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Tainted Memories

ALANAH HUNSDORFER

I look out of the window that sits next to my bed in my room and sigh. Water droplets race each other down the glass, some colliding into each other, others disappearing altogether. Rain is thrumming against my window pane. A melodic rhythm. A sign that it's officially winter. A reminder that I hate the cold. My fingers start to move with the sound, picking up the beat of the song that the clouds are playing. The honking of traffic masks itself as trumpets in the storm's symphony. And the whistle from the wind in the leaves creates a sort of flute-like sound. As beautiful as it is, I frown to myself as a shiver runs up my spine. I used to love the rain, being completely drenched, stomping in puddles, opening my mouth up at the sky for the raindrops to be absorbed on my tongue, breathing in the smell of rain on the pavement. It was happiness. It was serene. It was a girl that I didn't recognize. Not anymore.

I smile out the window as I see the little girl I used to be, giggling as her clothes get soaked and the rain pelts against her skin. That girl found beauty in the darkness. Where was she now? I couldn't say. Shaking my head out of my thoughts, the orchestra that I was composing from the storm quiets down as well. The familiar sound of warm air coming through the vent in my room makes me groan in frustration. I wish I was somewhere

in the sun, maybe on a beach in the middle of nowhere, or perhaps in a field of daisies. I close my eyes, yearning for that feeling of warmth.

I can see myself on a beach in Lake Tahoe, giggling with my brothers as they try to do yoga poses on the paddle boards we had rented out for the afternoon. The water glitters in the sunlight, creating an impossibly perfect picture that no camera could ever capture. Surrounding mountains have traces of white snow in the dips and crevices of the terrain that hasn't quite melted yet, even with the sun beaming down on the month of June. I can see myself throwing my head back in laughter as my brother lets out a whine. He stares down at his ore, slowly sinking down to the bottom of the lake, drifting into darkness.

"You have to dive down and get it, you know," I spit out through my laughter.

He groans at my giddiness, giving me a glare mixed with a hint of regret.

"I don't wanna get wet," he whines with a pout on his face.

As the memory fades I am brought back to my room, but I force my mind to shift the pictures in my brain from that trip to Lake Tahoe to another summer when we were all kids, back when we actually had a lawn out front. It was lush and green, and it used to make my skin itch, but it was perfect for all the sports and games we used to play. Visions of my front yard now start creeping into my brain, the vibrant green grass being replaced by what is now woodchips, but I shake my head so those thoughts dissipate. I want to go back to the summer, so

many years ago, as I lay on our lawn with my siblings. My legs grow little red bumps as the blades of grass irritate my skin. A sleeve of ice cold otter pops catches my eye as my mom walks out of our garage, her sunglasses pushed back on her head, keeping the hair out of her eyes. Remnants of our water balloon fight are strewn across our yard, colors of the rainbow shining in the hot July sun. My clothes are soaked, and I glance over at my brother who is completely dry from head to toe. I roll my eyes at his athleticism. Somehow, he had dodged every single balloon I had lobbed at him. He is either the luckiest person I have ever met or just really skilled at everything. I could never tell.

I smile up at the sun, taking a bite of my blue otter pop, letting the flavor burst on my tongue. Blue raspberry had always been my favorite flavor, but it was always the first to go in our house. My brother finds an unpoped water balloon in the gutter, bringing a finger to his lips, silently telling me to be quiet as he runs over to smash it on my other brother's head.

"Hey! What the hell!" My brother yells, fury in his eyes.

"Oops. Sorry," my other brother snickers at his despair.

I tilt my head forward as a fit of laughter takes over my body, and the sun cascades down on my face, leaving a reddish tint to my cheeks.

The monotonous sound of the heater pulls me out of my reverie, and I open my eyes back up to reality.

The memories creep out of my vision, as my room seeps back into my line of sight. I glance back outside as the raindrops turn to hail. Little pieces of ice scatter the street and pound so hard against my window, I am almost worried it will shatter. My eyes wander to my closet door, where I painted a large sunflower in the summertime. I wanted something yellow, something to remind me of the sun, to be the center of my room. Something I could look at in times like these, times where the sky casts an awful gray color and ice plagues the streets outside of my house. Right now, it seems like a silly thought. The sunflower isn't helping me feel any happier, any warmer. Goosebumps rise up on my arms, my hair standing straight up from the cold. As I get lost in the sunflower's petals, I hear the heater turn off. I close my eyes, wishing for it to kick on again. I need the warmth, as artificial as it may be.

What happened to the girl that used to love the rain? The question presents itself again, my brain grasping for an answer that isn't there. I hadn't seen that girl in months, maybe even years. I wasn't quite sure when I had lost her. Sometimes I wonder if I ever even really had her. Maybe it was all just a facade. The mask that I had worn, the mask that donned the smile, had melted off my face. I sigh, running a hand through my tangled hair.

She grew up. I guess. I don't really know. It's the best answer I can come up with. Because, truthfully, I don't know the answer myself. I guess there's always a time where someone has to grow up. I just didn't know I would be doing it so drastically. I close my eyes again,

trying to bring back the warm feelings of summer.

Think happy thoughts. Let the warm feelings come to you.

My mind wanders to a summer day just a few months ago. I am sitting on one of my backyard lawn chairs and soaking in the sun. Rays of sunshine poke through the lemon tree behind me and cast a golden light on my honey colored hair. Birds sing songs all around me, a prettier sound than the rain had composed. No, a softer sound than the rain, but not prettier. They were both pretty in their own ways. The warmth of the sun feels good against my skin, but something isn't right. There's a gray filter that rests over my memory of that day. My mind shifts through the memories of the trip to Lake Tahoe and the water balloon fight. These memories do not have that same gray filter on them. In fact, they are glowing, a golden hue sits around the edges of the pictures in my brain. I scrunch up my nose, shaking my head of the gray filter, but it doesn't budge. This memory feels dark, not quite warm, however bright the sun was shining.

The wind from outside brings a gust of raindrops pounding against my window, and I open my eyes in fright. My heart seems to pick up on the rhythm of the rain because I can feel it harmonize and synchronize with the beat, stammering in uncertainty.

I raise my eyes to a family picture hanging on my wall. My eyes are glowing with laughter, leaning into my brother's embrace. A tiny smirk plagues my other brother's face, his dimples deepening for the picture. My sister's cheeks are hinted with a warm shade of red as she waits for the camera to flash. My mother has her

arm wrapped around my brother's waist hastily. Moments before, she was running towards us as the camera's timer counted down the seconds until it would capture the moment. That photo seems like it's from a different lifetime at this point. I have not seen my siblings in months, only speaking from the occasional phone call or text, and the last time we were all in the same place at the same time was years ago. I smile at the picture, even though sadness grows in my chest. But, the photo has that same golden filter over it, the edges sparkling with what I can only describe as happiness. The vision of me sitting in the sun a few months back flashes across my brain, wrapped in the gray filter, and my heart finally falls back into its normal rhythm as I realize why that memory is tainted. The sun might have been there with me, but my family was not.

I shiver at the thought, and the gray filter falls over an empty house.