

Summer Heartbreak

a story by JohnJRenns

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1

I used to be your typical, book-reading girl. But I never liked stories with romance in them. When I read fables about princes and princesses, I - being a 7 year old little shithead - would say something like:

“Why do I have to marry a prince? The princess is prettier.”

I could never hold on to those books for long anyway, because adults would hear me saying the same to other kids.

As I grew up, I got to read more sophisticated romance novels, and I still couldn't feel anything. The nerdy girls my age (or, perhaps instead it is more reflective of the times to say, “thirsty”?) would talk to me about their curiosity for men with great passion and all I could do was nod. Romance just seemed like a pain in the ass. Not only the prince, but I also couldn't care about the princess anymore.

When I got older and went through *The Wild Times*, I started becoming disillusioned with the concept of love. (Perhaps it's a coincidence, but it was also around this time it became harder for me to make friends.) It was always the same. Confessions cause an uproar, but they act like nothing happened when they break up. 6 months is the furthest I had seen a pair go. Boys never refuse a confession and girls make up rumors even before anything's said. It was like everything was following a damn textbook. To me, love was a 'code' to be studied.

Humans say 'love' is truly the most inherent and natural element of the human experience. But even before enrolling in high school, I had made a conclusion. That love is the most artificial thing in the world. You have to follow what others say, watch for the other's back, beg for the other's acceptance - never looking inside yourself. What could be more superficial than that?

For the moment, that was my conclusion. For the moment. That was still when I couldn't even entertain the possibility of love entering into my own life.

A co-worker of mine said this to me the other day. “Sia, you live alone, so how come you're so good at self-management?” Of course, it was really a rhetorical compliment of sorts, but I felt sick after listening to it. So I asked her back, “isn't living alone common in this line of work,” with another rhetorical question. She said, “that's true, but your personality is cleaner and more careful than any married couple's.” I did not understand what she meant by this.

What's the last song I'd want to hear before I die? This is a question that came to my mind one day. My first thought went to "A Day in the Life" by The Beatles. In one verse, there's this part about 'waking up' then going 'into a dream,' and I always thought that was a metaphor for death. You finally wake up then have a dream right after - you just started but it ends only slightly after - that oxymoron symbolizes death for me. And that outro with its orchestral crescendo captures the extremeness of death well.

But the Beatles are too cliché. That said, I don't want to pick an obscure song. So I think "Quicksand" by David Bowie would be better. It's hard to explain why. Just that, as I'm losing consciousness in bed, I have a feeling the lyric - "Don't believe in yourself, don't deceive with belief, knowledge comes with death's release" - will be repeating in my head unconsciously.

Rock 'n' roll saved my life. Thus, rock 'n' roll will kill my life. She would want that too.

I was invited to a university alumni reunion. I went with my memories buried inside my heart. Not many come to university reunions. University is where people with an infantilized mind inside a two decades old body go to laugh, love, drink, punch, have sex, and cry - together. Not something anyone who's properly matured into adulthood would want to remember. Rather, we beautify our middle or high school days in nostalgia. I went to a middle school alumni meet once but have never wanted to meet my high school classmates again. The possibility is close to zero, but perhaps I was afraid I would meet her again.

The primary objective of an alumni meet is to show off, so after having met for the first time in 4-5 years, we immediately started being patronizing to one another. I don't particularly have pride for my job so I waited until someone asked me directly. Most thought I'd become a writer, but they didn't express too much surprise that I became a journalist. Whether it's a newspaper or a novel, they just process it all as "jobs that don't make money." Writing books used to be a young passion of mine. Going to university and studying literature, I decided to actualize that dream. But everytime I would try to make the stories in my head come to life, I would remember her name. And I would have a 1/3 chance of having a panic attack. So, I rescued my soul by listening to music. But nothing made me remember her more than music. After I graduated, I stopped trying to write books.

We had meat, got drunk, and talked aloud. As tales from our university days started to turn painful, we went over to more nostalgia-inducing times; back when we were even younger. I started sweating cold. Jihye, who majored in media, and for the past 3 years have been working her ass off as an assistant director, brought up an innocent tale of her first love. She used to be quite popular in our campus, so we all expressed shock that even she had such a pure youth.

The restaurant started to fill up with the disgusting scent of romance. Whenever the storyteller in focus would describe something embarrassing or cringy, we would all laugh it up, but I found it difficult to even sigh.

I lied at my turn. I lie in my job professionally, so it was not difficult creating a believable story. I talked of a first love that someone who used to be shy and quiet like me would've had in middle school. It was about a boy who I had only talked to once. Of course, I never talked to a boy even once during all 3 years of middle school. Everyone bought it though. They thought it was pure but bittersweet. They do not know true bitterness.

When Sunghee started talking, who majored in music composition, everyone started simmering down. Sunghee confessed to us that he is a gay man. And also that his first love wasn't in middle school, nor high school, but actually in university. With a professor at that. (We all knew the teacher because he was one of the youngest teachers in our campus, in his mid 30s.) Giyu, who majored in engineering, and has a voice as gigantic as his beer belly, laughed out loud. "How come only your story actually sounds like it's from some romance movie!"

Sunghee said it's not that fun of a story. Before then, in his senior high school year, he had awakened his sexuality. So he explained that every relationship or sexual attraction mixed with confusion caused by social pressure, were all not real. But those extreme feelings he felt for his piano teacher felt so natural, felt just "right," that he could point to that teacher as his first love. Of course, the two never developed into that sort of relationship. To this, some people chattered, saying, "I did think Sunghee acted weird when that guy was around."

"Now that I think about it," Sunghee raised his glass and shook it. Smiling, he looked at the slashing liquid. "I think I wanted a man who would treat me like a father. Even when I foolishly thought I liked women, I liked the relationships I had with those sort of men the most, especially spending time with older students. An older man who would hug me like my father, but wasn't actually my dad. I think my type is still that sorta guy. Just like how straight guys just want a mother they can fuck."

To these words, every man in the room went dead silent, only nodding their heads. All the women, excluding me, would only look at each other's faces with confused looks.

The night was long. Half of the restaurant had fallen asleep. Some were even whispering that they could go another round. Terrified at that thought, I just looked at my glass of water. I could see my face, blurry and distorted. That face was trying its best to smile.

I looked over to Sunghee. He was sitting by the table next to mine. Around him, his former music class buddies were leaning against him, snoring. They had a band back in university. I didn't really like them. They had no energy. It felt like a band that was formed just because a bunch of kids who knew how to play instruments happened to be together in one spot. Couldn't feel the rock 'n' roll.

Sunghee, despite having all that weight pushed onto him, didn't really seem to mind the weight. I was curious about that. I would've thrown a fit. It'd be a funny scene, actually. There was a similar occurrence back when I was in high school.

Sunghee noticed my presence while looking at his phone. When our eyes met, I was surprised and instinctively turned my head. But the only ones still awake were just us two. Sunghee went over and sat next to me, smiling.

"Uh, what was your name again?" He asked.

"Sia. Lee Sia."

"Oh. Sorry to keep asking, but how old are you?"

"27. No problem."

"Oh. I'm one year older."

"Yes."

"Yeah. You can lighten up, you know."

"No."

"Ok..."

He showed me a smile then looked down. I stared at my glass of water. I remembered his story again. I remembered it being weirdly relatable. That made me open my mouth.

"How's your love life going since then?" I stared at him.

"Huh?" He raised his head and looked at me. "Oh, no. Had a few boyfriends. But how far can a pianist go with romance, really. You just end up becoming a slave to the music." He had a self-deprecating attitude. I could tell this even before.

"I see. Writing is similar."

"I figured."

I raised my glass. With my eyes closed, I emptied it into my mouth. Now that the inside of my mouth was wet, I felt like I wanted to say something important like him too. I hadn't even drank a sip of beer, but I ended up thinking of something so dumb. My fears idiotically shrunk.

"You know."

"Yeah?"

"The story that I told. It was all a lie."

Sunghee looked at me for a second, then, looking elsewhere afterwards, nodded his head.

"I thought so."

"Really?"

"At least, it didn't sound like a story you wanted to tell. I could tell you were omitting something."

"That's right. Because..."

Before continuing, I gulped.

"I like women."

"Oh..." His mouth went wide open. His pupils started straying to the side, along with his neck. "I see!" He raised his voice to compensate for the nervousness in it.

"Be quiet."

"Oh, then... You haven't told anyone else?"

"Why would I do that, such a dumb thing. It's not like there are guys out there hitting on me."

"Makes sense."

Sunghee just continued to nod. He stretched his arm out and grabbed a drink that somebody left. He spread his limbs out and arranged it comfortably. Looking at him, I also stretched my legs. I pulled a cigarette out from my pocket. I bought it just in case I needed to relieve some stress on the way back home, but I figured it'd be better to smoke it then. I also pulled out a lighter and lit it up.

I'm afraid of anyone seeing me smoke - no, I'm afraid of anyone seeing me do anything except stay still. So, even though the only person around to see it was Sunghee, I only let out the smoke towards the corner, in short bursts. Though, smoke would just drift by the air and spread to the whole room anyways. I kept watching out. My stress only heightened.

No matter how I tried, the smoke spread out further in the restaurant. It was my fault. Now everyone sleeping was breathing in my smoke. Smoke, and how it spread like a plague, reminded me of the social paradigm known as love. The smoke went into everyone's lungs like a thief, though not consciously. And most importantly, had it not been for me, that didn't need to happen. It was I who had forced upon the benzene. I felt great guilt for this catastrophe which I caused for my own selfish relief of stress. And this was the same guilt that I had felt countless times every time I'd smoked before. Yet, I never quit it.

I almost cried. I decided to stop thinking about this. I didn't want to be known as a woman who was invited to an alumni meet, didn't even say anything, and cried while everyone was sleeping and ran. (Though, in retrospect, I think I did end up being known like that) To reset my mind, I started talking to Sunghee again.

"What do you think about this whole, *love* thing, Sunghee?"

"This whole love thing?"

"Like, how it just comes to you, all that natural attraction stuff. I honestly have no clue."

"Really? You must've had someone you liked too, right. How could you have found out otherwise."

"...I did." Maybe it was because of the cigarette, but my voice had gotten rough. I cleared my throat. "I just don't think love's actually all that romantic. Love was created artificially, after all."

"How?"

"For example, if we had never heard or learned about love growing up, we would've never thought about it. Love isn't all that innate to human beings. It's all social."

"But love, in the end, is a result of a biological reaction. You can't say it isn't entirely based on science."

"You might be right. Even if I didn't know love, I would still be attracted to women sexually, and you would like men sexually. But there's no guarantee that we would necessarily harbor special feelings for anyone or take our relationship to another level."

"Probably. In a world without love, that may end up being the norm."

"Yes. In fact, wouldn't such a world be better? A world without embarrassing unrequited love, or confusing relationship issues; a world where people are treated as just people."

"Hm." Sunghee wondered with a very serious look on his face, then looked at me with an answer. "If you ask me, I wouldn't want to live in that world. Actually, it scares me, even."

Once my cigarette ran out, I pulled out a wet wipe, folded it then put it back in my pocket. I drank another sip of water, but the ashes flushing down my throat was such a painful feeling. I laid down on the table.

"I think I have to go now." I said, with a voice that was all dead.

"Huh? You aren't even saying goodbye to the others?"

"It's not like I know any of them that well." This was half a lie. I have memories of making some good friends in university. At least, I knew the names and degrees of everyone who was there in the meet. I just stayed quiet because I was afraid to know the answer on whether they remembered me.

"Alright. Then take care, Sia."

"Yes. I hope you find luck too, Sunghee. With romance."

"Then I'll pray for you too, Sia - for you to find someone. Someone who would make you stop believing in a world without love."

I stood up right after and started running away. On the hallway leading outside, I saw Jihye - the girl with the media degree - coming out of the bathroom. Her makeup was undone. Thinking back, it seemed like she was crying back then, but everyone knew to stay quiet.

"Oh, where are you going, Sia?" Jihye had remembered my name. I had not known this. Though I did have some history with media class folks.

"I'm going home."

"Oh, yeah. We should, too." I heard an unusually unemphasized voice without any power from Jihye; one that I haven't heard before. Then she, without hesitation, put strength in her voice again. "Hey, you mother fuckers!"

Jihye went inside the room again, which was mostly filled with people sleeping or a few fiddling around in their phones, and yelled at everybody. With the room having gotten loud again, I just froze there, still, not being able to get out. Everybody said short goodbyes to one another, including Sunghee, and got ready to head out. I went out before everybody. It was a late evening, at 11 PM. I keep remembering the night sky I saw after leaving the restaurant. The shape of the moon was apparent, but its light blurry. Remembering that blur, it reminds me of a different memory; a memory much, much distant.

There is one story that serves as a good example of everything I just said. It is from back when I was in high school; a story of a long time ago. It is a story of my only love. A story of two girls. A story of rock 'n' roll. This is a story that happened one summer, ten years ago.

2

Song Sori murdered me then left the body behind. The following is the story that led up to it.

