

The leaves from the trees fell, as they came to their unavoidable death, only to be revived later on as some kind of mindless resurrection cycle. Abandoned birds nests slowly deteriorated over time. Winter was coming. Its haunting presence filling every corner of the world - other than those, of course, untouched by the bitter cold. Clouds fluttered by like cotton candy and dissolved as suddenly. Greying clouds slowly replaced the soft white ones. The wind ruffled the leaves like they were waving in sync. Teal curtains slowly tore apart as a face popped out between them. It was a tall face with a strong nose and watery eyes.

The smell of chemicals flooded my senses as soon as I stepped inside. Various bottles littered the desks, some of the contents spilled onto the floor as if dropped hastily in the past. Vials of strange liquids were neatly labelled and shelved in a rack, beside them dead creatures bobbed around inside containers. A few animals were in cased in glass displays, which reminded me of the woolly mammoth they found a few years ago, preserved in ice, both preserved in time. One of the animals (a stingray) had swelled up like a balloon. I imagined it exploding, guts, blood and all, as it would've had it not been found and brought here.

It was inevitable. She was doomed the moment she met me. There was something beautifully tragic in this curse I seemed to be under. Everyone knew that anyone who fell in love with me only survived a week. Yet, she still loved me. Within a week, her interest in me had blossomed into something more. Within a week she was dead. I held her, as she struggled to fight death's tight grasp. Every breath became taxing until she took her last. Then with one last gasp, she lay still. Unmoving. The ambulance arrived seconds too late. It always does. I wondered if some malevolent god had it out for me or if this was supposed to be some kind of lesson for my previous actions. Either way it was pointless. I was numb to it. I had learnt not to get attached.

That was until a few months after her death. I was invited to a club. A friend's suggestion that he had hoped would help me move on. Little did he know I had moved on the moment I met my late girlfriend. This time it was different. Like last time, Mia spoke to me first. It was like I was stuck in a clock with its endless chime and sickening loop. She was slightly taller than me and had long dyed hair that framed her face, which was flushed from wine. I asked her to dance. I had no idea how to but luckily neither did she. Later that night after a few more drinks, we exchanged numbers and arranged to meet up for coffee. This was my first mistake. The mistake I was make. The next mistake was asking her on more dates and eventually falling in love with her.

Joel's dad had directed her to his room, which was on the left, next to the bathroom. She was shocked by the plainness of his door. There wasn't a single sign of ownership. She had at least expected a plaque reading his name. His parents had told her he was out - where they

were uncertain and when he would return home was even more of an ambiguity. Cautiously, she knocked on the door in case he had managed to slip past his family. Satisfied by the silence that followed, she pushed the door open. It was exactly as she had expected it: vinyls scattered about the floor, a collection of guitars bundled in the corner, rock posters up on the wall. What did surprise her, however, was the cork board in the corner of the room, adorned with fairy lights, displaying photos of Joel's friends with their first band photo in the centre. Below it was a makeshift shrine dedicated to his late girlfriend. A bracelet she brought him on their 4th anniversary lay in front of a candid photo of Jasmine Love smiling. A purple candle (Jasmine's favourite colour) sat on each side of the image. Elizabeth knelt in front of the photo in respect, tears welling in her eyes. As she knelt there eyes closed, head bowed, she heard a creaking sound. Startled she sprang to her feet. Shock turned to horror as she saw who had walked through the door. He stood in the doorway in a soaked leather jacket, his hair slightly dishevelled and equally as drenched. She hadn't noticed the rain until then. The sudden jolt back to earth had alerted her to subtle rumble of thunder. He definitely wasn't going to let her leave now. Joel leaned against the doorframe, his smile like a threat. "Hello, Liza." He said her name with a certain bitterness that made her freeze.

