

## Atlantic City, 2022

It's the end of the world and I'm going to break up with my girlfriend.

The thought comes to me at 3.a.m as I lie flat on my back atop the stiff, cheap mattress we had bought two years ago, back when we still lived in the same city. In the same apartment. The glaring light of my phone casts my face in harsh shadow and I imagine, to a watcher in the darkness, I must appear a sort of ghost, a skeleton woman with holes for eyes and pale tapering bones for a face. In a week or so, perhaps that is what I will be.

*If it wasn't the end of the world, would I be breaking up with my girlfriend?* I wonder, although I had made up my mind only seconds earlier. The thought hangs at the back of my mind, dim and blurry compared to the sharp images on the screen before me: the ground opens up in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, a jagged line of thick black smoke emerging from its bottomless depths; the Dead Sea in Jordan roils and boils, turning to blood; nine-breasted, dragon-riding lady surfaces from the murky waters off the coast of New Jersey to scream garbled obscenities at startled beachgoers. My girlfriend, currently a resident of Atlantic City, had been one of those beachgoers. I have proof of that, a shaky video posted to her Instagram page of her and another woman, scraggly blonde hair fading at the roots and an 'end is nigh' shirt, sticking their middle fingers up at the intruder, as their arms loop around each other. She claimed that she had travelled to Atlantic City to visit family. This woman was not her family.

I was not going to jump to conclusions, and so I asked her as much. She did not respond, but that was not shocking as she had stopped reading my texts three days after the world started to end. The following day, she posted two more short videos with the other woman, both apparently taken at an end of the world rave. They were playing a drinking game where they took shots for every new apocalyptic event they could spot on their socials. Even just looking at my feed now, I can't imagine it would take that long to get drunk.

*Jackson Hole earthquakes, take a shot.*

*Blood rain, take a shot.*

*Strange entity from a theology you're vaguely aware of, down the whole bottle.*

I stare at all the feed images for a moment longer. They are part of short video clips, so they pass quickly before my eyes, growing, then vanishing then looping in on themselves in an endless cycle. Small universes that pop into existence and die before they can even become something coherent. It's not their fault though, so I give them each a heart emote before I switch off my phone and roll out of bed. My footing is unsteady. I cannot tell if this is evidence of another earthquake or simply my night-tired limbs refusing to cooperate with my brain.

The flooring of my bedroom is a crappy jigsaw puzzle of jagged wooden boards that you'd expect from an apartment paid for on an independent contractors' salary, and the walls are also somehow sticky as I brace myself against them. I hobble into the hallway toward the closed door across from my room. I can hear the clack of a keyboard from behind the heavy door, evidence that my roommate has not yet fallen prey to the weariness of a month-long apocalypse. *Good for her*, I think with a surprising lack of annoyance.

I rap my knuckles hard against the scratched wood—twice, our code for something immediate. The clacking stops, then there is a slow scrape as a chair is shoved across another hardwood floor, followed by footsteps. My roommate opens the door, curly black hair poking out from a plaid sleep bonnet to dangle across her forehead.

"Hey. It is 3a.m., but we're both up, I guess? What's going on? Also, maybe make this quick because I'm on a good streak with chapter eighteen and I don't know how long it's going to last." Her

voice is raw, as if she hasn't used it in several hours. That's also how long it's been since I last checked in on her, so she probably hasn't.

"Ohhh, good to hear it's going well! Break a leg. Or a finger? I don't know how that saying goes for writing actually, but good vibes all the same." I attempt, with debatable success to make myself sound less like a skeleton woman up at 3a.m. "Just wanted to know if you were going to be using the car or if I could drive it down to New Jersey for the day."

"New Jersey? Why would you want to go to New Jersey?" She raises an eyebrow. Like me, she was born and raised in the general periphery of New York City and considers the adjoining state something of an embarrassing cousin.

"Girlfriend," I say.

Her expression softens a little. "What? You and Quinn want to be together when the world ends? That's pretty damn romantic, actually. Fuck, can I use that? I think there's going to be an apocalypse in my story too."

"Um, sure, but that is...not exactly what's happening? I'm breaking up with her. Just saw a picture on her social, and I think she maybe...got together with someone else."

"Ohhh, that sucks. I mean, you know, she sucks." Shayna's voice trails off and I can tell that's not all she's thinking. She sighs and adds, "Look, you can use the car, I'm obviously not going to be needing it so long as my book isn't done yet which isn't going to be for a *while*. But—and I don't mean to deny the fact that what Quinn's doing hurts—but do you *really* need to go to Jersey to do this? Text breakups are shitty etiquette, yeah, but it's the end of the fucking world. No one expects you to drive five hours to say, 'shove off' to someone who ghosted you."

"I guess so, yeah. But we were together for two years, you know? I want closure. I want to see her face when I say—how did you put it?—shove off." *I don't want her to ignore me again.* "And it's not like I don't have the time," I add. "Not everyone has an ongoing novel draft they need to finish before they kick the bucket, y'know?"

"Ha, fair. Alright, then—go on, take the car, and live your dreams," Shayna says, motioning with one hand to the world outside our apartment and also, assumedly, my dreams. I give her a look and she snickers. I tend to fall in with people who like to mess with me, which has led alternately to good relationships, like my one with Shayna, and also those that are rather more questionable.

"*Alright* then, on that note..." I take a couple awkward steps down the hallway, then pause, glancing over my shoulder to where Shayna has started to retreat into her writing cavern. "Actually, you know what? I've been meaning to ask this for the past couple days and now may be my last chance. Does it bother you at all? That you're putting all that *work* into this story, and no one even may have the chance to read it? Not before..."

*Before the world ends.* I don't say this. The end of all existence is one of those things that are easier to talk about in jest than in earnest.

"To that, I reply: 'never underestimate the dedication of Wattpad readers.'" Shayna laughs. "But, yeah, it is more than that. I need...what was it you said, closure? I don't want the world to end if I haven't said what I need to say." She leans her head back against the doorframe, her expression suddenly pensive, then adds, "Yeah, that's good. Thanks, Sammie, that's going in chapter eighteen. Anyways, keys are on the counter, next to the takeout boxes you haven't cleaned up yet."

"Nor will I ever," I say, backing away down the hallway. "The kitchen will die as it lived, an unwashed, ramen-smelling mess."

“You’re an unwashed ramen-smelling mess.”