I had zero friends and Song Sori had many. Sori sat on the corner of the classroom, by the window, and that became a sort of 'hub' for students to come together and chat with. Throughout the first semester, I sat next to her, but never was I invited to that Hub. I'd stare at them with eyes mixed with feelings of frustration and envy. I never met eyes with any of them either.

Even I could tell that Song Sori seemed to possess this ability to attract people, like gravity. It didn't look like she was even trying. Her nature simply found herself in that situation.

This one time, two students were fighting, one claiming the other had stolen their pen. The one with the pen made some flimsy excuse that it was a gift from his grandmother. Everyone else in the class ignored or watched. As the voices grew louder, and it became harder to ignore, Song Sori naturally stepped up and interrupted them. She listened to both equally, and calmly explained the other's side to the other, as they failed to see each other's perspectives. She came to the conclusion it was simply a coincidence. (Or maybe she thought that was the easiest way to end the conflict.) The situation soon resolved. The scene concluded so naturally that it felt like listening to a well composed piece of music. As you can see, there was merit to being friends with Song Sori, so everyone attached themselves to her. And Sori accepted that as it is.

I would lie on my desk and daydream alone. I wasn't particularly interested in Song Sori's existence, but sometimes I would fantasize - 'what if I was in the same boat as her?'. I would always come to the conclusion that I would surely go mad. Even if my mental state and sanity itself had transformed. I think Sori herself was worn out from it too. But the fact that she maintained the status quo despite the hardship; I was curious with that element about her. Whether she had lots of friends, or that she spoke well, or that she was pretty didn't really matter to me. I only had but one question. How come this hasn't driven her mad yet?

From when I was young, I did not know self-control. I had a tendency to obsess over one particular emotion. My anger would not quell unless I beat someone up, and laughing all day at a joke would barely satisfy me. I'd especially cry a lot, even when I wasn't a baby anymore. It wasn't easy to stop once the tears had started to fall down. Adults sometimes went, 'well she's just a sensitive kid,' but as I grew older, it became more rapid and unpredictable. Enrolling in middle school, I figured that I was suffering from some kind of terrible illness. I didn't get diagnosed with depression until university.

Depression isn't simply a temporary condition, but a constantly striking and perpetuating 'state of mind.' You can't just shake it off. Furthermore, this 'state of mind' influences even one's worldview; their thought process. Every action and each observation are presented through this filter. You can't laugh at what's funny, you hate what is lovely - and, most important of all, you shed tears at things you shouldn't cry for.

Depression is deadly because it is attractive. Depression threatens one's thoughts. Depression is envious of happiness itself, thus it forms this toxic relationship with humans. And at the end of it all, it whispers, "it's okay. You were always like this." Such a nonsensical lie. But I trusted it. This disease clouded my world.

Now, I shall tell you of the time when I first cried in class.

It was during a Monday math class. Since Friday I had been spending my life in bed, except for when I went to school. It's not like I didn't wanna wake up. If someone had forced me to, I would've done so without complaints. I simply could not see the value in getting up and doing anything at all. Going to a good college is no good for a human garbage like me, so why even do homework. And who would even care about my hobbies? The more I thought, the more I got lost interest in not only dreams but the concept of living itself. So from Friday all through, of course, the weekend, I just slept. I more or less just told my family that I was sick. It wasn't entirely a lie. So come Monday morning, the walk to school felt even heavier than usual. When I sat down, my body turned into stone, and acted like it didn't want to go anywhere else. Then came class. I remained still, my body frozen up like a statue. When it was my time to hand in homework, I specifically stated: "I couldn't do it." Yes. With my 'state of mind,' I could not do it. Maybe some other weekend, but that Saturday and Sunday, it was impossible for me to do anything. My mind was corrupted, my body disabled; as if I had to bandage all of it.

It wouldn't be graded anyways, so maybe that's why I didn't do it. The teacher seemed to have been aware of this, and replied with something funny. 'Well, it's that you didn't do it.' He said this, sighed, then went to the next person. He did not pursue any longer. His words became like spears and struck me, penetrating my eyes. I couldn't blink for awhile. No, it hurt to move any muscles in my body. It seemed like the more I moved, the more it hurt. If it was going to be painful no matter what I tried, what was the point in risking myself? So I sat still. The background was filled with murmurs. It felt like the classroom had turned into a tornado, spinning around me, round and round. I felt trapped inside a fish bowl. I had to face reality. All that was to it was I could not write a letter of apology because of a lack of paper, but others told me it was my fault, that I was too weak-willed. I should've known that. I was suddenly reminded of this fact. Frustration with 'why me,' anger at 'your fault,' and futility towards everything; or perhaps towards myself for not being able to change anything. I was struck with these emotions all at once. Finally, something hot started to fall from my eyes. As soon as I realized this, I ducked and buried my face on my desk, pretending to sleep. But hiding my eyes only made it easier for the tears to come out. So I acted out on the only escapist method available to me at that time. I wrote. Tears would stop when I wrote. They would come back when I read it back. For the rest of the 30 minutes, I repeated these motions. By the time the bell rang, I already wanted to give up on everything. I was tired, like I had been part of a war lifetime in the making. And nobody - not even a single soul - had witnessed my battle.

The reason I call this story 'Summer Heartbreak' is because it is as painful as the joy of a summer break.

To her, music was everything, and everything was music.

There wasn't often a time to be alone for Song Sori. She was always surrounded by people - and seemingly deserved to be surrounded by people. Those kids around her - ones called 'friends' - seemed more like servants than pets.

But I sat right next to her, so I could catch glimpses when she occasionally was alone. To repeat myself, I wasn't really interested in her at the time, but anyone would've been curious. What does Sori herself actually like doing? Because it seemed like Sori's hobby was to talk about other people's hobbies. So naturally I was curious.

Whenever Song Sori was alone, she would put earphones on and listen to music. Countless times, I saw that scene of her listening to music, her eyes closed. The sunlight coming from the window was shining on her. Then, as if she had another eye somewhere else in her body, as soon as she noticed someone coming over, she would take them off, open her eyes and put on a smile.

I couldn't think of this then, but when she closed her eyes, that expressionless face of hers - brightened by the warm sunshine - was more genuine and beautiful than her usual smile.

I was disgusted by 'being seen.' I hated any places with eyes on them, not to mention public spaces. I wanted people to leave me alone. I hid myself whenever it felt like I was being watched. I learned how to blend into the background. That's why I never felt lonely. I can't make friends anyways, so why should I - that was my self justification. So I stayed away from people. And more than anything else, I couldn't see myself right. I wanted to hide myself.

It's somewhat embarrassing to put it this way - but Song Sori found me first. I'm talking like I was some lost pet, but the fact that she looked at me, kept eyeing me out, and eventually talked to me - that was all unique to Song Sori. No one's done that to me before.

The first conversation we had eye-to-eye wasn't all that special. It's weird for me to say this, but that day, I fell in love, even though I've never once - of course, even now - thought anything special had happened. Perhaps it was more nonsensical than anything else.

It was in recess. The classroom was fairly quiet. I was writing an essay. It was closer to an autobiographical format. I was organizing my observations on social phenomena and putting

them to writing. This replaced conversations for me. Instead of understanding and recontextualizing information through talking with someone, I instead wrote it into words, all by myself. It was solitary, bitter, and painful. But I did this everyday. It was all I had.

“What’s that you’re writing?”

This is me being honest, but this really was the first time someone had talked to me in weeks. (Someone had found something I lost a while ago. But it’s not like they talked to me *for* me, so I don’t think this counts.)

Hearing that sound, I first instinctively covered the writings. In panic, I closed my notebook. In the process, my hand had hit the desk. That shock made a big ‘thump’ sound, and it became more of a mess when other papers on the desk started falling down. Song Sori glared. At first, she was taken aback. But after noticing my body shaking, she picked up the papers for me. I snatched them away from her like a thief. Hugging the papers tight, I stared up at Song Sori’s face. Her smile still remained.

“What’s that?” She asked, maintaining her stature.

“What?” I breathed heavily. Just letting out my voice hurt.

“You seem to be very into writing this thing... so I’m curious.”

Sori did this cute motion where she got her two hands together, then twisted and bent the fingers. I lowered my eyebrows. I didn’t blink once, and continued staring at her menacingly.

“Do you have to know that?” I gave not an answer but a question. But I didn’t particularly want an answer back.

“Eeehhh...?” Sori’s mouth went wide. There was worry in her face. “That means you don’t want to talk about it, right?”

I couldn’t say anything. Sori figured out the exact meaning of my words, and even answered with a question, just like me. I wondered if she’d just go away if I kept staring at her like this.

“Then, do you like writing?”

There was a certain warmth to her voice when she said this. Superficially, it would seem like she was just switching the topic, but in reality she had figured out where I wanted this conversation to lead. I couldn’t help but be stuck at this question as well.

That’s when I realized I had been holding on to these papers that fell down earlier, like it was my child. I unfolded them on my desk and started organizing them. As my arms moved, it felt like my mouth could move as well. Song Sori only waited for me.

“I don’t like it, per se...” I said, looking down at my desk.

“Yeah? Speak louder for me.”

“I don’t like it, but - “ I raised my volume. “ - it’s something I have to do.”

"Really? That's amazing. I can't write even when I want to. Do you like books?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Anything you're reading right now?"

"There's one, but I'm not telling you."

"I see. I guess that's how it is..."

Sori's expression went gloomy, but there was still a bright smile on her face. Sori tried to sit next to me. I didn't take my eyes off her. Sori coughed, and decided to sit in front of me instead. She positioned herself on the chair elegantly but fragile. She looked at me back.

"What are you." I said.

"Me? You don't know me, Sia? I'm Song Sori."

"Not that. What are you supposed to be."

"What am I supposed to be..."

Sori put her hand on her chin, and was lost in thought for a moment. It seemed like a question she had not heard before.

"I guess just, someone who likes being with people?"

"But sometimes you are alone."

"Yeah. Sometimes you need a break. Like music."

"Music?"

When Sori mentioned music, I was curious. I did figure it was music that she listened to. But was this the reason she had not gone mad? Is this her shelter? I had not known music was something that incredible. I had not felt that the music - the rock 'n' roll - was something that could save people and bring about love.

"That's right. Music is like rescue for me. Ah, it doesn't rescue me from people though. Rather, it's like it rescues me from myself. Listening to a song is like heading off for a journey. It's like riding a train to an unspecified location, far away. To me, music is like my 'saviour.' Aren't books like that for you too?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure." I was so focused on her words that I wasn't even aware that she had asked me something. She was unbelievably articulate.

"Well then, since you won't show me your saviour, how about I show you mine?" Song Sori pulled out a phone from her skirt pocket.

Song Sori plugged the earphones connected to the phone in my ears. Her hands touched my cheeks. It was so much colder than I thought. But that was because my body was burning up. My body froze at that moment. My arms had stopped too. Paralyzed, I started listening to the song called love. That not only bound my body but my heart as well.

A guitar and some humming formed chords. The humming didn't have as much power as a choir, but its texture gave to a clean and clear chord. The guitar and bass didn't take up all of the soundscape, but especially the light bass sound was holding the foundation to every chord. Drums lightly came in, establishing rhythm. The singer's melody had many intervals

that were difficult to execute, but whether the notes were high or low, he sang on with warmth and leisure. Under this melody, the chords holding the basis for everything had an ascending progression. The way not only the instruments but also the voices kept reaching higher and higher truly reminded me of reaching for a 'saviour,' as if I was climbing the stairs to heaven.

The name of the song was "Here There and Everywhere." The 1966 song by The Beatles.

"

**To lead a better life
I need my love to be here**

"

- *"Here There and Everywhere,"* The Beatles

3

It was the next day. After school, I was stuck inside my home like always. But for the first time, it didn't feel like I had trapped myself, but rather that someone had imprisoned me. While lying in bed, I felt as if something was weighing down on me. Even trying to run away from it all by sleeping was interrupted by the paralysis. This suffocation was so stifling that I couldn't breathe. I opened the window. The lukewarm sunlight of June came inside my room.

I was hoping for something - or someone - to save me.

I played the only CD that there was in my house. It was the first album by the band "Spring Summer Autumn Winter". It consisted of groovy jazz rock tunes and earworm ballads, so my parents would play it all the time. It only registered as noise to me. But here's something strange about humans. The things you considered to be part of your everyday can be heard anew in extreme contexts. As I listened to the CD, I kept thinking, "would Sori like it too?" No matter what I did, all I could think was her. All roads lead to the destination known as Song Sori.

I decided to go outside. I still couldn't find life interesting. I didn't want to search for any meaning. It's just that I felt like I'd suffocate to death if I had stayed in that room. Dying from heat stroke seemed better than dying alone while crying. I allowed music to lead my steps.

When I had come to, I wasn't standing far from a record store. The worn-out sign read "Sori Soundscape". (Sound Soundscape. Not funny.) I had never seen this place before but I had arrived there so naturally. I could hear a piano tune over the door. The sunlight beamed down on me and my face started to sweat. Nobody was passing by me, and no one would open the door either. I closed my eyes and listened to that piano melody by myself. It felt like someone was reaching their hand out to me.

