

Apple Pie

The town I live in is out of time. Shops, people, and buildings all seem to be colored in sepia, as if everything was only a photograph—a monochrome, muted glimpse of the world beyond. Men march to work in tan suits, while women busy themselves cooking and cleaning. Newsies run across the streets, running to penny candy shops with boyish excitement.

The town I live in is out of time. This world, and every person in it, is ending. Today is the last day that every person in the world has to live, and yet no one is treating it as such, as if a thick blanket of denial was cast over the sepia town, and every citizen truly, *adamantly*, believed that it would protect them from the End.

I am waiting for a package.

I walk on reddish concrete, rounding corners with intricate metal street lights. In my pockets, I have two ha'pennies, shiny and tiny metal joys that can fetch me a taffy.

I skip down the streets, humming. I don't want anyone to bat an eye, so they don't. Cheerful hellos and good wishes follow me, just as perfect and sepia as I liked.

This timeless world filters out everything; there's not a single black suit nor dress, not a single graveyard nor funeral home down the fun-filled sepia streets, not a single unsmiling face. I love it here.

I am the only one in this world who might receive a package. A small bag, just smaller than the palm of my young hand, that no one envies me for getting.

I walk by the post office, a taffy in my hand.

I walk by the post office again, the taffy eaten and the wrapper folded in my fist.

I keep coming up with things to do, ways to let the sun set before I ever go in. I've hummed every song taught in school and braided and rebraided my hair dozens of times, my fingers clumsy and nervous. Five p.m. comes in a blink, and my brother shoulders past me, newly freed from his corporate job.

He looks tired. He always looks tired.

He stares at me. A silent question.

I look away, slightly embarrassed, and he sighs. He sighs far too much for a man in his twenties, wrinkles his eyebrows too much, sleeps and smiles too little. I wish he got the chance to be happy.

He walks away, his gait always more of a march than a stroll. He had explained to me, once, that he had to bend his legs in such a way so that he wouldn't crumple his suit.

He steps out of sight, out of the picture frame, and I wring my hands, willing the sepia to stay on my skin. I step into an alley, regulate my breathing, whisper hopeful ideas to myself.

Perhaps there would be no package this time, perhaps I could stay this time. Can't I? Can't I stay? I realize only when I watch sepia slip off my fingernails that I want to. I don't *want* to go back—there's nothing for me there—nothing, nothing, nothing.

My brother comes marching back down the sidewalk with a parcel.

Cracked sepia freezes on my dress.

I feel the shells of sepia clay crumbling off of me, and I can't keep them in place anymore, I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't—

I run.

I weave between walking statues, sprinting through alleys and streets of sepia-colored denial, and I run, my legs slapping on the pavement, reddish soil misting off of me like fog on a humid day. My brother is running right behind me, a slow jog at first, to not ruin his suit, but as I approach the beach, his steps become more desperate, his gait longer, his shoes thumping with the impact of every stride.

I grab a piece of driftwood floating on the ocean and take it with me as I rush into the cold water, feverishly paddling my arms and kicking my legs as I launch across the ocean. The sepia town behind me fades into the horizon, and the water turns from a murky brown into a clear blue. My brother is just behind, jumping into the water without hesitation in spite of his nice suit.

I scramble onto the first piece of land I see, an island lush with jungle trees and vines and flowers but conspicuously absent of any other creatures. The flora is too green, an oversaturated photo of color that's jarringly artificial. I duck through the trees, pushing vines and leaves and branches out of my path.

I turn back to look at my brother. Unconsciously, I slow my steps, slow my breathing, let sepia reapply itself on my skin just slightly, because *he looks so tired*.

Not just the skin-deep tired from a lost night of sleep I remember seeing on him, but something beyond, an exposed memory in the superficial sepia. I stop my steps completely, and he slowly walks up to me, each step looking like a monumental effort. I stare at him, feeling as if I'm going to cry.

“C’mon,” he sighs. “Let’s go home.”

He grabs my wrist gently and pulls me back towards the ocean. We travel back the way we came, or at least I think we do, yet the sepia town never comes back into view.

“I, I think we’re lost,” I whisper, apologetic, but not enough to actually apologize. “Let’s go that way.”