“Thank you. I hope that’s how you remember me when I’m gone.” This is the sort of thing I meant when I said it was a bad idea to reference the apocalypse in earnest. There’s a pause of about two minutes, as both of us attempt to work out how to say goodbye without actually acknowledging that this could be *goodbye*.

“Well then. See you around,” I say, at last. It’s awkward.

“Yeah. See you around,” Shayna replies with the same self-conscious awkwardness then adds—  
“Good luck with the breakup!”— before retreating to her room and what remains of her novel. As I leave the apartment, I wonder if that was the last time I’d ever see her face.

\*\*\*

How do you prepare for a four-hour road trip in the middle of the apocalypse? It felt, at least, like a smart idea to grab a raincoat before I headed out—in case it started raining blood or something. I also took a clunky old first-aid kit that could double as a blunt object if things started getting all *Mad Max*. Besides that, I had no fucking clue what to do besides get out there and hope for the best.

It was not raining blood as I opened the door of my apartment building, nor did the ground open up to swallow me whole, or any other manner of apocalyptic disaster occur, which I took as a good sign for my trip. In fact, the night appeared reasonably normal. If not for the lack of twenty-somethings stumbling back to their apartment drunk or dogs howling into the moonlit sky, I’d be half-inclined to think that there was no apocalypse, after all.

I find Shayna’s and my car, a scratched-up Honda Prius parked in the back of the lot near the oak tree that drops as many acorns as leaves in the fall. A small flock of sparrows that were cooperatively ransacking an empty Starbucks bag scatter when I walk by them. Quinn used to feed them back when

we lived together in the apartment, and, once I realized she wouldn't stop, I did research on what she could give them without fucking up their digestive systems.

Good times, I guess. I cram all of my stuff in the back seat of the car—the raincoat (it's June so, no, I'm not wearing it), the first aid kit and half the granola bars we had left in the cupboard. The other half I left outside of Shayna's room, along with a lukewarm bottle of tea and a note that said *don't forget to fucking eat, you literary genius, you <3*. Even before the end of the world Shayna and I would correspond in fake passive-aggressive notes, something that Quinn said made us 'big fucking weirdos—like not in a bad way, but you *are*.' I think, despite the fact that she was the one moving away, she wanted us to remain just Quinn-and-Sam, two against the world. Which, *fair*—after all, I'm the one travelling to another state to say how mad I am that she chose to be with someone else.

I slip into the car and stick my keys in the ignition. My plan feels real now, in a way it didn't when I was lying in bed at 3 a.m., and I ask myself: *am I going to actually do this?* The pressure of the choice is momentarily crushing, so I choose to put it off for a moment and glance at my phone. It doesn't help. More disasters parade across the glowing screen: a massive snake has slithered out of the sands of the Sahara and has opened its great needle-toothed maw to swallow the sun; people across the world are dissolving into blinding golden light in the first widespread epidemic of spontaneous combustion; a four-story man in glowing armor on a white horse is wandering the world, speaking the truth of these last days to all who dare to ask it of him. He was last sighted in Brixton, and, before that, Bombay, both times speaking to children. After watching this last story, I switch off my phone, and, in a blind sort of panic, turn the key in the ignition. The world is ending. It is ending everywhere, in places that I have never been, to people I have never met, and I cannot understand it. The decision is simple then. I'm going to break up with Quinn.

I maneuver the car out of the apartment parking lot, paying no attention to the red light that stands guard above the intersection—no one's coming. If I imagine for a moment that I had not just spoken to Shayna, then I become the only person left in the world, a skeleton woman beneath an empty sky. The idea is bleak and poetic until it becomes bleak and horribly lonely. Halfway to the interstate highway, I stop in the parking lot of a boarded-up furniture store to put some sound on my phone: a song, a podcast, anything. Scrolling through Spotify I notice that, against all odds, there are playlists for the end of the world. *Apocalypse Jams*. *Armageddon Starter Pack* (Sponsored by Taco Bell: *This Hour May be Your Last...Live Más*). I feel mildly vindicated by the fact that at least my cross-state road trip is not the *most* absurd thing that people are doing at the end of the world and pick one at random.

The acoustic version of a song by R.E.M. (you know the one) comes on and I sing along under my breath as I head towards the highway.

\*\*\*

Quinn and I went on a road trip like this once. It wasn't the end of the world, but it sure had felt like it at the time.

We drove up to the I-30 from Albany, yawping the lyrics to Mitski songs as we took the mountain bends far too fast for what was the end of a wet and cold NY-state March. We felt alive. It was my last year in college. Quinn had just gotten a Real, Honest-to-Goodness Job with Benefits. The sky was as clear and wide above us as the ice across Great Sacandaga Lake, and nothing could go wrong.

"So," I said to her, "you ready to finally meet my family?"

Quinn shrugged. "Uhhhh, hard maybe. Do they already know that you're...?" She didn't complete the sentence; we both knew what she was talking about.

“They know,” I told her, and felt a spark of affection for my unexpectedly open-minded small-town parents. “They said they love me. They’ll love you too. Just... be the same amazing self you’ve been with me.”

Quinn cackled like the pellets of hail that hammered the top of the car an hour ago in Schenectady. “Whoa, let’s not go *too* far here. Maybe wait a couple of years and *then*, if things are already going well, I can start to put my amazingness on full blast. But not yet. It’s only our first dinner, after all.”

I didn’t know it at the time, but it was going to be our last dinner too.

We pulled into an uneven gravel driveway which my parents had been meaning to pave since before I even left for college and stomped our way across the slushy walkway to the doorway. We knocked. They answered. It was Sunday, so my uncle was also there, in a sweat-stained flannel that smelled of Old Spice and diesel. But he had learned of my ascension to lesbianism months ago and gave me a gruff smile as I walked in. Quinn introduced herself to him, and to my parents who had never seen her in person before. Then, after the obligatory small talk, we sat down at a dinner of pasta and red sauce. The room was silent. The sauce had meat in it, chunks of beef that swam around in the leathery noodles and tasted of onion and blood.

“How was school, Samantha?” my father asked.

“Good,” I told him, trying to ignore Quinn’s incredulous face across the table mouthing *Samantha*. “Hard but good.”

“And how has the job search been going?” my mother asked.

“Alright. I sent out applications to a couple places in NYC, but if they aren’t hiring, my backup plan is still to do freelancing. Oh! And *Quinn*,” I pointed at her, “actually just got a job, so *that’s* good



news. It's remote, with a marketing company that works in Atlantic City. You know, very similar to what you used to do for a while."