"Sia?"

I turned around. That was when someone literally reached her hand out to me. It was a voice I'd heard before, but my brain was so shocked by the sudden unknown noise that my sight blurred. What I found after regaining focus was Song Sori. She was in casual clothing comprised of half-sleeves and shorts. She was biting on a straw, which I still don't know what was about. I still had my uniform on. My mouth was still wide open from the shock, which formed contrasting imagery. Song Sori tilted her head and made a worrying expression.

"Jeez, look at you sweating." The straw fell from her mouth. "It's not that hot out... I mean, let's go inside, Sia."

"Eh..." I tried my best to make any sort of sound.

Sori grabbed my arm and slammed through the door into the shop. Heat marked itself on the part of my arm where Sori was grabbing. I followed her and my sight became blurred again. Nothing came out of my mouth either. I could feel my face heat up. I kept my head down.

"Hey, why is your face so red? Dad! Bring a towel over here." She yelled to the man sitting behind the counter.

He stood up, not expressing any surprise. "Yep, yep."

"Okay, Sia. Sit here."

Sori sat me down on a sofa. That's when I could see clearly again. She went to get some water while I looked around the shop. The floor was wooden, and there were natural white

light bulbs on the ceiling. The width of the place was quite small with everything around, so there weren't many places to stand. I was sitting in a rest area in the corner that had a sofa, some chairs, and tables. But the rest of the walls were covered with shelves. At the center of the shop was a record player you could play stuff on. That's where the piano music was coming from.

The shelves were filled with records. Most of them seemed to be vinyl LP records, but there was a small shelf with just the CDs on display. (I heard all of this from Sori later. At the time, I didn't care about what was a CD or whatnot.)

Sori handed me a cup of cool water. "Here."
"Mm." The word 'thanks' would not come out.
"Just get comfortable there."

I had one sip then looked up. Sori was handling a record. (I'm still not sure what she was doing here.) She didn't have any expression but I kept staring at her. Then she turned her head and my eyes met hers. She showed me a smile. I looked down again but I still remember that smile. It looked like a different type of smile from the one she showed at school to the other kids. I felt like I could see her true self. That may have been ego on my part though.

"But I was really surprised. You were just standing there in front of our store."
"...This is your place?" I squeezed out a voice.
"Yeah! Actually, I was named after here. You thought it was the other way around, didn't you? My dad is quite silly..."

Sori was beaming with a grin. Her dad came out from what seemed to be the restroom and brought a wet towel. I tried to stand up to greet him but Sori yelled at me not to do it. She snatched the towel away from him and hunched in front of me. Her dad meekly went back to the counter.

Sori put the towel over my forehead. "Is it cold?"
"I'll do it." I put down the cup on a table.
"No, it's fine. Your face is completely red."

Before Sori could put the towel on me again, I grabbed it away from her hand. I unfolded it and wrapped my face with it. The coldness numbed my senses. It felt like smoke could come out. When I wiped my face and looked in front of me, Sori was sitting in a chair at the opposite side. I turned my head so that our eyes wouldn't meet.

I put the towel on a table and looked up at the ceiling instead. I let myself be comfortable and leaned my back on the sofa, like Sori told me to, and closed my eyes. I could hear the piano much better than before. I let my body sink into the music.

"I played this one... Good memories." Sori started humming after saying this.
"You did?" I opened my eyes.

"Yeah. I wanted to achieve something before graduation. Rented a studio for a day."

"Just for a day?"

"Twenty pieces in a day... maybe for about three hours?"

"Huh." I tried my best to hide my amazement. She would've liked that though.

"Oh, this is Puccini. I also did Chopin and Debussy." They were all 19th century composers. Even I knew that much. "I recorded it across two records. One was this, and the other one had Beethoven, Mozart, Bach..." 18th century.

"You like classical then?"

"Not that much. Actually, I only really know those six, haha." She smirked. "I think Beethoven is my favorite. He was the world's first ever rock star, you know."

I couldn't help but laugh at that line, so I covered my mouth. I became self-conscious while looking at Sori. Her smile widened. Then she stood up and started walking towards me.

"Did you come here to listen to music?"

I looked down again. "I was just passing by. I heard music and I stopped..."

"Huh~ Then it was cause of my music?"

I put my hands together on my knees. "...Yeah."

Sori giggled. "Hee hee. I'll play you a show one day."

Sori sat next to me. It was almost close enough that our shoulders met. I guess she thought it was okay for girls to do that. I went a bit further to the side for distance. And turned my head to the opposite side. I could feel her staring at me. I remember it being really awkward. I couldn't hear the music properly either.

"Sia, you..."

"What?" I instinctively reacted to her voice and looked at her face.

"Oh." Her eyes widened. "Are you, uh, one of those types?"

"What."

She kept some distance between us. "You don't have any clothes besides the uniform..."

"Uh, ye... yeah." I wanted to hide my face but it would be too obvious. So I just lowered my eyes.

"Oh! Or maybe, that's a kind of fashion too??" She clapped her hands.

"...Sure." I let out a 'hmp' again. "Let's put it that way."

I could hear the music clearly again. I closed my eyes and let out a breath. I gulped and then made a decision to turn around and look at Sori. She tilted her head again. I looked at what she was wearing without making eye contact. Her shirt had sky blue stripes, and it seemed too big for her body. Her shorts were cotton. And she had knee socks on, which she always wore to school too.

I suddenly thought up a few things to say. 'They also look good with shorts, the socks.' That sounds perverted. Probably alright for girls to say, but I would feel weird about it. "You always have that on your legs, doesn't it get hot?" Something's off. It doesn't sound like something you'd tell someone else. 'If you think about it, you also wear some strange things.' I actually almost said this but Sori would break the silence again.

"Did you like what you heard last time?"

"What?"

"Sorry. I only like boring music." Sori lowered her head. The smile was still there, but her eyebrows were knit. "Only old people like the Beatles, anyway..."

Sori's words trailed off. Her voice started to lose strength. Hearing that was painful for me. It seemed difficult for her to maintain her smile - it was just like always. I was aware. That if I say these very simple words, she would show me that smile again. It was a foolish thought. Falling for a fool, I almost began to be a fool as well.

"No. I liked it." I clenched my fist.

Sori looked at me again. "Really! Thank God. I'm so glad..."

Sori's face shined brightly once again. I stared at that like a dumbass. Hee hee, Sori laughed again. She breathed deeply and got up from the sofa.

"You wanna listen to some other stuff?" Sori walked up to the record player.

"Yeah?"

"I brought all my favorites over to my house..." Sori put her finger on her lips. "Oh, then you can come over sometime! I'll play you piano, something way better than the Beatles, hee hee."

I could feel my heart stop. My head was heating up again. I grabbed the towel on the table and fiddled around with it. Sori kept staring at me, waiting for an answer. I felt my body heat up, like I did something embarrassing. But it wasn't a kind of 'shame' I would typically experience. I could only feel the gaze of one person. The fact that I didn't cry was proof of that. So I could answer rather easily.

"Sure."

"Yeah!" Sori jumped in mid-air slightly. "It's a promise, okay?"

"Promised."

"Alright." Sori looked at the record player. "Oh, wanna listen to something else in the meantime?"

"No."

I looked at the ceiling again. I closed my eyes and breathed in deeply. The piano tune went inside my ears. On a black background, I could see Song Sori playing it for me in front of my eyes. It was such a comfortable scene. This space had already become somewhere even more warmer than a home.

"This one is fine."

I was being saved.

4

I didn't have sleep paralysis at night from then on, but I just couldn't sleep. I was used to being so tired all the time, so this was quite troubling. I wanted to go outside and roam around when it was still midnight. I was being changed. Music would not leave my mind.

But I didn't go outside again for awhile. I didn't go back to 'Sori Soundscape' either. I tried my best not to make eye contact with Sori. I was afraid of change coming to my life. I thought I had no interest in life for sure, but humans instinctively fear change when they find it. I did what I always did. I read and wrote. I tried to distance myself from music. To maintain the 'present' - to protect my 'present'.

But I couldn't even write like I had before. The reason I could write all the time was because I was always negative. To be more specific, I used my inferiority to fuel my creativity. One of the most effective motivators for writing is the will to 'prove' oneself. In a word, spite. The urge to say 'suck it!' to everyone who looked down on me, or told me 'there's no way you can do that', or looked at me with doubtful eyes - that's why I wrote. They say revenge is a dish best served cold, but I disagree. Revenge is a burning will. That, to me, was writing.

But every time I would remember Song Sori's voice, those thoughts became meaningless. I could not cry even if I wanted to, and nothing would come out even when I wanted to scream. My heart would start pounding all of a sudden and my body became paralysed. My head began to heat up and my legs shook. Energy would store itself in my heart but I could not let it out.

So I decided to write a poem instead. I don't read poems. They seemed too formulaic and limiting. Writing prose made me feel free. But it seemed like what I needed at that point was a 'restriction.' And by writing a poem, I could turn the music inside my head into something I could perceive.

The following is a poem that I wrote back then.

The heart is stopped
Breathing is stopped
But the crybaby
Is standing still

Afraid she would be had herself
If she were to help
The crybaby
Runs away

For even the stamping feet
Or the pouring tears
End up being useless
If you don't know how to say 'help'.

When the crybaby
Becomes an adult
The heart is stopped
And breathing is stopped.

It was mostly written in a 'stream of consciousness'. So I tried rhyming near the beginning then gave up. (It's one of my first poems ever. Give me a break.) The third bar is especially too wordy that it just reads like a novel. So I started the bar with "For ~" to give it a sort of poetic edge. And by referencing the first bar with the last, I gave the impression that I had thought it out all along, making it seem smart.

I would soon fall into an ocean of words. I almost drowned to death, but I learned how to swim my way out. I kept writing. I heard music. I didn't know at the time, but what I was writing out was that music. I was writing an idea known as 'Song Sori'.

This happened a few days after I had started writing poems. During break time in school, I was once again staring at my desk. I started to count the ringing in my head with my fingers. One, two, three, four, one, two, three - One two, three, four, one, two, three... I started to hypnotize myself by repeating this rhythm.

At first I only did it in my head. Then soon, my head was nodding along to the beat. My leg dropped in at one, two, one two, and my fingers naturally moved along to the other beat - two, four, two four. This is how the music conquered my mind. I soon entered a subconscious state. Keeping up this beat had become like breathing for me.

In this subconsciousness, I was thinking of words. It was like what a rapper would do. (I've never listened to rap though.) I would then also start whispering these words to myself. My head started churning out these rhymes. 'Summer is a burning heat / Plotting its deceitful cheat / Flirting with an added treat'... These words turned into a spell. I fell into a complete trance, building castles in the air.

Someone ran into me. I fell down on the floor easily because I wasn't putting much strength into my body. It seemed that the person who ran into me didn't fall. I stared at the floor while face down. I was still in a trance state, so it took some time to realize what happened. I internalized the situation that just occurred around when I could hear my breathing again.

I held on to the floor with my hands and stood up. As I stood up, I saw Song Sori standing to the side too. When I turned around, I saw the boy I ran into and some who seemed to be his friends. They were looking at me, holding up their hand, and saying something. I'm not sure what I was even doing when I ran into him, but I didn't care. I realized my sight was becoming blurry. I also realized after blinking a few times that I couldn't hear anything. I couldn't hear anything except for my own breathing. Not just what they were saying, but also the beat I'd been hearing. Fear crept into my heart. I started clicking my fingers to

confirm. I couldn't even feel my fingers clicking. The boys in front of me stopped saying anything and stared at me with a confused look on their faces.

That's when I started hearing not a beat or rhythm but a noise in my head. It was like a ringing you'd hear when a bomb goes off. The volume of the noise soon grew exponentially. The noise seized my breathing. My pupils grew and my legs were shaking. My blurred sight started becoming darker. My head was aching and I felt my heart begin to beat faster. The terrible noise was like a scream. It was screaming for me, because I could not do it myself.

The noise stopped when Song Sori grabbed my shoulder. I turned my head to her. I could hear my breathing again. The next thing I slowly started to hear were voices. I turned my head to those boys. Only the one who had ran into me was still looking at me.

"Are you okay, Sia?" Song Sori put her hand off my shoulder and asked me. "Need to go to the nurse's office?"

I gulped and looked at her face. That boy - and everyone else too - were looking at me confused, but Song Sori was making a worried expression. There was something warm but sharp in her eye, something that realized something serious was going on. I kept trying to say something but my voice wouldn't come out yet.

So I closed my eyes and ran out of the classroom. The last thing that I realized when I closed my eyes - was that I was crying. I could even feel the warmth of my tears. I didn't know what these feelings were about. I tried to organize them, but I couldn't express it in words. If I had to put it to words now, I'd say it was a 'killing urge'. It was not an urge born from rage or despair. But as I was hearing that noise, I certainly wanted to murder someone. But I can't really speak much about that. You'll understand later. For now, that's all I'll say.

I always realize things one step too late.

I silently went into my classroom again the next class. I avoided that boy deliberately. He didn't come up to me either. I think that was peace.

After school, I attempted to run away immediately. But as I expected, Song Sori called me from behind. I had no choice but to stand still.

