinking three, then you quietly nestled your head into the nook of your elbow.

'I'm just resting my eyes, I promise.'

I picked you up and carried you to bed. I wish I could say I did it anywhere near as gracefully as they do in the movies. Good thing you're a heavy sleeper.

On Sundays, you dragged me out of bed early to go to the market down the road. You dashed excitedly between the dozen-or-so thrift stalls, just barely managing not to spill the coffee I had bought you just a few minutes prior.

‘Whatcha think?’ you spun around to face me, holding a baby blue sundress to your chest with your free hand.

‘It’s cute,’ I smiled.

You let out a soft squeal and shrugged your shoulders with delight. Before I could say anything more, you had dashed off.

The first time you wore that dress was a few weeks later at the beach. The waves painted azure into its hemline as you danced frivolously amongst the tide. I lounged on my towel, content to just watch; admire you in all your carefree wonder. You asked me to come join you, but the beach was more crowded than what I was comfortable with and you knew that, so you didn’t push it and I loved you. Still, occasionally you popped back to lie in the shade of our umbrella for a while. You sipped on a can of coke you’d pulled from the cooler box while you let the gentle sea breeze cool you down. Smirking, you leant over and brought your face closer to mine. I could feel your breath tickling my cheek. Your sun-kissed lips kissed mine. My eyes closed as distant chatter faded to nothing and the ocean’s soft roar was replaced by deafening silence. Wonderful silence. Our souls tangoed through our lips in the space between heartbeats and I fell in love with you all over again.

Is it really falling if you don’t hit the ground?

You pulled away gently and my mind found its grip on reality again. My eyes opened to be greeted by yours; hazel with a touch of sunlight. I let my hand fall from where it was resting on your cheek – I don’t remember putting it there.

‘I love you,’ I whispered.

‘I know,’ you smiled.

You didn’t believe in ‘I love you, too’.

‘It’s insincere,’ you would say, ‘when I tell you I love you, I want it to be because I want to, not just as some generic response to you saying it to me.’ And that was what I found so awe-inspiring about you: you hated the world for all its unspoken rules, so you built your own and invited me in. A world where, instead of chasing sunsets, we could make our own.

Later on, that’s exactly what we did. The sun began to dip below the horizon, turning the sea a deep shade of crimson-violet – and the sky to match. We had moved up to a bench on the promenade to avoid the high tide. You reached into your handbag and pulled out your polaroid camera.

‘This is too beautiful not to keep,’ you said, enraptured.

You managed to snap a picture just before the sun dipped below the horizon, then you tilted your head onto my shoulder and slipped the camera back into your bag without looking. We stayed like that for a while; the lukewarm breeze occasionally blew some of your hair into my face, but I didn't mind all that much. The sky was mostly clear apart from a few wispy clouds, so we sat in our comfortable silence and watched as violet dimmed and the stars shimmered into view. You traced infinity onto the back of my hand and, as I gazed upwards, a single star streaked through the sky above us.

The leaves are turning brown again. A carpet of them has already settled around the oak tree in the gardens. With every passing day, the soft patter of rain against my window sill is becoming more and more familiar. You never cared much for umbrellas or raincoats, rather choosing to let the drizzle soak your hair and drip through your clothes – is 'defiant' too strong a word? Summer left quickly. Most of my time is spent indoors: working or finding reasons not to. Occasionally I look up from my desk and let my mind wander with the raindrops as they spring from the half-naked branches that hang near my window.

I still have that polaroid. I keep it in the back of my phone case; a little reminder of the question you asked me that night. 'Why aren't they called falling stars?'

To be honest, I'm still not sure, but I like to think that sometime, somewhere, we were gazing up into the night, watching the stars fall towards the earth, but seeing that they never reached the ground, we decided that they were shooting for the skies instead.