"Oh, right—back when you were still in elementary school! Hard to believe so much time has passed." My mother gave a short laugh that reminded me of a fork scraping against the side of her bowl and said nothing else. A moment later, my father turned toward Quinn and me, clearing his throat in a way that I knew always preceded the first syllables of a question .

"Samantha, honey," he said. "Could you please pass the red sauce?"

And so it was for the rest of the conversation. Any reference to Quinn was patently avoided, as if she wasn't even there at all. Maybe that's how they had wanted it to be the whole time: gay daughter at college, straight daughter at home. As if it worked that way. They'd be thrilled to know what I'm doing now, I guess. After dinner was done and our red-stained bowls drowned in the murky waters of our kitchen sink, my father said that the two of us were welcome to stay the night. My mother added that I could have my old room and they could blow up a mattress for Quinn in the spare downstairs. It would be easier and cheaper than going to a motel and I couldn't find it in myself to say no to them.

Later that evening, I crept out to the back porch, breath steaming in the cold Adirondack air. I wanted to wallow in the misery of the evening. I wanted to be alone. This was fruitless on both accounts. Quinn followed me out, I think assuming that we were going to make out in the light of my mom's anti-mosquito lamp. My uncle, too, was seated outside on the concrete stoop, smoking as he stared at the stars. He glanced over his shoulder at us, then took a long drag of his cigarette and told me: "I'm sorry, they've always been that way". I learned he had a partner over in Mayfield, that he'd been with since I was little, and he laughed when Quinn called him the quintessential gay uncle. When I asked him to tell my parents that some sudden catastrophe had happened at our apartment and we couldn't stay the night, he blew out a ring of smoke and said, "Alright, just so you don't get in the habit

of running away from your problems, kid.” I promised him I wouldn’t, then Quinn and I sprinted across the frost-coated grass to the scratched-up Prius and drove away.

I made it ten minutes without losing the last shreds of composure I had left. Then, with shaking hands, I turned into a gravel lot next to a crappy bait shop, and started to cry, in great heaving sobs that sounded like ice cracking. Quinn took my hand and stroked it as I told myself over and over again that it could be worse, that this was fine. *No, it isn’t*, she whispered to me, tickling my ear with her breath, *but it will be*. I asked her afterwards how she did it, how she made it through that evening and my breakdown afterward. She said nothing at first then, gave me a strange, very un-Quinn-like smile.

“What can I say? In this big, wide, terrifying world of ours, I like to feel needed.”

“I do need you, Quinn,” I said to her then and it was true. If I knew then what I was going to be doing now, I would have put a nail through my tires, and slammed a desk drawer on both of my hands, so intense had the feeling been.

\*\*\*

I don’t sing any more after I recall that. Instead, I fill my vacant ears with a janky pop song that I remember hearing constantly on the radio eight years B.A. (a new dating system I developed in the bored hours before the New Jersey state line: Before the Apocalypse). The (admittedly not good) song is now the only thing keeping me from total silence because, other than the Prius, the interstate is nearly abandoned. The only cars that I see are vacant, squatting in the breakdown lanes or the ditches on the side of the road, where they had rolled to a stop after their driver had, assumedly, spontaneously combusted. It takes another hour before I encounter my first inhabited car, a Camry that turns onto the Freehold entrance to the I-9 just as I’m driving past. I take a look into the window as it veers into the lane next to me. Every surface is covered with IKEA cartons full of clothes and books and household appliances, save for the driver’s seat and a small area in the back where a dog is curled up on a ragged

blanket. The driver looks at me and we exchange an uncertain glance. Do he or I want to trust a stranger in the middle of the apocalypse? Then he raises a sheepish hand in a wave, and I notice he's young, probably still a teenager. That is all it takes for us to make an unspoken agreement to ride alongside each other—and we do, at least, until we pass Toms River and come to the enormous man on a horse.

He's seated atop a gas station as if it were a small footstool, his armor-clad knees bent to the height of his lower chest. His horse is standing in the lot of broken concrete and grass behind him, white flanks blending into the fog. Last time he had been sighted he was in Brixton, England. I wondered how he managed to make it all the way across the Atlantic.

As we near the road stop, my companion starts to swerve across the empty highway toward the exit. I guess he wants to hear whatever the man on the horse has to say. I pause a second, then yank my steering wheel right to head after him. I'm never going to get another chance in my rapidly-dwindling lifespan to meet a four-story apocalyptic warrior. Also, it occurs to me that I only have a passing idea of where Quinn is in Atlantic City and that, if anyone would know, it would probably be the guy who has access to 'the truth of these last days.'

The kid and I pull into the gas station lot three parking spaces apart. We're sort of to the back of the horseman, so I can only make out his armored torso, half-covered by a mane of long black hair, as it looms above the abandoned Speedway. Half of the time, though, that's not what I'm looking at. It startles me, actually, to realize how little I register the horseman. Staring at him does make me feel small—both literally and metaphysically. And yet when I keep him in the corner of my eye, it's almost as if he were flat, an image instead of a person. A news clip flashing across the screen of my phone to be reacted to and then forgotten. The realization unsettles me a little.

Meanwhile, the kid gets out of his car, hefting what looks to be an expensive camera tripod, then he heads around to the back door and lets out his dog. She darts out, sleek grey haunches bobbing

over the edge of the car, and races around the car once before returning to his side. I wave at the two of them, as I get out of the car.

“Hey kid, I, uh, like your dog.” This whole thing feels far more *social* than I’m accustomed to with strangers, but there’s something about driving for hours alongside someone during the apocalypse that makes you like them more. The kid watches me carefully, as his dog comes bounding over to sniff my legs. I lean down to pet her, then stop myself. Quinn was all about petting *every* dog she saw, but she still has a scar on her wrist from when one of them got startled and bit her.

“Don’t worry, she’s friendly, ” the guy calls to me at last, as if my caution with his dog had passed some sort of test.

As he approaches me, I finally get a good look at him. He’s definitely as young—or younger than—I thought he was and has a sort of punk Harry Potter look to him, with the wire glasses, chunky metal stud earrings and bright yellow eyeliner that pops against his dark tan skin. No idea how he managed to keep it looking so crisp during the car ride though.

I hold out my hand. “Thanks for riding with me, dude. Name’s Sam.”

“Ro.” He stops a beat as the dog hops on me. She’s tall enough that her front paws barely touch my stomach. “That’s Lizard.”