"Sia." Song Sori tried to show me a smile. "Are you free today?"

I didn't say anything. I just looked at her. Sunlight shined through the window, lighting the distance between us. Song Sori soon gave up waiting for an answer.

"Wanna come over to my home today?"

Song Sori put her hands behind her pack. Some of the girls who were leaving said something like, "what the heck, even I've never been there!" Sori showed them a smile too. I couldn't smile. I just froze there, still. I didn't say anything. Actually, I didn't make any sound from my mouth. After the music died, my voice died alongside it.

I lowered my head. Sori said "Is this... a yes?". Then I raised my head again. This looks like I had nodded. At least, it did to her. Come to think of it now, Sori was most likely looking for any excuse to bring me along. Sori laughed and came up to me to hold my two hands. "Let's go!" I was puzzled. I could not properly process the situation. Sori's hands were so warm. That's when I finally could muster up a sound that went "yes".

I learned of three facts as I was walking with Song Sori.

The first was that Song Sori is an altruistic person. When she invited me before, she asked if I had "wanna" come - she asked for my intention. Not if I 'can' come, nor if I 'will'. She also never looked down while walking. She would move out of the way so that she wouldn't run into anyone, before they were even aware she did that. Every action she took - from the way she invited me to the way she walked - she never once considered 'herself' in the equation.

The second thing is that 'Sori Soundscape' was quite far away from the school and my house. I'm really not sure if the fact I walked all the way over there that day was fate or coincidence. But her house wasn't far from the store. I soon remembered their location.

Before I say the third fact, I wanted to talk about something interesting that's relevant. They say one is shaped by the 'environment' they live in. This doesn't just mean the people closest to them - family, friends, etc, - but also the language they speak, the food they eat, the culture where they were raised in, and the place they live in. It is especially known that someone's room tells much about that person. I'm not sure if that applies everywhere, but the place Song Sori lived in did tell me something interesting about her.

Song Sori's house was on top of a hill, far from the residential districts. I say a hill, but it's essentially a mountain. As we went up there, I instinctively looked down the hill often. Typically in comics or movies, only when you finish the hike can you look down and see a great view. But here, the whole way up was built on the edges, so you could see everything down all the way through. And like I said, it was far from any residential or market districts, so most you could see were roads or trek paths. So Song Sori would walk up and down this place every day, looking at this scenery which seemed to contain an entire world. You could see everyone, and see every cloud - just walking up here made you feel like a queen.

Once I stood in front of her house, such feelings dissipated. Weirdly enough, her house took the form of a traditional Korean house. The size wasn't big. The outer structure seemed a bit shabby. Sori opened the door without saying anything and invited me in. (I didn't know at the time, but there never was going to be anyone inside. But Sori didn't tell me this. Her parents

worked all day so she deemed it to be obvious.) I hesitated before going in. But when Sori reached out her hand to me, I went in first. I didn't want to show her my embarrassment.

I followed Sori to her room. What I saw there is hard to describe with words. It's a little weird to say this, but it didn't seem like a girl's room. The walls were covered in shelves. On the side where the bed and the table were, records were hung on those walls. Half of the shelves were records and half of them were books. I'm not sure about books, and it was the first time I'd ever seen someone with so many records on their shelf.

On the table were piles of textbooks and study sheets. I could also see a keyboard instrument. I didn't see a computer. Actually, I didn't see much colour beside the sky blue coloured bed. Instead, records formed a certain hue, like an art exhibition. It formed its own kind of harmony. I think she just hung the ones with pretty covers on the wall. That felt a little girly. (I feel weird when I keep talking about what's 'girly' or not. What are you, fucking stupid, Lee Sia?) In between the bed and the table was a record player. It seemed much older than the one at the store. I looked at the ceiling. A single bulb was flickering. I wonder what I should say. Maybe it felt like the room of an 'otaku'?

The reason I say is because her room was very similar to mine. The differences were that my room was much smaller, the shelves were also smaller and only filled with books, that I didn't have anything hung on my walls, and that I had a computer. Maybe one could mistake our two rooms for belonging to sisters. I recognize this quickly. Maybe the surprise on my face looked to Sori like I was having trouble.

"I'm sorry my room is like this." Sori put her bag on the chair. "You can sit there."

I sat on the pillow that was on the floor.

"I'll get something to drink, so do you wanna listen to something?"

I waited until Sori played something without an answer. She seemed to have understood this and started pulling out a record from a shelf next to her. On the cover was the face of a man on a yellow background. I waited as I looked at the flickering bulb.

Sori left the album playing and told me to wait as she went to get tea. A bluesy piano arrangement started playing. As the cheerful instrumentation kicked in, it started to form a jolly sounding country tune. The chorus part had these brass parts that couldn't help but make you hum along to them. The quality of the record was rubbish so I couldn't hear the lyrics well, but I couldn't forget this one part. "*Change is gonna do me good...*"

The album Sori played was Sir Elton John's 1972 album, "Honky Château". The horn instrumentation of the first track, "Honkey Cat", spread across this worn-out but lively room. The song was about 5 minutes long. As it faded out, Sori came back with two cups of tea.

"Oh, did I completely miss the first song?"

Song Sori gave me a cup and sat across me. And then the piano accompaniment of the next song, "Mellow", started.

"I like this one, the second one."

The bass and the drums kicked in, as the song started for real. The bright texture of the piano followed the heavy sounding chords, and I could hear the singer say this: "*Mellow's the feeling that we get / Watching the coal fire glow*".

At around the 3 minute mark, something started playing, and it was a sound I'd never heard. It had the timbre of an organ, but it was playing as if it was a string instrument. (I looked it up later, and it was the sound of an electric violin.) The vocals came back, and that sound formed a sinister sounding harmony with the singer's voice.

"Isn't this part good?" Sori said as she drank the tea.

"Yeah."

"I like songs like these, that sound bright and sad at the same time."

"Yeah." I looked at the floor. "By the way..."

"What?"

"You don't have a computer?" I kept wondering as I listened to the music.

"Oh. When I need to study, I can just go to a PC cafe... It's not like having my own would help that much."

"I see."

I looked at Song Sori. She had the same expression as the one I saw at school; she had her eyes closed, and didn't show any emotion. She opened her eyes when the song finished. When she noticed I was staring at her, she got embarrassed and started drinking more tea. I didn't even touch my cup.

The next song was a piano rock with a faster tempo. This time, the lyrics came into focus more than the music. Just before, I could only hear stuff like 'change' or 'love', but suddenly there were words that seemed a little different. "*I'm getting bored being part of mankind / This race is a waste of time*".

And the chorus came as a shock to me. I learned this later, but the first line here is the name of the song. "*I think I'm gonna kill myself / Cause a little suicide sticks around for a couple of days / Yeah, I'm gonna kill myself / I'd like to see what the papers say on the state of teenage blues*".

These rebellious lyrics were being sung on top of a song that you'd dance to at a ball. And the way the song slowed down with the word 'blues...' - it made it hard to resist clicking my fingers. And the second verse had a humorous edge too. Basically, the story of the song is, it's about a teenager whose parents wouldn't let him ride a car, and he's mad that they told him to come home by 10, so he starts having these stupid thoughts like, 'if I killed myself, I wonder if that'll get their attention.' I didn't need Sori to tell me that this was a song from 40-50 years ago, so I was just curious who could've written a song like this in the 1970s.

“Uh...” I pressed my lips on the cup of tea, but it was too hot so I put it down again.

“Yeah?”

“Whose songs are these?”

“Oh.” Sori got embarrassed again and laughed. It felt a little weird that Sori couldn’t manage well. “This is Elton John. He’s probably like... 70 now?”

“Oh.”

“What is it? Do you like it?”

“It’s alright. The lyrics were just funny, is all...”

“The LYRICS???” Sori put down her cup too. “Sia, you can understand all of this?”

“What?” I was confused. That’s when I realized; not everyone is as good as English as I am. I keep forgetting that. I don’t really go around parading that fact around.

“Wow, I guess you’re good at English?”

“It’s not even that.”

“But I don’t understand a lick of this.” Sori kept talking with amazement. “I just like it if the music is good. But you’re awesome, Sia!”

As we were talking, the next song already started playing. It was a song called “Susie (Dramas)”, and just as the title suggests, it’s a song about a harp player who falls in love with a dancer girl. When the bright look on my curious face faded away, Sori also closed her eyes and started listening to the song.

“Is Sia...” Sori tilted her head, and still had her eyes closed. “Is Sia a foreign name?”

Is it? I don’t care much for myself. My parents might’ve given me a foreign sounding name. I never asked them, and I don’t really care to.

“I wonder. I don’t really care about my own name.” I said.

“Yeah? My name is a little funny, but I really like it. It’s the one thing my stupid dad did right in his life.”

Sori laughed. It was light but melancholy. Each word she spoke had its own weight and emotion to it. I kept observing her. It was as if the girl in front of me known as Song Sori was becoming music itself, entrancing me.

When the next song started playing, Sori stood up all of a sudden. “Oh. This next one is my favorite. In this album, I mean.”

“Okay.” I grabbed my cup of tea and blew into it.

“Though, it’s the most popular song here. But it’s a masterpiece.” Sori sat in her bed instead.

The song started as a piano ballad first, but that vintage bass tone you’d only hear in a 70s rock ‘n’ roll song was added on top of the drums. For a whole minute, the song kept adding on to the instrumentation, and the minor chords created tension.

The drums revealed every moment, as it blew us away into the chorus. The acoustic guitar started the chorus with a bang, as if it was a bomb going off. The ‘ooh’ background vocals

formed an angelic major chord. If the Beatles song felt like it was sending me up to 'heaven', this felt like it was launching me off into 'space'. Not complete hope, but rather the bittersweet ashes of a blastoff. The melody was faster than that song, and a bit repetitive, but inside that repetition was 'grief' - or perhaps 'sweetness' - and it possessed all elements of an emotion. In the last part of the chorus where he sings 'Rocket man', it was like every voice was screaming in freedom. The piano, the guitar, the bass, the drums - everything made my heart rise up.

"Hey, Sia..." Sori talked to me during the instrumental part.

"Why."

"Can you, uh, tell me what this song is saying?" Sori looked down at me. "I've always wanted to know..."

"..."

I looked at the floor. It took awhile to remember the lyrics, then translate it to Korean. I closed my eyes and restructured the words. I also shortened some sentences.

"It's gonna be a long time. Till touchdown brings me round again. They'll find I'm not the man that I used to be. I'm a rocket man. Burning out his fuse alone..."

The vocals kicked in again. I looked at Song Sori again. She was sobbing. She kept her eyes closed so I couldn't see tears. I didn't ask her if she was crying. I didn't want to interrupt the music. That's when I realized the meaning of her emotionless expressions. That was to completely relate herself to the music. And my voice became part of that music, and reached out to her. I put my cup down on the floor and looked down. I placed my ear closely to the music. It rang, and rose up. The music she showed me was, to me, my saviour. And no one knows if it was me or Song Sori whose saving hand was being reached out to.

"

*And I think it's gonna be a long, long time
'Til touchdown brings me 'round again...*

"

- "[Rocket Man \(I Think It's Going to Be a Long, Long Time\)](#)", Elton John

5

Going to Sori's store after school became an everyday occurrence and a lifestyle for me. For hours, we would play records, and go on to study, or simply be there at each other's side. There wasn't a clear sense of development in our relationship. I'm not a very talkative person to begin with, and surprisingly, Song Sori wasn't either. But she would talk by herself a lot before playing the records. I'm not sure if she noticed, but I intently listened to every single word she'd say. That's how I memorized the names of every band and musician she listened to. And I would go home and listen to them as well.