We turn to a small, sandy island, crawling off the driftwood and collapsing onto the shore. Sand sticks to our wet clothes almost immediately as we sit. I laugh, donning layers and layers of sepia as I poke fun at my brother’s wet suit with a levity I didn’t feel. *Laugh*, I silently plead to him. *Smile, c’mon, look less tired. Please.*

My brother’s expression doesn’t change. He doesn’t answer, doesn’t even look at me. He just sighs once more, a long, shuddering breath that seems to rip him open on the way out, and drops the parcel into my lap.

I push on, continuing to joke about childhood memories, pulling up everything I can remember saying to make him smile as I rip open the brown paper on the package.

Inside is a hand-sized artisan apple pie, a manufactured frosted sugar cookie, and a picture. I automatically reach for the cheaper cookie first, thinking that I would want to save the pie for tomorrow.

I quiet for just a moment as my fingertips reach the cookie’s plastic wrapper, remembering that I *couldn’t* save it for tomorrow. I reach for the pie instead. Somehow, everything begins sinking in as I stare at a still-warm pie, a lovely, lovely gift that’s too good for me.

The homemade crust nearly crumbles in my hands as I tried to split the treat in half, ending up with a ruined mess of a pastry in one hand and a perfect slice in the other. I push down

a sinking feeling with a smile and hand the perfect half of the apple pie to my brother, who finally looks up.

He takes it, glancing down at the mess of sugar in my other hand before switching his perfect half with my crumbled mess. He flicks my forehead, a gentle reprimand.

“Lucky you,” he says, a tired grin climbing onto his face with great effort.

My sepia smile starts to quake at the edges. The heat burning my eyes overflows, and fat tears begin rolling down my cheeks before I even think to stop them. The first sob surprises me, wracking through my body with such fervor that I’m not sure how I’d managed to stay smiling before it. The first is followed quickly by a second, which drags a third and fourth with it, and soon, I’m shoving bites of cinnamon apple into my mouth just to try to mute my wails.

My brother pats my head, pastry flakes from his fingers getting tangled in the roots of my hair, and I feel ten years old again, helplessly sobbing at our parents’ funeral.

“Damn you,” I hiccup out, and I am so far from sepia that even my words bring colors with them, every syllable a deep blue sticking to my brother’s suit. “I just wanted to be happy for a few more minutes. *Fuck you.*”

“Isn’t that a little unfair?” He breathes a short, watery laugh, a sound I hadn’t heard from him in a long, long time. I look at him through the blur of tears and find his eyes to be glazed over, the sunlight reflecting off of unshed tears. He’s barely holding it together too, shaky hands bringing apple pie to a trembling mouth.

He chokes on his next bite, a sob finally ripping its way out of his sepia suit. The tears make him look so much younger. The way his face crumples and the way snot dribbles down his upper lip makes him look both unfamiliar and too familiar.

It shocks me more than I feel comfortable to admit, watching tears fall from a sepia man. *No*, I correct myself. *It shocks me to see my brother cry.* Him. He hadn't even cried at the funeral, ever a strong face, an exasperated sigh, a warm, calloused hand steadily ruffling my hair.

But maybe that wasn't who he was.

I scoot towards him, not exactly leaning on his side, but moving close enough to have our arms stick to each other, shoulder to elbow.

We're both shaking, sobbing out of sync and laughing at the mess we are as we watch the sun dip down the colorful horizon. I look at us through a blurry filter. What were we but two children with no one but each other? What was I but a spoiled brat who forced my brother to be stronger than he was?

The sun's warmth slips off of us, inch by inch, until the only warmth I feel is his arm on mine, and I stuff my last bite of pie in my mouth as he pokes my wet cheek, smiling.

As the last rays of sunlight get pulled into the ocean, I feel the warmth next to me vanish. I don't need to look to know that my brother is gone.

So too is the sepia town that raised me, so too are the sepia people who loved me. I rub the picture from the package in between my fingers.

It's an old sepia picture, yellowed at the edges, capturing a memory of my brother putting candles in an apple pie for my birthday. I cradle it to my heart—it's almost all that's left of him. I watch the moon slowly glow into view in the pitch dark sky, alone.