I raise an eyebrow, but don’t ask. He continues, words spilling out of his mouth faster than before. “Perhaps you’ve heard of us. We’re on YouTube. Rozilla. Strange Phenomena and Urban Legends.”

He’s so eager, that I almost feel bad shaking my head. “Nope, sorry. I gravitate more toward the gaming channels, myself. My girlfriend—” Ex-girlfriend? How do you refer to someone you’re only

*planning* to break up with? “—probably would have seen them though. She was the Mulder of our relationship—super into paranormal mysteries, and local legends and all that sort of stuff.”

“And you were the Scully?” Ro’s eyes dart to the four-story man seated on the gas station behind us. He hasn’t noticed us so far—I guess we’re too small. I shrug.

“Operant word being ‘was.’ Sort of hard to be too much of a Scully when you’re standing next to 50-foot-tall warrior dude. Though I guess we *could* all be hallucinating due to a massive gas leak or something.” As I talk, I too find my eyes drawn to the man behind us, and all of a sudden, I regret saying anything about a gas leak. There’s a grandeur, a beauty to him, that’s impossible to explain by any hallucination. “So, I’m guessing that he’s why you’re here then? This is all...everything about the apocalypse has been very unexplained.”

“Yeah.” He sighs and looks all too weary for a 17-year-old. It suddenly hits me—I’ve heard people in their forties saying how horrible the apocalypse is for people my age but, *god*, how much worse has it got to be for people who haven’t even gone to college? Whose brains aren’t fully developed yet? I get the feeling Ro doesn’t want to talk about it though, because he immediately dodges my gaze and starts to loop around to the other side of the gas station. I trail behind him, doing my best to wrest my expression back to neutral. This is harder than it seems given that I’m standing in the shadow of a giant man who is both the only source of information on my girlfriend’s location, and also probably a deity.

Ro and I walk in silence for about a minute, then he starts to talk again, as if the conversation had never lapsed at all. Youtuber instincts, I guess. “Actually, though, if you look *closer* at the apocalypse, I don’t really think it’s that unexplained at all. Everything is some sort of end-of-the-world theology come to life. The spontaneous combustions are from Christianity, a fire appearing out of Yemen—that’s from Sunni Islam, and scientists are saying global warming is speeding up for some

impossible reason—I guess that’s for the atheists? And this...” He motions at the back of the four-story horseman, more of whom’s torso has started to appear as we circle the gas station. “...is Kalki, Avatar of Vishnu, who’s supposed to end the Kali Yuga—that’s the worst of the four ages in Hinduism, which, not gonna lie, is *definitely* the age we’re living in—and start everything over again. They’re all here. It’s as if humanity all decided collectively that the world was crap and not worth living in, so it just...stopped.”

“Can we do that?” I ask, my Scully instincts kicking in. I’ve spent too long arguing against Quinn’s crack theories to *not* question the validity of this universal consciousness thing.

The YouTuber shrugs, flipping his tripod over his shoulder and handing it to me. “Uhhh, lemme think on that for a sec. Could you set this up? I’ve got to change the settings on my video recorder.”

It’s been a *long* time since the last time I handled any camera equipment—stage crew in high school if you’re wondering—but the motions come back to me easily. As Ro fiddles with his camera, he elaborates on his shrug. “Okay so, disclaimer: the most philosophy I’ve gotten into is that fifteen-minute YouTube series with the stick figure illustrations. But I’m going to stand by what I said earlier. Technically, if you think about it, the ‘physical world’ is just an inference we make, based on patterns in all the stuff that we see. And sometimes we even fuck that up and get sensations that are totally different than that ‘physical world’. It’s not *implausible*, at least, that everything is just a world of sensation formed into patterns by our collective consciousness, and if everyone starts thinking something else, it all changes.”

He looks up from his camera to find me staring at him. “Fuck, sorry if that all sounds batshit. I only halfway believe it to be honest, but I haven’t found a better theory yet.”

I have to laugh because he looks so embarrassed. “It’s okay, dude. For 90% of my childhood, I thought the phone tower near my house was an alien radar device, because my dad saw glowing lights coming from it once. At least this actually makes sense. Is there anything else I could do to help?”

“Oh! Uh, yeah actually. I guess you could keep the video camera on me while I’m talking with Kalki Avatar. I was going to just point it in the direction of where he is and hope for the best, but an actual person filming would be better.”

“No, not that. I mean, I *will* do that.” I switch on the video camera, and aim it at him, causing him to immediately fiddle self-consciously with the collar of his jacket. “But if, in your theory, the world is ending because people decided it should end, if we all thought something else...would that change things?”

“Oh. Oh damn, that’s a deep question. I don’t know? That feels way too simple, and I doubt it comes down to only thought, but maybe it would help?”

“That’s fine.” I sigh. “It was just a question. Honestly, who actually knows what’s going on at the end of the world? Besides Kalki Avatar, I guess. But I do like your theory better than most—at least it means that...I don’t know, this wasn’t something that just happened to us.”

“In my theory, we *caused it*. We literally summoned beings from every theology to end the world.”

“Better than they just came by themselves.” I laugh because the world is ending and I’m standing in the parking lot of an abandoned gas station that is currently being used as a stool for a god, chatting about philosophy with a 17-year-old YouTuber. As meanwhile, said YouTuber attaches something that looks like a mic on his collar and uses the camera on his phone to check his makeup. “I look okay?”

“Frustratingly so. I am jealous of your makeup.” As he turns toward the road stop and the four-story man that towers above it, I add, “One more thing. I, uh, heard that Kalki Avatar has a lot of information about the end of the world and everything and if it isn’t too disrespectful, would you mind

asking him where my girlfriend is? She's close to Atlantic City, and I've been out of contact with her, and, um..."

My voice trails off, and I feel my face burning at the intimacy of what it feels I'm revealing. Ro's far less weird about it though than when I realized how young he was earlier. He nods and gives me a corny thumbs-up that looks out of place with the stud earrings and jean jacket. "Yup, no problem. Us gay peeps gotta stick together, right?"

I had no idea what his sexuality was before this moment (though I guess teenage YouTuber covering cryptids should have been a strong hint) but hearing him say that makes this abandoned road stop at midnight in rural New Jersey feel like the friendliest place in the world. I stammer, words barely coming to me. "Yeah. Thank you."

Then he gives me a lopsided grin and turns away to approach the avatar of a god.