The Beatles, Rolling Stones, The Beach Boys, Elvis Presley, The Who, The Smiths, The Cure, Pixies, The Sex Pistols, Electric Light Orchestra, The Kinks, The Moody Blues, The Clash, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Jesus and Mary Chain, The Fall, Joy Division, The Carpenters, Oasis, Blur, Nirvana, Radiohead, Led Zepellin, Michael Jackson, Kiss, Elton John, Bob Dylan, Buddy Holly, Deep Purple, The Grateful Dead, Wham, The Ramones, Van Halen, David Bowie, The Police, Talking Heads, Bobby Fuller, Nine Inch Nails, Queen, Curtis Mayfield, Billy Joel, Jefferson Airplane, Steely Dan, Can, Lou Reed, Squeeze, The Pretenders, The Knack, Elvis Costello, Simple Minds, Don Henley, Soft Cell, Dexys Midnight Runners, Gill Scott Heron, Swans, Sam Cooke, They Might Be Giants, Ween, Cardiacs, Buffalo Springfield, Village People, Don McLean, Bryan Adams, Pink Floyd, King Crimson, Yes, The Zombies, Frank Zappa & Mothers of Invention, The Residents, Boris, Yellow Magic Orchestra, Sun Kill Moon, The Strokes, Rancid, Against Me, LCD Soundsystem, The Replacements, Cheap Trick, Big Star, Grover Washington Jr, Television Personalities, The Loving Spoonful, At the Drive In, The Art Attacks, Dead Kennedys, Andrew Jackson Jihad, Drive Like Jehu, Gorillaz, Godspeed You Black Emperor, John Coltrane, King Gizzard and the Lizard Wizard, Neutral Milk Hotel, Opeth, The Cribs, Portugal The Man, Rage Against the Machine, Rush, The Eagles, Sonic Youth, The Sweet, A-ha, Emitt Rhodes, Albert Hammond, Miles Davis, REO Speedwagon, Allman Brothers Band, Dire Straits, Starland Vocal Band, The Stooges, Pearl Jam, The Slits, Velvet Underground, The Sparks, Wire, Aerosmith, The Doors, The Undertones, Fleetwood Mac, J Geils Band, Alan Parsons Project, Stevie Wonder, Steely Dan, Cream, Dan Deacon, The Fishmans, Emerson Lake and Parmer, Bad Company, Mott the Hoople, Genesis, The Doobie Brothers, Jimi Hendrix Experience, Asia, Bruce Springsteen, Bobby Caldwell, The Monkeys, Simon and Garfunkel, Devo, Blondie, The Buggles, Jonathan Richman, Jeff Buckley, The Cardigans, The Everly Brothers, Flaming Lips, Foo Fighters, Hall and Oates, Green Day, The White Stripes, Swell Maps, Weezer, The Cars, Jimmy Eat World, Johnny Cash, Redbone, The Lurkers, Diana Ross, Tears for Fears, Matthew Wilder, The Turtles, The Ink Spots, Clovers, The Orioles, The Ravens, The El Dorados, The Animals, Cyril Davies, Chuck Berry, Earth Wind and Fire, Neil Young, America, Boston, Chicago, Kansas, Orleans, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Jeff Rosenstock, Prince, Xiu Xiu, Death Cab for Cutie, McAlmont and Butler, Daniel Johnston.

I listened to all of them.

I soon learned Song Sori's language. I had my own favorite bands, and sometimes those would differ from those of Sori's. When talking about music, she would show joy; a kind of joy I couldn't see from her before. She also grew to be more assertive in our conversations. (To begin with, when you don't talk to many people, you don't know which things are bad to say and which aren't. This can be a positive thing too.) So she became like me, and I became like him. I learned how to make a genuine smile for the first time in my life.

We talked about Morrissey's ridiculous voice and John Marr's slick guitar playing. We talked about which mascara Robert Smith would've used. We talked about who was the most genius songwriter in the Beatles. We talked about what our favorite song from "Pet Sounds" was. We talked about David Byrne's suit and David Bowie's face painting. My favorite Bowie record was 'Station to Station' and hers was 'Young Americans'; and we would pick a favorite track from the other's favorite album. (Mine was 'Somebody up There Likes Me', hers was 'Golden Years'.) We compared the piano performances of Elton John and Billy Joel. We would get pumped up from the explosive energy of The Sex Pistols, Green Day and The Clash, and would talk more. She would memorize the entire discography of The Beatles and would tell me about it as if she was a college professor. And I would instead listen to The Pixies' record 'Surfer Rosa' so many times that I could write an essay about it.

Song Sori was changing in school too. Her smile no longer seemed fabricated, and she became more active in behavior to the other kids too. Some of them would see this and say she had become more 'boorish'. The 'image' they had been given of Song Sori was being threatened. So to them, it was nothing less than an insult. Maybe it was only because I became close to Sori, but I started hearing various things people would say about her. I became concerned for her, without her knowing. But one-sided concern never resulted in anything. Even so, Song Sori retained herself like nothing was happening. And I began to lose myself as a result of Sori.

We were resting in the record store, fleeing from the murderous summer sunlight. I would watch Song Sori playing with the record player. I would look at her only, and forgot that the world existed. When I could see the moon up in the sky, I cried while listening to that Spring Summer Autumn Winter CD. Then I would get a call from Sori, and we talked to each other all night, just like that.

We asked each other nonsensical questions that could not be answered. I can't forget a single moment of it. It was the longest 30 days of my entire life.

6

This is a poem I wrote before the end of summer.

Spring, summer, autumn, winter
And the one which hurt the most
Summer, stuck as memories
I can only feel the deep scent of nostalgia

Summer is a burning heat
Plotting its deceitful cheat
Flirting with an added treat
I can only feel the deep scent of nostalgia

That is autumn's optimism
That is the sky's pessimism
That is everybody's escapism
I can only feel the deep scent of nostalgia

That was your voice
That was life-changing music
That was the road you walk
I can only feel the deep scent of nostalgia

Summer is a broken memory
Learned wisdom and its treachery
Confessions of a tear, a reverie
I can only feel the deep scent of nostalgia

Spring, summer, autumn and winter
And that which I loved the most
Your ark, singing dyslexia
That deep scent of nostalgia.

This is a weird thing to admit, but I never knew what touching someone felt like until then. My family is not particularly abnormal, but we aren't exactly comprised of social people. I never received much physical affection from them growing up. But maybe too little of that stuff is better than too much. My mom didn't really express love in that way, except for when she would grab my arm in a crowd. (Not my hand; my arm. Mom was a weird person) Of course, I heard plenty of verbal affection. That's why I grew up into such a cunt. It probably wasn't her fault though.

So on our way from school, I was going to the record store with Song Sori. I followed her footsteps and saw her back. Her hair was around chest length, and it let out a sheen when the summer sunlight shined on it. The shoulders of many people passed by, yet the only

thing on my mind was the girl in front of me. I never would've gone through such a crowded route in the past.

We saw a crosswalk and stood next to each other. When I stood next to her like this, my heart would pound so hard that I could die. Not even thinking about couples; even if you're just friends, when she's right next to you and you can't even see her, what do you even do? Just don't say anything? Sometimes give her a look or something? Or maybe just act 'natural'. I had no idea what these words even meant.

The progression of how I saw Song Sori went as thus: 'Irritating girl -> Weird girl -> ??? -> The girl I like" - up until that point. In every stage, I sort of saw her as someone not in the same realm as mine. Standing next to her needs no explanation; even seeing her was such an abnormal environment. So the fact that we can stand by each other as 'friends' - that we can be on equal footing - it was so confusing. Especially because in my heart, I knew I wanted to take this relationship one level further.

As we waited for the red light to turn green, my tension would heighten.

When it was almost time, I tried to move my feet but felt some sort of weight being wrapped around my left arm. When I turned my head, what I saw was Song Sori linking her arms with mine. It was already a hot day, but my left arm started to feel like it's burning. The heat went all the way up to my head. I could picture my face getting redder in my head. Before I could finish that thought, I pushed away Song Sori's arm and got her off of me.

The light turned green and the people around us started going ahead first. Song Sori didn't look offended; just confused. I didn't mind us doing stuff like that. I even wanted to hold hands with her. But when I thought about doing something like that with so many other people around, I suddenly reacted with disgust. It was a kind of self deprecation - how dare someone like me be seen with Song Sori like that? If there's something funny though, it's that nobody looked when we crossed arms. But when I pushed her away so dramatically, that's when I could start to actually feel people's gazes.

"Hey!" I raised my voice.

"Yeah?" Song Sori laughed and tilted her head. "What's up, Sia? Don't like touching?"

"People are looking..."

"Oh yeah~"

Song Sori laughed even louder. Then she held my hand like she was snatching it away from me, and brought her face close. I instinctively stepped back. I thought I was going to fold, but she held on even tighter to me. I remembered the first time Song Sori reached her hand out to me. That time, she grabbed my arm and pulled me around, but this was the first time we could feel each other's warmth like this. My world became white. The only thing I could see was that exultant face of hers.

"That's the point."

That's when I learned what it felt like to touch someone. Love was soft, and warm.

We were overlooking the Han River.

To us, who lived in the city, the vastness of the Han River was our only impression of nature. When you looked down at the emerald green hue of its flow, it felt like you were being hypnotized. It was by no means a sanitary river. It was dark and polluted. Once the novelty of 'living near the Han River' dissipated, no merit remained. So I didn't come often.

But she - Song Sori - loved this river. She had brought me there, of course. She used to say this. "Inside the Han River are memories. It's flown for thousands of years, accumulating history. But I don't mean the history you see in books, of great men and women. You can observe people's everyday lives in these waters. What these people did in this place across all these years. In a way, looking at this river is like listening to a song. When you listen to a song, you cry at things that are no big deal. People like you, or me, can put their stories into song, and we can understand those stories like we've lived it. You look at the Han River and you understand other lives."

Then, after speaking for such a long time, she laughed, saying, "Or is that so?" I never took my eyes off of her while I listened. Not even for a moment. After that, Song Sori got embarrassed, and grabbed my hand to pull me away to the Han River.

So we sat at that hill which overlooked the Han River, watching the river flow.

"This time will pass, too." Song Sori said.

"Do you want that?" I said.

"That's not it." She smiled. "But when that time comes, I don't want to have to cry."

"I'll never leave you."

She laughed. "Thank you. I didn't mean you'd do that."

"Then what do you mean? Tell me." I kept asking her, which was unlike me.

"I don't know. I think your thoughts would be more fun to hear."

"I wouldn't think it strange if you were to stop talking to me. Someone like me doesn't deserve to be with a person like you."

"Don't say that!" Sori raised her voice. Her face turned serious. "Sia, you're amazing... Your fault is that you always take words at face value. But the way you find emotions like that is cool, too. I can't do that. I can't turn other people's thoughts into my own."

"Is that so?"

"I don't want to leave you. I want to believe you feel the same."

"Of course."

"But nothing lasts forever... I know that well."

"Who said that? I need to file a complaint."

"Haha..." Sori let out a laugh, a weak one. "You would have to file it to me."

"That's impossible, then."

As we watched the Han River, we had a moment of silence. I looked at Song Sori's eyes. The flow of the river was being reflected in her eyes. In them was a kind of wisdom that I could not describe in words. I felt like she was speaking from experience.

"If one of us has to leave..."

Song Sori said.

"Then let's forget together."

July was ending too. This day was the second and last time I ever went to Song Sori's house. It was a pretty average summer day. I assure you, things like fate don't exist.

That day, Song Sori was particularly more down than usual. It seems like the lackeys that hang around her didn't notice it. It's not like I can say I perfectly understood her, either. But there were certainly signs of anxiety in her voice and her face. I didn't selfishly go up to her in school or something. But something was different after school. Usually, she would wait for me by the school front gate, but instead she was trying to head home right away. I saw that and felt an unmatched sadness. I chased her and blocked her way to home. I just stood next to her without saying anything. Song Sori raised her face. It looked like she was letting out a sigh of relief.

Song Sori didn't want to go to the record store and I didn't ask further. Even before she mentioned that there was no one home, I was already following her up the hill.

Being in her house was less awkward than before but it was still pretty weird. Though, this time I decided not to head straight into her room. I followed her to the big living room, which had things like a refrigerator, a television, et cetera. The wall on the opposite end was open and led to a yard. There also seemed to be a door to the bedroom for her parents but I didn't go there. I sat in the living room, feeling the wind that passed by my ears.

I couldn't see Sori so I turned around. Sori was sitting on her knees, staring at the floor. I thought she was praying or something. In silence, I watched Song Sori, who had her face down. She was sleeping. I didn't want to wake her. So I watched the sunlight, and the shadow that sunlight created as it beamed upon the living room.

When she woke up, she gasped loudly. As she stood up, she kept saying "sorry" to me, like she was speaking to her boss or something. I nodded. She sounded like she was about to cry. I think she wasn't apologizing to me, but rather to herself.

"I can't sleep well recently."

"You can't sleep well?"

I instinctively repeated her sentence about sleeping. I couldn't sleep well all my life, until I met her and it got better. Perhaps I became afraid it worked the other way around for Sori.

"Are you alright?" I asked a meaningless question.

"Yeah, I'm okay. It feels good to have Sia looking out for me.

"What?"

"Well, you seem like the kind of girl who doesn't worry or care about anything... Oh, is that bad to say?"

Song Sori smiled and her face became bright again. And, as if a lightbulb lit up in her head, she exclaimed and told me to wait for a moment. I thought she was going to get another record. While she went to her room, I laid down on the floor in the meantime. It was cool and chilly. It was a particularly windy day, so it was even more chilly.

Song Sori came back with a keyboard wrapped around her. When I tried to stand up, she told me it was okay to stay down. Apparently this was one of those keyboards that didn't need to be plugged in to make sounds. Sori installed the stand, while facing the yard.

She started playing a piano piece without any explanation. It was a digital sound so it didn't sound clean, but the melody formed a nice tune. I thought I had heard it before, but classical music wasn't my strong suit, so I quietly searched my memory. But there was no need. It was that song that I heard over the speakers the first time I came to the record store. (I looked this up later, but it was an aria called "O Mio Babbino Caro" from the opera Turandot.)

I could only see Song Sori's back, but her emotions could be heard in her performance. The velocity would become stronger, but the tempo never changed. I was only hearing her play for the first time, but I could tell her talent at first glance. (Or first listen?) The song itself was simple. But that minimalism is how she could attach her own feelings to it. It was as if each note being played from that keyboard had her sweat and tears on them.