It was cold that day. The sort of cold that nipped at your skin despite the mountains of layers you might apply. Pandora wasn't cold - at least not in the way that suggests that the weather has any effect on her. Rich people don't feel the cold. She wore a slender white dress, which reached just above her knees and a matching pair of gloves. Her golden blonde hair was tied back in a neat bun, secured by brown bobby pins, which were hidden underneath her hair. She sat beside her husband in the back of her limousine, glancing out of the window, deep in thought. She and her husband had been married for nearly five years and she had only recently noticed a shift in his behaviour. They first met on the set of his film, *Doom*, which she starred in. From the first meeting, he had started to chase her: leaving gifts in her trailer, taking photos with primarily her on the red carpet. He even brought her a dress, a deep crimson red with black detailing, which she wore to their premier. Now he seems to find every excuse to work on many late night projects, which Pandora was convinced took place in someone else's bedroom. Or maybe even her own. She too had to work a lot but the couple used to make time between shoots to spend time together as a family, especially as their maid paid more attention to their fifteen-year-old son than they did. Pandora didn't regret giving birth to Cole, despite how it appeared to his school teachers. She regretted giving birth to him when she knew it was too early. Perhaps, if Cole had been born later, she would've been able to raise him properly. Maybe if he had been born later, she could've worked less. Instead, she gave birth to him when the world was still learning her name. As she thought about this, her limo pulled up to the restaurant. In an attempt to repair their relationship, Pandora had booked a table at a five michelin star restaurant in London.

In one sudden impulsive motion, Joel grabbed Elizabeth's chin and forced her to look at him. He heard her breath catch as she stood rigidly still, not trusting herself to lay a hand on him. "You know, you didn't seem very remorseful when Jaz died."

"You mean when you killed her?" The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. His eyes hardened like ice over a lake. Elizabeth could feel herself shaking and tried to step away from him but he moved his hand down her neck and fastened it around her throat. Only then did she dare to touch him in an attempt to free herself to no avail as his grip only tightened until he was one squeeze away from strangling her. "It was an accident," he growled through gritted teeth, "I loved her."

"So did I." Joel barked out a laugh.

"She was just in your way wasn't she? Must've been hard watching your best friend making out with the guy you liked."

"That's not true Joel. You know it isn't." Joel brought his face closer to hers so that it was only inches from her and he could feel his warm breath on her lips. She could easily pull him in from here and do what she'd only dreamed of but she didn't. Dead or not. He was Jasmine's boyfriend. Everyone knew him by that title. "Joel please." Her voice was barely a whisper. Fear had completely overridden her senses.

"I knew all along," he admits, still keeping a vice grip on her throat, "do you know why I chose Jaz over you?" He relaxed his hand slightly so it only rested on her neck. "Because unlike you, she never pretended to be innocent. You act all pure but you're just as guilty as the rest of us." With that he let her go and she remembered how to breathe again. Giving Elizabeth one last look of distain, Joel turned and walked away, hands buried deep in his pockets.

*She walks in beauty, like the night Of cloudless climes and starry skies;*

Lord Byron

Is there anything more destructive than the human desire to be perfect? There's something alluring in the way it consumes us, transforming us into something horribly beautiful. There is nothing more fascinating than watching an intoxicated artist perform. If there's anything that can be learned from a classical tragedy, it's that we all have one common flaw. We want to be adored. It's a basic human instinct to do everything in our power to be admired. As an artist, I accepted this and I was not the only one. In fact, this is not about me. This book you hold in your hands is an account of a dear friend of mine – one that was neither real nor fake. Sometimes I wonder if I made her up in some kind of complex hallucination, but sometimes I am haunted by the memories of a living,

breathing person. Those memories were the rare moments I realized what she really was: a person who strayed too far from her sense of identity. Each character she played shaped her identity, both on and off the stage. Her name lost in time.

The first time I saw her was at my first audition in London. She stood a few feet away from me, muttering her lines under her breath. Before I had the chance to strike up a conversation, she was gone again. I caught sight of her later that day, her delicate silhouette illuminated by the sun, a bundle of papers held gracefully in her hands. I couldn't help but admire her poise and elegance; the sweet smell of her perfume lingered in the air, her soft voice hummed a melody as I watched her. She looked up as I walked over. For a moment, as our eyes met, I found myself at a loss for words. To this day, I cannot even explain just how hypnotic I found her. The way she looked at me was as if she were assessing my every feature. The way she ran a hand through her hair - a mesmerizing, yet simple gesture. The way her skin looked, it was almost too perfect. Just, her. In fact, I don't think a word exists that can fully capture her elegance. I extended my hand forward, my words feeling unsteady as I managed to ask her name, captivated by her beauty. "What is your name?"

As she shook my hand, I was shocked at how real and warm she was. "What is a name but a construct that confines us," she replied. This intrigued me even more. She considered for a moment as if searching her mind for a long - forgotten secret. "I'm an actor," she said, finally, slightly lost in thought, "I have no name. I am whoever they want me to be. If you were to ask anyone else, they would probably tell you that I don't exist, that I am merely a character on the stage." Then someone called out to her and she left without another word.