\*\*\*

I watch the scene unfold through the lens of a 2013 Sony camcorder, the already grainy image quality made somehow worse by the fog and the smears of holy light that extend from the avatar.

A small blotchy shape that I assume is Ro moves across the parking lot, hesitates, then stops at the foot of the apocalyptic god. From my position at the camcorder, it seems to me that the top of his head reaches the god's ankle. Or maybe just to a toe? Every so often the image seems to shift before my eyes, and what was once the tan of his flesh becomes the core of the world, the ageless heart, throbbing in time to all the lives that begin and end in this second of eternity. In its seething depths, I can see a child slide free of its mother's womb, a man hurl his brother, screaming, into a pillar of fire, two lovers each swallow a handful of pills and sink into each other's arms. Whether these are scenes that manifest to Ro, I cannot say. Yet I watch as he takes a halting step forward, and falls to his knees, grasping at his



head and wailing something like a song. The dog stops racing in circles around her owner and pricks her ears, glancing from him to the avatar. I bend my head, maybe believing that if I do, the images will cease. They don't. Instead, Ro's song resolves itself into words. I cannot understand them, though I can't tell if they are too far away, or in a language that I do not understand or in a language that humanity was never meant to understand.

Whatever they are, Ro's words somehow draw a reply from the avatar above us. The voice that emanates from him is a crack in the earth, so deep and low that I can feel it in my very bones. Even from my place, thirty feet away and tucked safely behind a camcorder, its immensity consumes me. It's as if I were a child again— my neck aching as I leaned back to stare at the night sky—and I had just realized that all I ever saw above me was a flat image, the shadow of something far vaster and more complex than I could ever possibly comprehend. There were stars being born and dying thousands of light years away, continents and storms that were as large as continents on the planets that orbited them. And all I would ever see of them was the faintest flicker of a small, bright point slightly to the right of the phone line pole next to my house. I want to collapse onto the broken stone of the parking lot, so strong is the sensation. I want to scream. I want to cry.

In the end, ironically, it is the thought of Quinn that allows me to remain at the lens of the camcorder barely keeping my eyes on the scene that transpires before me. I remember the night that she moved out, six months after the failed dinner with my parents and three weeks before I would sign a lease with Shayna. When at last we had packed all of her things into boxes, two of us clambered wordlessly to the top of the monkey bars in the complex's small playground, and sat there for a while, feet dangling through the metal rails. We didn't say anything to each other. It wasn't one of those nights when we felt the need to reassert our relationship, to act like this wasn't the beginning of the end by repeating the same words over and over again.

Hey, don't worry, I'm sure things will stay the same, even if you are in another city.

It's not far, right? I can just drive down on the weekends. Or you take the bus up here, whatever works.

And, you know, I'll always need you, Quinn.

Neither of us needed each other that night, but we did still believe we were better together.

I ended up star-watching that night, too, but, unlike when I was a child, the vastness of the universe did not scare me. I can't exactly say why. Maybe I realized just how vast other human beings could be as well. How wide the hole was that they could leave in your life. I hold onto to the thought, to how comfortable the world felt when my hand was in Quinn's, in the ages that seem to pass before Kalki ends his conversation with Ro. At last, the young man clambers to his feet, dog prancing around him in a circle and yapping for joy. He pays her no attention, save a short pat on the head—only staggers toward me, his face almost literally aglow with an awestruck smile.

The first words he speaks to me are incomprehensible—not another language but wonder itself unmoderated by language. I knew, then, that he must have felt the same thing I did—but who knows how much more strongly. What happens to you, after all, when the avatar of a god turns their attention to your small mortal frame? When they speak to you in a language that predates time and space? The second words that he speaks to me, though, I can understand: “Are you religious?”

I shake my head. As much as I feel bad saying this next to a real deity, making something up would be worse. And yeah, maybe the physical incarnation of every theology in the world should be all the evidence that I need to believe in something. But it isn't. Instead, it raises more questions than it gives me answers: the first among them being, where have they all been the past thousand years?

All the same, it also feels wrong to act as if what I had just watched wasn't sort of, well...divine, so I add, "There's something out there though, I think. Just don't know what it is. What about you?"

Ro flashes me a wide grin, that suddenly makes him seem like the teenager he is. His eyeliner smeared sometime during his encounter with Kalki, and he no longer appears to mind. He no longer appears to mind much at all. "I'm with you. There's something—or someone?—out there and...I think I just met part of it."

"That's...that's fantastic, man." I grin back, less jealous than I was expecting. Damn, is the end of the world making me into an okay person? "I got most of it on the camcorder by the way—well not the sound, but definitely everything else."

He shakes his head. "Doesn't matter. There's so little time left and—and—I've made up my mind. Lizard and I are going with Kalki. That's how I want to spend my last hours, Sam, doing something transcendent."

"Ah." An image of Shayna flashes into my mind, unbidden. I have things I need to say before we all die. "Why did you come back down here then?"

"I asked your question—or I didn't really ask, Kalki just knew which was—" He pauses, realizing he had gotten off-track, "...But anyways, Quinn is at Pork Island near Atlantic City. Something is happening there. Don't know what though—I hope it means something to you."

"Not in the slightest, but I'm sure it will to Google Maps," I say, glancing over my shoulder to the car.

"Okay, good. Well—" Ro also looks over his shoulder. "We should probably part ways, then. We don't have much time left, and you should probably make the most of it. You can take the camcorder if you want."

“Oh! I mean, thank you. It was good to meet you, Ro. I hope you find what you’re looking for too.” I grab the camcorder by the root of its tripod, then pause before walking back to my car. “Uh, one last thing, you kept talking about the time. Did Kalki tell you...how much time we do have left?”

He pauses, then nods. “Two hours and seventeen minutes.”

I don’t walk back to the car. I run.

\*\*\*

I’m usually a safe driver. I remember on the road trip a year ago, Quinn asked me at least ten times to speed up, so that we could drive the highways ‘the way they were meant to be driven’, at a bracing ten miles above the speed limit. She would even laugh about this sometimes, saying that if we put her and I together, we’d make one normal driver, and wasn’t that the point of relationships, to balance each other out?

Yet tonight is no time to be balanced and, I’m pushing 70 on rain-slick roads, trying to squash the fears that I’m not going to make it to Pork Island in time.