The performance lasted for only a short 1 minute and 30 seconds. Sori no longer seemed like the girl I knew. I thought that I had formed some special relationship with Sori by listening to music and talking with her. I considered myself different from anyone else at school. But even I had never heard Sori express herself for 1 minute and 30 seconds like this before. And now that she had shown herself, I felt so stupid. I was no exception; I had approached her with selfish intent as well.

As I had these thoughts, I stared at Sori dumbfounded, and she took this to mean I was left speechless. She laughed by herself. When I heard her laughter after such a long silence, I woke up. I stood up. And I didn't know what to do, so I just walked in front of Sori. She looked at me weirdly and said, "What's wrong?". I couldn't answer her. Except, those words that came out of my mouth were ones I had been burying deep inside my heart all this time; the same words that I could not let go of.

"I love-

“...Huh?” Sori interrupted me.

“The performance. I loved that.”

“Oh~ Yeah...” Sori sounded like she was disappointed. “Well, obviously! Thanks, though.”

Sori held both of my hands with hers. I still hadn't internalized what I just said and what they meant. I just wanted to do whatever she wanted to do.

“Kay, kay. I could play more fun songs. Do you have any requests?”

“Play whatever you want, Song Sori.”

Song Sori made a surprised face. “Did you just, call me Song Sori?”

“You don't like it?”

“No. I just thought... that might've been the first time you called my name. Hee hee.”

Song Sori made a weird laughter and started turning some knobs on the keyboard. She seemed to be changing the sound. She soon started playing again. This time, it was a synth sound that sounded like a string instrument. They started forming harmony. The notes seemed to fly in the sky. They were elegant, comfy. Like a mother's embrace, it emitted nostalgia familiar to the ears. When Sori started playing the melody with her right hand, I instantly recognized the song. It was from Spring Summer Autumn Winter's first album, “I Guess Everyone Changes.”

It was difficult to not be surprised. I wasn't all that curious about how she knew the song. I was just surprised it was this specific track from that album out of all the others. But it wasn't time for me to ask about that. I chose to sink myself into the music instead. Before I knew it, I started humming along. Sori slowed down her performance and looked at me.

“Sia, do you know this song?”

“Huh?” Then I finally realized I was singing along. “Yeah.”

“Wow, that's amazing. I just remember hearing it once on TV.”

“TV? Like in a commercial?”

“No, the band was playing it. I don't remember their name. I remember the whole song though.”

“You... memorized all of it?” I couldn't even believe what I was saying.

“I'm just going off the top of my head. But if you know the song, then it's perfect! Sing for me.”

“What?”

“I... So I only remember the chords. I don't really remember the lyrics. You sing it for me.” I didn't really get it, but I did understand the part about me singing.

“No.” I turned my head.

“Aw... C'mon~”

Sori grabbed my hand with her right hand and started playing the notes with her left hand again. I looked at her face. It was completely different from the one I saw at school. I saw those genuine eyes that only I knew; that smile she made only for me. I wished that she could always make this face. I wished that she didn't have to fake a smile even after having

fallen asleep as soon as she got home because she was that tired. I wanted to provide for her a hundred - no, a thousand more smiles. For that, I thought I could do anything.

I sang, tightly holding onto Sori's hand. I had the lyrics all memorized since I was a kid. But it was worlds below what Sori had done, learning the entire song just from hearing it once on TV. I kept looking at her and continued singing. Sori was focused on the keyboard. I looked at her face by her side, and it was as if I could sink myself into her. I could not believe I was living in the same world - in the same time as this person next to me. I could not believe that we could meet each other.

When the chorus came, she let go of my hand and started using her right hand to play another melody. Now she was completely focused on the performance. I kept singing by her side. I sang like my throat was going to break. It was embarrassing, but I thought it'd be fine if it was next to this girl. I wanted to believe that she also thought it'd be fine if I was the one hearing her performance.

My lips went dry and my eyelids became wet. For a brief moment, we became one. Changing each other, turning nothing into something.

“

*I guess everyone changes
Yeah, because you changed too
Looking at the way you changed
I also changed alongside*

“

- [“I Guess Everyone Changes”](#), Spring Summer Autumn Winter

7

We will now have a brief inquiry in sexuality.

When people feel love, they first doubt it. I, too, doubted my own feelings. Even more so since it was the first time it happened for me. How I finally realized the fact that my feelings toward Song Sori were 'romantic' was when I started having sexual desires about her. Some people might've had the opposite experience. Certainly, I've heard people say they realized it was pure love when they didn't feel any sexual desires for someone. But I've never felt sexual desires for men. And even amongst women - the few that existed - Song Sori might've been my first. (The choice of wording is deliberate.)

I also have a few words to say about this word, 'pure.' It is a word even more foolish than love. (Is there a term for words about things that don't exist?) Humans are not pure. We aren't clean either. Humans are dirty, rough, and treacherous. There's not a single instance where a human won't have a million different kinds of thoughts for any given situation. (Most of them sexual, of course.) Our bodies are hideous and constantly discharge secretions. We vomit for nothing at all and spew liquid from their eyes while watching images that mean nothing.

But something that does apply to humans is 'gentle.' The skin of humans is comprised of very thin cells. These cells aren't much useful besides for their regenerative purposes. Humans can die from the slightest wounds. Indeed, there isn't an animal more susceptible to death than humans. We don't even think of death as just a physical phenomenon. There's social death for when you're abandoned by comrades, historical death for when you're forgotten from memory, etc. They categorize it further, like that. This word, 'pure', then you can say, is a form of standard for when you meet this 'social death.' But humans are so mentally fragile that this veil known as 'purity' is soon torn apart.

Why do people enforce this concept of 'purity' unto 'sexuality'? It's like putting 'equality' together with 'capitalism.' It's an oxymoron. I've never fantasized about Song Sori's body as clean - in other words, 'unkempt.' (I'll try my best not to objectify her.) I imagined her dirty parts. It was difficult. Not because I've never seen them. But because I didn't want to. Though, that desire to shatter the glass wall was also an element of the fantasy. I imagined doing rough things with her. I got depressed even thinking about it. It was partly because it was unrealistic, but also because I didn't deserve to have those thoughts. I thought I knew her better than anybody else, that I treated her more human than anybody else; but in the end, I was treating her like an object as well. But Song Sori was the first person who I've thought of like that. So I was sure this was love. I kept thinking of these things, even though I didn't want to. Thus, love was something I couldn't help but follow, despite not wanting to.

Perhaps this'd be better described in literal terms. But first, a disclaimer. Even if this is from when I was young, as an adult now, going back to these memories and describing them is not a good look. So I will try my best to keep them short.

I first started looking at Song Sori in a sexual way when I saw her naked.

Perhaps I mentioned this before, but I was in charge of the attendance record. Which meant I was the one to lock the door when it was time for classes outside the classroom. And once it's done, I had to hurry back and unlock it before anyone else came. Nobody could even remember there was such a role after awhile. It wasn't necessary either, because it's not like there was anyone trying to sneak in during a class. But I did my task as it was given.

It was right before gym class. I waited in one of the stalls until everyone got out of the bathroom. I hated changing clothes in a dirty place like this. But most of all, I was disgusted by the thought of changing with everyone else. And I knew I would be the last one to go out. So no one ever noticed if I came to the gym a little late. I decided I would head back to the classroom to lock the doors and get changed at my leisure.

I opened the door and looked inside without thinking. Standing there was Song Sori, in a classroom that should've been empty. The lights were off and the sunlight was shining on her as the only source of light. She was taking her top off. It looked like she was done with her bottom already. I saw her breasts. The light was illuminating that part clearly. They were small. Why weren't there any underwear over them? I didn't have time to think about that. She lifted her arms up. I saw her armpits. Her body was clean. Song Sori's physique was petite. Like I could just grab her. Maybe it was because I saw her from afar. But every part about her was small.

(Oh my God. What am I even doing. Why am I alive. Fuck, what the hell am I doing with my life.)

Just up until then, Song Sori didn't know I was standing there. I tried to turn my head and walk away. To where? That's a good question. My gym outfit was in my bag. But is it even time to think about something like that? I wanted to run away. It still wasn't too late. I could still pretend I didn't see anything.

"Is that you, Sia? What are you doing there?"

I turned my head. Song Sori was already in front of my eyes. I almost screamed. She had her gym top in her hand. She probably saw me standing there, rolling my legs like a dumbass. When I saw Sori's body, everything else in the background went white. I held my breath. I couldn't see my face, but I was probably making a terrible one. A horrible, bright red face.

"You!" Now that I think about it, I did scream.

“Yeah?”

“Why... Why isn't there anything?” I chose the wrong words.

“What? Is that a joke?” Song Sori frowned. She didn't think it was funny.

“I can see everything!”

“Oh...” She didn't even try to cover them with her hands.. “Well, it's itchy.”

“Are you mad?!”

“What with you.”

“You really are.”

“Okay, Sia, you're being really...”

“Cover it! Cover!” I covered my eyes with my hands.

“Aren't you getting changed? You'll be late.”

“I'll do it in the bathroom!”

Sori shook her head. “...Weren't you just coming from the b-”

I slammed the door shut. The echoes spread across the empty hallway. I just sort of stood there. Even with the door between us, her image wouldn't leave my mind. So I closed my eyes. It was actually easier to imagine her with a black background. I wanted to scream. I kept running out of breath.

I ran from there. I ran away to the gym. I ran to control my thoughts. I ran until I couldn't think about anything. Everyone looked at me weirdly when I came in. But I couldn't care less about that. I still couldn't forget her body. In fact, I will not be able to for the rest of my life.

I told the teacher that I was sick and skipped that class. I sat on the floor, hearing the balls bounce. I saw Song Sori come in late, holding the attendance record. I ducked before we could meet our eyes. Throughout the whole class, I buried my face in my arms. When the bell rang, I looked to my side. The record was there. I waited until everyone left. When I arrived at the classroom with the record (which has the door key) everyone was standing in front of the door very confused. I ignored them and unlocked the door without saying anything. The next day, I had a fever and didn't go to school.

The fever was a lie. But my parents didn't care. My phone call with my teacher didn't last more than a few dozen seconds. That doesn't mean he was apathetic. He already knew of my 'condition' and would let stuff like this slide. I felt a great amount of guilt. I didn't really mind not going to school. But I felt responsible for who I've become, not even seeing Song Sori's face.

It was true that my body was heating up. I covered myself with sheets. I stared at the wall. I didn't want to think about anything. It was hard to sleep, like I had gone back to when I hadn't met Sori. I was anxious; my head filled with weird thoughts. I would have rather died.

I remembered her body. I moaned. My voice was muffled by the blanket. I felt hotter. When I tried to forget her body, I remembered her face. That was even more embarrassing. When I

purged the memory, I remembered the day before. Song Sori, who had ignorantly showed her beauty. I moved my fingers.

I heard a door opening. I don't know how much time had passed as I twisted my body around.

"Are you okay?"

It was Song Sori. She had her bag so she must've come from school. Are classes already over? I didn't even realize the time. I was glad I was staring at the wall, and not the door. Though, I didn't have much time to be glad.

I instinctively tried to cover my face but I soon realized how stupid I would look. I tried to look for a mirror. There wasn't such a thing in my room. Sori let herself into my room and shut the door. I tried to comb my hair with my nails. My last ditch effort. I think I heard Sori laughing.

"Oh, your mom let me in." Sori nonchalantly explained.

"What the hell, is she insane. Why are you here."

"Yeah, I came to give you these worksheets. Our class doesn't get many absences, you know. This is my first time doing something like this. I'm the class rep, so I gotta do it. Didya know that, by the way? That I'm the class representative?"

"Do not care. Is that actually the reason?"

"Actually? Yeah...?"

"Leave that there. Please go, now."

Sori put down the papers she was holding on a table. She looked around my room for a moment. Then she stopped after noticing my glare. I couldn't look at her anymore, so I started staring at the wall again.

"Are you mad at me, Sia?" Sori said.

"What."

"Did I do something wrong yesterday? You're always sorta like this but... Oh, I didn't mean it like that. You're usually not very talkative but I was worried after I heard you were sick. And it almost feels like you don't want to see me right now."

"That's not it. I want to be alone."

"Why?"

"It's none of your fucking business."

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry? Why would you... I..." My throat started to hurt and I couldn't finish the sentence.

"Huh? Are you alright?"

"This is all... Because I... You-"

I felt like crying. Even so, I turned my head to her. She was standing right in front of me. I could even smell her scent. Sori looked me in the eyes. Her eyebrows were lowered; she

looked incredibly sorrowful. What did she see in my eyes that made her so sad? I don't know. At that moment, I just wished she would go away. To leave my mind.

"I am sorry. Okay? So please come to school tomorrow. Alright?"

"Okay. Go now."

"Yeah. See you tomorrow, Sia."

I went inside the blanket again. I only heard the sound of a door closing. I could hear myself pant. I closed my eyes. Song Sori's voice lingered on, like a siren in my ears. I crouched my body like a cocoon. I felt my own sweat. My body was so hot that I couldn't think properly. But I couldn't sleep. I kept shutting my eyes. I could see her body. Her in a school uniform that I just saw and her naked which I saw yesterday - they overlapped in my eyes. I felt disgusted at myself for thinking such things.