1 hour, 40 minutes, 37 seconds. I set a countdown after I got the end time (ha! Awful pun) from Ro and Lizard. If I take the shortest route on Google Maps, I should make it there with maybe an hour to spare. But all of the roads are closed in Atlantic City, courtesy of the nine-breasted dragon-riding lady, so, instead, I’m forced to go the long way around, and find myself driving past places with names like Pleasantville and Linwood. Sometimes, when the clouds part for a moment and I’m staring out to sea, I think I can see her, the lady herself, snatching the hurricane winds and braiding them into reins for her beast. Somehow, with the distance and rain, she looks human. She has a mole on her left cheek and her fingers are veiny, as they should be, given that she’s technically millennia old.

The other parts of her change though and at any given moment she could be anyone you see on the street, your parent, your roommate, your lover. But with a vacant stare, milk-eyed and distracted. Sometimes, she is even you. At this, you pause, hands taut on the steering wheel, because what could it mean that the beast-lady at the end of the world has your face? Then the fog closes in, and she fades from sight once more and you slam down on the accelerator, because some horror has rooted within you, so that you cannot chance what you will see when she manifests again.

The current visitors to Pork Island, in this way, are tempting fate. When Ro had said something is happening, he meant something is happening. The entire span of what is apparently a combination dog-park-and-beach is covered in various modes of transportation, some cars, some rusted bicycles, even a couple of roller blades kicked off and thrown to the ground. The garbage cans have been turned over and emptied out, so that fires could be lit within them, warm and inviting on this cold rainy night at the end of the world.

There are people leaving the gathering, others just arriving, yet others telling stories and or passing around bongos or making out— and that makes me think of Quinn, which makes me think of what I'll have to do within an hour, which makes me distracted enough that I forget to take my foot off the accelerator for a sharp turn and the car starts to coast over the water-coated road toward the guardrails at the edge of the beach.

“Shit!” I frantically snatch at the steering wheel—are you supposed to turn into the swerve or away from it? But it’s already too late and I can hear the snap of metal, bright and sharp, as the front of the car folds in on itself, and the hiss of the airbags exploding in front of me. For a moment my vision goes black, and I can see nothing.

I can think, though, and what I think is that it would be really fucked up if I died right before the end of the whole fucking world.

And then I open my eyes. My face is smashed up against a rapidly deflating airbag, and my eyesight is a little bleary, but mostly I feel alive. I kick the side door of the car a couple of times, until it finally creaks open and take a shaky step outside. Then, I survey the damages. Well, no one's dead. That's probably about the best I could say for things.

"Shayna's going to kill me," I mutter beneath my breath. "I wrecked the car. As soon as she finishes her book, she's going to fucking kill me."

"Who's Shayna?" drawls a voice from my right. I look over to see a goth-looking girl shakily clambering over against the guardrail I just scraped with my car. She's got heavy eyeliner and a hazy cloud of dark hair that hangs about her face—or maybe just my vision is still foggy. I shake my head at her. "Doesn't matter. She's not going to have the time to kick my rhetorical ass anyways."

The goth girl lays a comforting hand on my shoulder, apparently not bothered by the fact that I got here by crashing my actual car into the back of her party. "You've got the right idea, darling. It's the end of the fucking world; nothing matters anymore."

That feels wrong, but I don't have the time to argue so I only bob my shoulders and ask, "Hey, do you know where I can find someone?" I realize too late how stupidly vague that sounds. "My girlfriend. She's six inches taller than me, actually gorgeous, badass-looking undercut—"

"Look—" the girl starts, and her boots scrape awkwardly against the pavement as she staggers away from the guardrail. I realize then she's probably drunk or high. Maybe both. "Look, darling, if you want to find anyone, they're probably going to be over at the Abyss, looking in."

"The...Abyss?"

"Yeah. It's where the water isn't. I mean, in a fucked-up way, it sort of makes sense. Hospitality Creek, welcoming the end of the world." This doesn't help me much, but I can see that the people who

are still leaving their vehicles are all headed in the same general direction. “Right, thanks,” I say to the girl, and maybe because my head’s woozy and my good judgment’s still out of commission, I add, “You heading over there yourself? Need an arm to lean on?”

She shakes her head, smiling a big, almost too-big smile. “Oh, no. Don’t worry. The Abyss may be over there now, but I’ll see it later. We’ll all see it later.”

“Oh. Alright then, I guess. Thanks for your help.”

“It’s no big deal.” She cackles like this is the most hilarious joke she’s ever heard, then hops back over the guardrail, her dark cloud of hair the last thing I see before she fades back into shadow. I stare at the place where she had stood for a second. Then, I kick open the back door to grab my camcorder (the damn thing somehow made it out of the crash in better shape than me), and limp away from my smashed-up car toward the crowd at the far side of the beach.

I blame the car accident that it takes me until halfway across the beach to ask myself exactly what the goth girl meant when she said, ‘we’ll all see the Abyss later.’

\*\*\*

Following a stream of brackish water that I tentatively label ‘Hospitality Creek,’ the crowd heads away from the shore toward inland Pork Island. As we slog along over the water-logged earth, I hear someone next to me mutter that he feels like a zombie. Another person laughs. I chime in that I already felt like a skeleton today, which makes this the second time I’ve compared myself to the undead—which isn’t a lot... ‘but it’s strange that it happened twice,’ the other two finish. We glance at each other in surprised appreciation before the crowd shifts again and they’re swallowed up in a sea of shifting people. The longer I walk, the more this seems to happen, and my movement becomes aimless, as much towards the creek bank to the left and the retaining wall to the right as forward.

At last, the crowd thickens to the point that I can no longer take another step without shoving another to the grounds. I stamp my foot, then groan as it sinks half an inch into the boggy ground, earning a stain I know will still be there when the world ends. “Fuck.” I’m not even a mile away from the Abyss, whatever the hell that is, and this is where I get stopped up? I mean, that would be a shitty ending. I glance down at my phone lock screen. 00:30:07. Half an hour until I’m dead. That knowledge comes with an odd clarity. There’s no point in turning back now because this is the last chance that I get.

And so, to loud protests and the occasional obscenity from those around me, I make for the retaining wall. Back where Hospitality Creek met the shore, the wall was so short that I almost missed it but here it’s laid out at least three meters high and a meter thick—assumedly, to keep the waters of Hospitality from spilling onto the road in spring. I see that some people have already clambered to its top, but there aren’t many. Though the wall itself isn’t that high, its sides are slick from the rain—and really, who wants to risk having their skull smashed open thirty minutes before the end of the world?

But I’ve driven four hours, videotaped the avatar of a god, gazed upon the nine-breasted dragon-riding lady at the end of the world and I sure as hell am not going to be stopped by a wall. I stick my apparently indestructible camcorder in a crack three feet up the embankment and brace my boot against it. Somehow it bears weight, so I cram my fingers into the seams of the bricks, where cheap municipal cement has been worn away by the salt breezes. And I climb. And I climb some more. Quinn would like this, I think. There’s something dramatic and stupidly dangerous about scaling a wall to see the abyss at the end of the world.

At last, after four minutes of the crappiest physical exertion I’ve had in years, I throw myself over the top of the wall. My lungs heave. My arms ache. My eyes dart down at my phone. 21:47. Goddamn. Better find Quinn fast. I walk along the top of the wall, weaving around the tangled limbs of those seated on the stone below me. “Quinn, Quinn, where the fuck art thou, Quinn?” I scan the crowd



below, but the banks of the stream are heavy with fog, and my head isn't much better after the car crash. Then I hear a voice from somewhere below me.

"Deny thy father and refuse thy name; Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love. And I'll no longer be a Capulet." I look down. "Hey babe."

And there she is, legs crossed, hands cradling her phone—I knew she hadn't remembered those Shakespeare verses by heart—and a crooked, red-lipstick smile slashed across her face. And for the life of me, I can't tell if I'm falling in love all over again or resisting the urge to slap her. Goddamnit.

I do neither. Instead, I take a seat beside her.

"Babe? Really? After what you were doing two nights ago? You realize I came here to break up with you, right?" I give her a sharp look. She tugs at the strands of her ratty undercut.

"Okay, yeah. When I saw you coming, I had to assume it was either that or you were here to kick my ass." She has the decency to look a little less Quinn and a little more chagrined. "Anyways, I know I deserve that. Still, trying to grasp the reason that you would travel all the way cross one-and-a-half states to do it though."

"Yeah. Well. I'm still trying to figure out why you would cheat on me," I snap back. Quinn pauses, her eyes wide and amber in the evening light. In the corner of my eyes, I can see something dark, something looming closer, and pushing the crowd back toward us.

"Really? I thought you...I don't know, I'm sure you didn't assume I would kiss someone else, but that you knew things weren't going well." She's right. I did know. I mean, hell, we hadn't talked to each other since three days after the apocalypse began. But I had somehow thought that the relationship was like the earth itself; it would always exist even after we didn't believe in it anymore. Even after we were

dead and gone. We stay silent for a moment, and I rock my legs back and forth against the side of the retaining wall.

“Okay. You have a point. I mean, you shouldn’t have cheated on me—”

“No, I should not have—”

“—but, yeah, I could’ve seen things weren’t going great. I had seen things weren’t going great. And yet, it was just...god, I didn’t know what our lives would look like together, but I sure as hell couldn’t imagine them apart. I mean, I still can’t imagine them apart.”

“Well, we do have like, half an hour left so...” Quinn does something that sounds like a laugh but isn’t quite warm enough. “I know what you’re talking about though. It took—uh, sorry for bringing this up again—being with someone else for me to realize exactly what we weren’t to each other anymore.”

“Right.” I massage my eye sockets, which I know will screw up my eyeliner, but whatever. I don’t know why I’m so jealous of someone in a relationship I know I can’t want anymore, but since when have any of my feelings for Quinn been logical anyways? I suddenly realize that catchphrase T-shirt blonde from the Instagram photos is nowhere in sight. “Where is she by the way?”

I guess I look sort of angry because, the next thing I know, Quinn is grabbing hold of my shoulder. “Whoa, easy there, tiger.”

I glare at her. “Easy there, yourself. Do I look like the sort of person who’s going to end my time on this planet with attempted murder? No, don’t answer that actually. I have no faith in your sense of humor.”

“Can my sense of humor at least perform a deception check?”

“No,” I say, and the two of us fall silent. We have finally done it. In only minutes, we have managed to destroy everything between us but our history. We are now just two humans who know each other sitting on top of a wall. And soon, the universe will complete the job that we began. We will be nothing.

Quinn is the first to break the silence. “She’s gone. I...I was there when it happened. We were laying on the couch in her apartment, watching a guy on TikTok make some bullshit argument about how this whole thing can be explained by aliens and she....she burst into flames. Spontaneous combustion. TikTok asshole would have said it was death rays or something. But I...couldn’t stop it. She was too hot to touch, and she was burning like the sun. I couldn’t even look at her directly. But she didn’t seem afraid either. Just...still. And then she wasn’t there anymore. Her cloths were gone too—I don’t know if they went with her, or if they just burnt up. The apartment smelled terrible as well, like... cigarette ashes.”

She stops there, though her mouth is open like she still wants to say something else. There’s a fresh scar along her cheekbone—how did she get that, I wonder—and heavy dark circles under her eyes. I carefully press my hand against hers. “Fuck. I mean, I’m still angry but that sounds awful to watch.”

“It was... It was, yeah.” Quinn draws her lips into a knife-thin line. “When I looked it up afterward, I learned it was another religion thing. The Rapture. ”

“Oh. Damn. Like that bit in *Good Omens*?”

“*Exactly*. Just your average Christian apocalypse shenanigans, I guess. Apparently, you only spontaneously combust if you’re a good person, as *stupid* as that sounds when you say it aloud. It takes you somewhere else before everything gets really bad here on Earth. So, if you think about it, she’s probably doing better than either of us.”

“Probably.” I pull my knees up to my chest. “Though it is strange because technically she helped you cheat on me.”

Quinn coughs. “Unknowingly.”

“You mean you didn’t tell her?”

“The place where we met was really loud and...” She does another not-laugh. “I mean, there is a reason that I didn’t get spontaneously combusted into heaven. I break my promises. And I fuck with people who don’t deserve it.”

“Yeah, you do,” I sigh. “But I’m down here as well, so...bad-ish person solidarity, I suppose. Damn. Now I’ll have to spend the rest of my short life wondering which game I pirated that pushed me over the edge.”

“Nahh, I doubt that’s it.”

I raise my eyebrows at Quinn. “Are you volunteering to tell me why I’m a bad person?”

“Not a bad person,” she backpedals, which I guess I appreciate. “It’s more like...You sort of live in your own little world. It’s okay though—you mostly just do it because the life is short and bad, and you want it to be better. Most people are like that. There are far worse things to be.”