My bottom hurt. I put my left hand in my chest and breathed roughly. I used that hand to fondle my breast. A simple manner of relief. Perhaps it was an accident in the middle of arousal, or plain instinct, but my fingers pinched my left nipple. I think I let out my voice. My left hand started touching my crotch. Electrical signals shocked through my body from my lower half. My body grew hotter beyond control. I panted. I remembered Song Sori's scent. The fuzzy image of her body from yesterday became clearer. I moved my fingers and unconsciously shouted her name. Her voice, her scent, and her body - her everything broke me down. In that moment, it was as if all of my shame and guilt were being washed away.

I learned this that day. If you orgasm while shouting the name of the person you love, it feels better than usual.

8

From then on, I was alone again. I sank in silence. I tried my best to maintain myself. I returned to my life. But inside I found an emotion that didn't exist before. I was lonely.

I consciously avoided Song Sori. I felt my body heat up when I saw her. I wasn't sure if it was embarrassment, lust, or both. I just knew to be ashamed of it. I avoided it, and that was to abandon Song Sori.

For some time, Sori tried all kinds of shit to get my attention. She'd pull my chair, or pop out of a corner. This one time, she just stared at me from the opposite end of a hallway. I just walked past her every time. As if we never knew each other. Song Sori would try to bother me in front of me, but she never drew attention to herself by talking to me. She never did anything to draw unwarranted attention to herself. In a way, that might have been the source of her natural, gravity-like pull. It was a power she was losing touch with the more time she spent with me. In due time, she was surrounded by others again, and seemed to give up on me.

I recovered myself but lost something else. It was like something that was always there for me had disappeared. There was a hole in my heart. Had I lost it? Or did someone take it away? Maybe it wasn't that I lost something, but rather I lost my own place.

When I sat somewhere, I unconsciously left one seat to my side. When there were long periods of silence, my right ear became itchy as if someone should whisper in it. As summer drew its end, the sun would cast a shadow on me, and I felt empty when there wasn't another shadow next to mine. Most of all, I couldn't stand listening to music on my own. I listened to the album "Revolver" by the Beatles repeatedly, and I could not hold back the tears every time "Here, There, and Everywhere" would play. Something is off.

Solitude is underrated. Solitude provides many benefits. It gives you time. Time to think. If more people spent time alone, we would surely see more innovations.

But to a human being, it is important to change according to the moment. Before I knew it, what was most important to me was for Song Sori to be at my side. And without her I was like a meaningless story, a worthless tool. My value had vanished.

What did I want at the end of the day? To go out with Song Sori? I liked her. Becoming aware of my instincts had brought me humiliation. Then would I be satisfied if I confirmed that she felt the same way about me? How long could we suspend our summer for? Could we continuously climb up and down the walls of 'friendship' and 'love' forever? What did I want? I crumbled down because I could not answer this question. I didn't know what I should do. I had become just like those that I made fun of for being obsessed with love. I knew what I had to do next. I knew I had to tell Sori my feelings. Even though the story was laid out before me, even though the song was written out for me, why could I not take that one step any faster? It's a foolish thing, to know that you should do something but to not do it.

It's not like this stalemate would maintain itself forever, though.

It happened in gym class. I felt sick so I just observed. But that was, again, half a lie. It was less that I felt sick, and more that my body was instinctively aware that my inner systems have been rendered dysfunctional. My breathing was unstable, and it was hard to walk. But this is the weird thing about broken machines. Once you get used to it, it's hard to internalize the fact that there's anything wrong with it. I had already turned my heartbreak into reality, so I didn't realize it. But my body knew.

I leaned over a wall, where there weren't people around. And I observed the other kids. Well, I say that, but mostly I looked at Song Sori. She was playing badminton with some girls not far away from me. She was smiling, running around as she sweat. Her shoulder-length hair was flying in the air. Her gym outfit was too large for her physique, so her small arms popped out of her sleeves like tiny sticks.

I watched Sori like that, looked away in case she noticed me, but then looked at her again. But it's not like there was anyone aware of me there. The only person who was disgusted with me was myself. When Song Sori was within my sights, I felt dirty. I wanted to gouge my eyes out. When those thoughts overcame me, I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, Song Sori was running from way over there. Flying like a butterfly.

I'm not sure how much time passed while I did that. Then at that moment - probably when I was looking at Sori again - something came flying toward me and hit me. (I learned later that it was a soccer ball.) It should have hit my left eye. The impact was massive enough that my sight was temporarily gone. I couldn't see, my mind was racing, and my head was in a state of total disarray. I could hear properly, at least. I heard someone's voice, and someone else's voice was layered on top of them. But so many voices were talking over each other that I soon became unable to recognize any of them. As that happened, an ear-piercing drone started to ring in my ears gradually. If that ringing was the instrumental, the mixture of voices were like chords. Before I knew it, I was panting madly as if I was suffocating. I held my aching left eye with my left hand and clenched my chest with my right hand.

I tried to see with my other eye to the best of my ability. Everything was blurry but I could tell somebody was standing in front of me. My head was aching, like a drill was piercing through

it. But I grit through the pain and raised my head to get a better look at them. As time passed, my sight cleared up more. It was some glasses wearing boy I didn't know. He seemed concerned. Him and the other boy around him seemed to be asking me something. I watched their lips move. But there were so many voices that I could not hear anything they said.

Then the voice of a large man roared throughout the gymnasium and everyone ceased to talk. At that moment, the ringing in my ears finally stopped as well. I lowered my hand from my eye. I could see what was happening more clearly. The boy was looking at someone coming from the side. It was probably the teacher. Then he turned to me, like he realized I was looking at him. That's when his words sent a chill down my spine. They were three words he had been repeating all this time - "I'm sorry."

When I heard that, every thought in my head halted. The ache in my head and eye also stopped. My increasingly unstable breathing, and the boy repeating the words "I'm sorry" - that was all I could hear. I clenched my fist. I'm not sure, but my body was reacting to these words with repulsion. I could feel my sweat drench me, and my eyes seemed to be leaking something too. I cannot express in words what kind of emotion I was going through at that time. On one side, it might've been that I was touched by the thought of anyone being worried for me. But most of all, I felt insulted. It was insulting and repulsive, to the point that I could not handle that empathy reached out to me. It was a truly irrational response. I was wrapped in a kind of sheer hatred which cannot be conveyed in language.

I don't know how much time there was in between when I heard the teacher's voice and when I punched the boy. I just know that beating him up felt like an eternity. I threw myself toward him, shaking my fists and screaming. With a murderous intent, only wanting to kill the person in front of me, I hit that boy whose name I didn't even know. This probably didn't even last 5 to 10 seconds. I was soon separated from the boy by the teacher. In my memory, the boy did not attack back at all. It didn't even seem like he was hurt at all on the outside. As I was dragged away by the teacher, I saw his face. He seemed more confused than anything else. I did not resist the teacher's arms, but my screaming voice was piercing through the eardrums of every single person inside that gymnasium that day.

When I calmed down somewhat, I looked around. Song Sori was there by my side. She was holding my arm with a concerned look on her face. She was trying to keep me still. I have no idea when she came up to me. Puzzled, I tried to say something to her, but my throat ached so much from shouting so much earlier. To my front, I could see the teacher talking to that boy. Then he looked at us and told Song Sori to take me to the nurse's office. Sori pulled my arm. "Let's go, Sia." We both exited the gymnasium.

The way to the nurse's office was quiet. Suffocatingly so. On our way there, Sori cleared her throat and asked me something. "Does it hurt?" I answered. "Yeah." She didn't ask anything until we arrived.

There wasn't anyone inside the nurse's office. Song Sori sat me down on a bed and went to find a towel. The only source of water was the water purifier, so she drenched the towel with

that and put it near my eye. I moaned a little. Then I took the towel away from her hand and told her I'll do it myself. I put the towel over my eye. Actually, I took it from her to wipe away my tears. But when the water ran by my face, it looked like I was crying even more.

Song Sori told me to wait here until the teacher comes back. I didn't say anything because I couldn't think of anything to say. She stared at me for a long time. It was so awkward that I couldn't think of anything but to look at her back. We stared at each other and Song Sori seemed to be more nervous than ever. She opened her mouth.

"Sia, did I do something wrong?"

I sighed. "Are you on about this again?"

"Yeah. Because I can't tell what you're thinking. Ever since we met, even right now. So I wish you'd just tell me. Do you have a problem with me?"

"No. You're not the problem..."

"What is it then? Why won't you talk with me?"

"That's on you too. You won't talk to me either."

"But it's awkward. Do you really need me to start the conversation? Is that all our relationship amounts to?"

Sori's voice became sharper as she questioned me.

"What do you mean by that?" I asked her.

"I think you are my friend, Sia. But I don't think you think of me as a friend. Is that right?"

"..." I couldn't think of an answer for a moment.

"If I'm not the problem, then what is it? I'll listen to anything. Honestly."

"You're not the problem. If anything, I am." I looked down at the floor.

"Huh? Why would you be?"

"That's..."

"You're always like this. Why do you always blame yourself? Why do you lie to yourself, and degrade yourself?"

Sori came near me and crouched down. And she breathed in deeply and said this.

"How can I get you to love yourself?"

"You are one to talk, Song Sori. You deceive yourself too. You have no right to lecture me on deception."

"What...?" Song Sori gasped and let out a sound. "How could you even say that? Sia..."

"What is it? Are you sick of me yet? Hard to be friends with someone like this? Then throw me away. It doesn't matter to you anyway."

"That's not true, Sia. I wanted to be friends with you. That will not change, no matter how hard you are to deal with."

"Every single problem you can find from me, I learned it all from you. The deception, the self deprecation; all of them."

"Can you even believe these words yourself? How could you even..."

"Am I wrong? Can you say you are any different from me?"

"..."

I kept staring at Sori. She wasn't saying anything. She looked anxious.

"That's right." I said.

Sori stretched her back and stood up. She looked to the side. Looking at her face from an angle, she had a face filled with many emotions; sadness, regret. I heard myself panting. It was hard to breathe properly.

"Then..."

Sori said after deep thought. I don't think she heard my rapid breathing.

"Why? Why would you... imitate me?"

"Because..."

"It is as you said. I am not admirable. Then why?"

"Why...?"

Ahh. I see. It was this moment. Now I remember.

My mind went blank. I realized with my instincts. I cannot answer this. Out of every question in the world, this is the one I mustn't answer. But I already could not think properly. My breathing grew louder. It was like the words would burst out of my chest. That was a bomb in the shape of language. And my voice was the match to light its fuse.

"Because I... love you!"

And then - kaboom. The sound of my love crumbling down.

I yelled, I cried out. Song Sori's eyes went open side, and she looked at me once again. What kind of face was she making? There was some shock in there - even looked confused. In a way, she looked hurt there. For me at the time, what that face meant wasn't of much concern to me. I continued to cry.

"I wanted to imitate you because I loved you. I wanted to listen to your music, become just like you. No, I wanted to BE your music. Just as my life was yours, I wanted your life to become mine as well."

I gulped. I wasn't even sure what exactly I was saying. I coughed and my throat ached. But I never stopped looking at her. My head started to hurt again, and there was a weird sound inside my ears.

"I... I..."

I? As the bomb went off at this very moment, I realized these feelings that I didn't even know of myself. It would have been nice if my confession didn't play out like a nervous breakdown.

In that moment, it was as if the world around me was breaking down. All of it was swallowed up in a black void; the only thing left standing was Song Sori. And, as I fell down in that bottomless pit, I was dedicating my dying words to her.

“I didn’t want us to just stay as friends.”

I could not think of anything more to say. No, I could not think of anything, period. I had thought my life was basically over at that point. I lowered my head and covered my face with my hands. My face was incredibly hot. That’s when I realized my body had been feverish since some time ago. My head was spinning a bit but that wasn’t a problem. I wanted to die. That’s a thought I’ve had at various points in my life, but never have I meant it so seriously than at that moment.

I heard Sori’s voice.

“I’m sorry.”

I heard a door opening and closing. I lowered my hands and looked to my front. She was gone. I could only hear my unbalanced breathing. I quietly cried more in that place. Then the nurse came by and looked at the mess that I was. She cleaned my face and applied something. She probably thought I was crying from having been hit.

That was the last conversation I ever had with Song Sori.

9

After that, we never met or spoke to each other again. We spent the rest of our high school freshman year not contacting each other. In our junior and senior years, we were never in the same class, so there was never a chance to run into her. Our lives carried on like nothing had happened - besides that one fateful summer of our 16th year.

I continued to be alone and Song Sori always kept around a population around her. Sometimes I would pass by her in the hallway. I always felt like having a panic attack. I deafened my unsynchronized breathing and walked past her, without looking back. For some reason we would always meet each other's eyes. It also felt like she was staring at me from my back. But that's just a hunch. I never saw her around besides those few moments.