This is what it feels like to be intimate around Quinn. Like having your insides torn out of your body so that they can be gently stroked, exposed as they are to the hands of a brutally honest ex-girlfriend. And wanting it. As she stops talking, I can feel a dark thing in the distance coming closer, and with it a sort of pounding, like the beat of an ageless song.

“You know I didn’t really come here to break up with you,” I say, feeling my hands quaver. “Or at least that wasn’t all of it.”

Quinn glances over at me. The shadows on her face dance as she nods. "I figured. I don't think you were wrong, though. To do it. We wouldn't have worked out."

I look away from her, and toward the mass of humanity below. The dark thing is closer now than it was before. The pounding is louder "We could have ended it earlier though. We could have learned what...what happened next."

It arrives. And that is when I finally realize what the goth girl had meant by the Abyss. Imagine nothingness. Imagine the space between stars, a gleamless gap without even the smallest atom of matter within it. Imagine that gap writhing like a snake through the earth, swallowing up gallons of water as if there was no end to its thirst. Because that's what I saw in in the ground before me. Hospitality Creek, greeting the end of the world. Hundreds of people stand beside what had once been its banks and is now the edge of a yawning chasm. They are worshipers of nothing. Some, the tearstained, the elated, leap from the disintegrating ground into its expanse, screaming lines of Walt Whitman or Oprah or *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*. Others take one look at it and turn to run, clawing their way past those behind them in the crowd, only to eventually be swallowed up anyways. And yet more haul the panicked and gasping back to solid ground or shove each other in with laughing obscenities or serenade their way into the void.

And then there is us.

Two human beings sitting along the edge of a wall that is slowly falling away and thinking about what we will be like when we don't exist. Like falling asleep, that's what I've always heard. Like falling asleep but without the desperate fears of tomorrow and the restless memories of today and the feverish dreams of the night. So not really like falling asleep at all. My veins burn within me, my lungs heave, and my heart leaps into my throat. My body prepares me for a fight for my survival that will never come.

"I can't—" I say, my voice lost below the shouts and jostling of the crowd. There is a rumble in the distance, a pounding that sounds like the beat of distant drums. "I want more. Why is this it? Why is this all we get?"

"I don't know," Quinn says quietly.

I feel my breath tightening within my chest, my words becoming shorter. "I don't want to go out like this."

Quinn says nothing, but then there is a sharp tone from my coat pocket. My phone. I pull it out, hands shaking, not daring to glance at the time. There is a single text from Shayna, 'I am officially a goddamn novelist.' and a link to a Wattpad page for 'Finally finished piece (this time for real), Version2.3.1.2.pdf' As I scan the first couple lines of the story preview, another text appears. 'Thanks for the stir fry and the coffee, Sammie, you get a mention in the author's note for that. <3'

And, god help me, I laugh. I laugh until there are tears in my eyes and Quinn is looking at me confused, then laughing too and the end of the world has crept closer to us by a hundred yards.

"What is it?" she asks when we finally find the breath to speak.

"I just realized— it doesn't matter. It never really did."

"What?" She pulls back from me as if frightened by my newfound cheerfulness. "Like none of it matters because you just realized we're all going to die anyways?" Her voice is bitter. This is what Quinn has always thought, at the bottom of everything. It's there beneath the danger and the boldness and the desperate longing to be needed. But that isn't what I think.

"You've got the wrong 'it'. The way we live life isn't the part that doesn't matter." I stand, keeping my eyes on the crack in front of me. A man leaps in, just as I reach my feet, screaming 'I love all of you.' Someone next to him breaks down in tears, reaching out to touch his hand before he is

swallowed by the void. The pounding in the background grows louder and more frenetic, as if someone far-off was marching closer. I turn to Quinn. As I reach out my hand, I think of Shayna, lying flat on her bed, a faint smile on her face as she realizes that she's done it, risen her voice above the despair to make something magnificent. I think of Ro clinging to the cape of a four-story tall warrior as he sees the world from above for the first time. And I think of the woman before me, wide eyes staring out from her scarred, beautiful face, as if she can't quite believe what I'm saying to her. "So, *yeah*. I know this is going to sound stupid and sentimental but...whatever. It's the end of the world and I don't really care. Do you want to dance with me, Quinn?"

"We—You know we aren't dating anymore," she says, then does the not-laugh again. "Fuck, Sam. It's the end of the world."

"Yeah. That's what I said," I say. "Do you want to face it sitting or on your feet, dancing?"

She stares at me for another long moment, and I can see her start to comprehend part of it. Part of what I was trying to say to her. Her hand wraps around mine and she pulls herself to her feet. "Fine. But only if I get to choose the music."

"Knock yourself out," I say and hand her my phone. By now the Abyss is almost upon us. The mood in the crowd has changed as well. There is no longer any defiance, any attempt to escape the inevitable. The people who ran have either been swallowed up or made it back to their cars, revving their engines and racing down the highway, their breathing steady and hearts light because they have won themselves another couple seconds. 00:4:02. The clamor of the crowd has softened to a low rumble as if most said their last words when they saw the Abyss on the horizon and are now simply waiting for the end. There remains a faint roar in the background as the water of Hospitality Creek races past the ankles of its occupants toward oblivion. They've all formed a chain, arm looped tightly through arm so that when they fall into the Abyss, they will do so together.

Quinn takes my hand again and holds the phone up in front of my face. “The music,” she says, lips twitching into a smirk then adds, “I thought it seemed appropriate.”

It’s All the Single Ladies, by Beyonce, because of course it is. “I guess that’s what I get,” I say, “for spending the end of the world with you.”

We start to dance. There’s not much room on the wall and so we shuffle back and forth along the bricks as if we were both awkward teenagers again. Then it gets easier, as we grow used to each other’s bodies, our movements. I remember the last time we danced like this—apartment complex parking lot, the night she moved out—but it doesn’t feel the same. To my surprise, I’m okay with that.

“Hey, Quinn,” I whisper, the close-shorn hair near her ear pricking my lips. “How strange is it that, in the end, even after everything that happened, I’m just happy that I got to see it? All of it.”

“Not that strange,” she whispers back. “I feel the same way. Even for the crappy parts.”

The pounding becomes louder, beating in time with the warm notes of Beyonce’s voice. I close my eyes and imagine it’s the sound of the whole world moving along with us. That for one short moment, we’re all happy that we happened. And then there is nothing at all.