From what I heard, her family's record store didn't seem to do all that well. Song Sori would start working at part-time jobs in her senior year, which is why I never even saw her in hallways in my final year of high school. After graduation I heard she went to a famous university. It doesn't really matter. I don't care what she's up to now.

I kept writing and listening to music. In my junior year I joined the newspaper club. The seniors there suggested to me that I should write some articles using my musical knowledge. There weren't that many younger members who actually wrote, so they were keen on me for showing talent - relatively speaking. Anyway, I would write two articles every month - one about current pop music and one about classic rock - and posted them on the school paper. The ones about pop music got pretty popular, to my surprise. In the process I opened up to some of the other members of the club. Even a few kids in my class would ask me about albums and such. Dare I say that I even made some friends. I continued to write stuff like that in my senior year and naturally I decided to study writing in college. Like I said before, at first I studied creative writing, but I decided to pursue journalism instead, using my experiences from high school.

My high school life might have ended without much fuss. But Song Sori continued to be an element of influence in my life. Music, which now has become nothing less than the reason for my life, only entered into my life because of her. Perhaps I continued writing because in the back of my mind I had a hope that she would one day read them.

I only knew Song Sori for that one summer I spent as a 16 year old, but she had changed me. (And, this should be obvious, but if it hadn't been for that time, I would have realized I was gay much later in my life.) We were never meant to be, but if Song Sori and I were fated to never get together, at least I want to treasure the music. I want to keep on living, never forgetting that summer memory. If my fate is to live in a world without Sori, I feel like I mustn't abandon the things that she has given me.

I wonder why. Maybe I want to show to someone the cool part of me that I never got to show off to her back then. Look! Love had existed all along! Perhaps I want to yell it out like that. It might be that I am too stubborn to not uphold my end of the promise we made to each other. That we would forget each other.

Is Song Sori keeping that promise too? What kind of life does she lead now? Did I change her just as much as she had changed me? To repeat myself, it no longer matters. No matter what she does, or even if she thinks of the same things; it's not my concern anymore. No matter how much you cry at a story, not one word will ever be changed. Stories can simply be kept. I don't think there's a problem with me being the only one to keep this promise.

Now I understand. You can't save yourself through other people. Song Sori couldn't save me, but through her, I could save myself. Music became my saviour, just as it was hers.

The heartbreak I went through at 16; the love, the music - it's been 10 years since then. And in my ears I can still hear that music. I think my life is fated to be dyed with that music.

10

I wrote a song the other day. I learned how to play the piano in college, but it turned out to be useless. It was simply my last attempt at holding onto the memories of Song Sori's voice.

But I had a keyboard that I got from an older music major guy at the time. But I've not touched it since graduation. I was too busy writing for a living; I had no time to consider playing music. But whether I played or composed music, it would only remind me of Song Sori, which made me feel sick. (At myself, of course.)

I don't know what came over me that day. It was the middle of the night and I could not sleep. I got up and made some coffee. I brought the cup over to my work table and sat down. If I couldn't sleep, I might as well try to write something. It had been quite awhile since I wrote anything that wasn't for work. But nothing came to my mind. I turned on the lights and started cleaning my room, to tire myself out. That's when I found that keyboard that I had trashed away in my closet.

Giving up halfway in the middle of sleeping makes a person do some idiotic things. I grabbed the keyboard and wiped the dust off. I didn't have a stand so I just put it on my desk. It was one of those cheap ass ones with only 49 keys. And it still took up most of the space on my table. I connected it to electricity and did a test to hear if sound actually came out. It sounded pretty clear. I mean, since I hadn't touched it for so long, that also meant there wasn't anything that could've broken it.

I started playing a few songs I briefly learned in college. I can't explain how my fingers still knew the notes. Debussy, Chopin, Puccini... Then I started playing "O Mio Babbino Caro" without thinking about it. It was such a familiar melody that I had to stop after a bit. My arms started to sweat. I had to control my breathing. I needed to hear something else. Haha, I mumbled to myself. I should've picked up a few David Bowie tracks.

I tried to write a song but had no idea where to start. I only knew rock music anyway, so a keyboard wasn't of use to me. Could I even play a power chord with this keyboard that could barely fit two of my palms? That's when I thought. I wonder how a keyboard would sound if you play something a guitar is supposed to play. I randomly picked an A flat major key. And I played a IV chord like a guitar would play an arpeggio. It sounded alright. I soon came up with the melody. But what about lyrics? Would I even need lyrics. Of course I do, it's rock 'n' roll. I wanted to imitate the rock music that had killed me and saved me. If I literally write for a living but can't even put words to this tune, what am I supposed to be?

I didn't write sheet music. I couldn't really read it back then. I started writing down the melody and the lyrics on my laptop. I went back to the 16th summer of my life. For some reason, my breathing began to calm down. I felt chill. I closed my eyes and wrote down that summer.

I lied to myself
That this summer was never going to end

I looked out of the cafe window. Wind was blowing, sweeping away the leaflets. Looks like it's already autumn.

I sighed. In front of me, Jihye sipped her coffee, looking at her smartphone. After that alumni meet, we hang out every once in a while like this. It's mostly her talking off on her own, while I listen. When she says, "Do you know what the producer said this time?", I tell her, "No," and she takes care of the rest. She says, today he told me to do this, he totally doesn't see me as human, etc. Sometimes she tries to dig into my life and I tell her a few things. I don't know why I keep meeting up with this chick.

"Hey. Are you listening, Lee Sia?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck. You totally aren't. Your eyes give it away."

"If you can tell, why did you call me?"

"Um... Cause my therapist upped her rates recently?" Jihye changed her voice to a cutesy tone.

"I don't intend on taking care of your mental health for you."

"I guess I'm the dumb one for expecting that from you."

"What's that supposed to mean." I grind my teeth. This bitch...

"Sigh... Even taking my meds feels like work. Must be the dilemma of the modern man."

"Dilemma of the what?"

"You know, like. Getting a late paycheck."

"Or a resentment toward the bourgeoisie."

"Yeah! At least things are funny with you around."

"Like I said, what does that mean?"

I looked at Jihye. Her lively face seemed to have disappeared. She stirred her cup with a little spoon and continued talking.

"But you know. You're one of the good ones, Lee Sia."

"What?"

"Not many people around stick around with me this long."

"Oh really."

"Yup. Eventually they go, I have an appointment this or, I'm busy today that. Shit, they think I wouldn't know?"

"You are more troublesome than one would think, yeah."

"...you think I wouldn't..." Jihye's face goes dark.

"That's why you don't have a boyfriend."

"Goddamnit. Yeah, I wouldn't be here sitting around with your ass if I had a boyfriend."

"That's what I told you. It's because you hang out with someone like me."

Jihye kept mumbling something to herself, her coffee swirling round and round, but I cannot hear her voice. I drank my cup. Bitter, and most of all, lukewarm. It was terrible. I put it down and sighed. The inside of my mouth felt like death. It was a little cold in here too.

“Ah~ I want to drink.”

“Already?”

“Hey, it’s 6. 6 in the EVENING? A maiden’s time for war.”

“You’re insane. Don’t say that in a coffee shop. It’s getting bitter cause of you.”

“You’re not coming? I might call some of the other guys.”

“Nope. No. I can’t drink anything stronger than root beer.”

Jihye heard this and cackled. She pulled up her phone and kept swiping down. Probably was going through her contacts. I heard her talking to herself, “this guy won’t come today”, “she never actually shows up”.

“Oh, maybe I should call Sori...”

If I still had the coffee in my mouth, I would have spat it out. Instead I accidentally hit the table. When a loud thump went out, Jihye got surprised and looked at me.

“What’s up...?”

“That name. What?”

“Huh? Sori, Song Sori?”

I could not hide the shaking in my voice any longer. “Song Sori!”

“Hey, what the hell, Lee Sia. I’m scared here.”

“Really? You mean it’s Song Sori?”

“Yeah...? I met her because of some work I did in uni...”

“What?”

“Calm. Down. Let me finish.”

I leaned back and pretended to ‘chill out.’

“I met her in a bar a few days ago. She drank like a whale... Didn’t come across as the type, you know. Anyway, I was thinking I’d meet up with her there... again.”

Jihye faked her laughter. She stared at me. I touched my face with my fingers. I probably looked absolutely hilarious. I looked out of the window again. I thought, what is this unbelievable situation? Should I ask more? Maybe ask for her number? Holy shit.

Question I thought I had left behind began creeping into my head again. My head began to overflow with thoughts, and it ached. I felt like I was 16 all over again. But when I opened my mouth, what came out was a question I never thought about at all.

“Is she... Did she seem fine?”

“Huh?” Jihye thought for a second. “Well, it didn’t look like she was drinking out of sorrow. She just seemed to like it. She seemed better off than you right now.”

Weirdly, these words that Jihye meant as an insult only comforted me. I sighed in relief. The headache was gone. I one-shotted my remaining coffee, to numb my body.

“That is all?” Jihye asked.

“Yes.”

“It sounds like you heard the name of your high school sweetheart again.”

It was hard to contain my laughter. “Even so, it’s fine.”

“...I guess that’s that then.”

Jihye frowned. I think she felt as if she couldn’t do much for me. Even though all I needed were those words of hers. But, after fiddling with her fingers, Jihye had this to say.

“I wanna say this at least. The bar is a little further down the street from here. There’s a little sign in English, and inside there’s that... the thing that plays music. That’s the place.”

I didn’t say anything back. I only nodded. Jihye lightened up her face. She looked satisfied now.

For the next 30 minutes, we didn’t say anything to each other. Then we went on our way. Not that different from usual. But during that time, she did tell me one thing. It was when I was humming something. It was a melody I had come up with yesterday. “Sinless people / Green trees / It’d be nice if they all just died.”

“What the hell is that cringy tune.

“What?” I was surprised.

“It’s weirdly so you, but it’s still shocking.”

“I...” Before I continued, I took another breath. “It’s a song I wrote.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm, I see...”

For the first time in my life, I was hearing someone else’s opinion about my music. I wasn’t sure how to respond. It didn’t seem like Jihye was awfully interested in music. It just seemed like she was as shocked as me when she heard me singing. And it didn’t seem like she didn’t want to pry in further, because that conversation ended after she said this one thing.

“Well... Still, it’s very you.”

I bought a guitar. I must be crazy. (I guess I am, medically speaking.) 'I just have to starve in the morning for a few months.' That was my justification. But I knew. I knew I have never gotten my paycheck on time in the last 6 months. (Dilemma of the modern man... I suppose Jihye was right about one thing.) I feel like a girl that ran from home to become a street singer. But I don't have a home to come back to, or a mother to take me in. All I have is this one room apartment, with a moldy ceiling and a lightbulb that goes out every 3 days.

It was a Tuesday afternoon and I wasn't busy. I sat on my work table and played guitar. Since a week ago, I started learning how to play chords using online resources. They were all quite easy, except for the F chord. While I was thinking 'maybe I have talent', I realized all the chord progressions I've been playing were from songs I've heard a hundred times before.

Hmm. Nothing I can do about it. Not like anyone's listening, anyway. I talked to myself. I started singing a melody. The melody itself came naturally. But it was the words that always puzzled me. After I heard about Sori from Jihye, it became hard to think about her again. I kept playing the same chords, the same melody. When I got sick of it, I put the guitar away.

I moved my eyes onto the closet I found the keyboard in. Before I knew it, I was standing in that veranda again. I once again opened that Pandora's box. There was also my high school uniform and the Spring Summer Autumn Winter CD I got from my parents too. As I searched inside, I played the CD on my laptop. A song from the album started to play at random. "I can only feel the deep scent of nostalgia..."

I finally found the notebook. This was what I was looking for all along. I didn't want to actually find it so I didn't think about it. I cleared the dust off and opened it. Poems, written with my tears. It perfectly bore the handwriting of my 16 year old self.

I moved to somewhere with better ventilation. I saw that my face got red in the mirror. I cringed as I read these decade old poems. The biggest problem, I found, was that I could still relate to them. If it felt like someone completely different had written them, it would've been easier to take in. But I was mad and disappointed in myself for not having changed much.

There was one poem that was particularly noteworthy. It was the one that I wrote a few days before my last conversation with Song Sori, before the end of summer. It wasn't all that special, beside the fact that it completely synced with the melody in my head. But the song being played in the background was the same song that I was thinking of as I'd written it; 'The Road I Walk' by Spring Summer Autumn Winter.

There is a word in English, 'serendipity.' A string of unintended, coincidental discoveries.

I sat down in my chair again. I picked up the guitar. After drawing one breath, I started playing it. My voice and tongue soon followed the rhythm.

*Spring, summer, autumn and winter
And the one which hurt the most
Summer, stuck as memories
I can only feel the deep scent of nostalgia*

I wrote another song on the guitar. It's called 'The Smiths and The Cure'. Though, The Pixies are actually my favorite.

Friday, 10 PM. Something happened at editorial and I had to get off late. It was only a few years ago that we worked at home. Nowadays writing is all done through emails. Even at the editorial department building, you don't really talk to people. You just do your own work. This is a good thing. But now I realize why they make us come there. You can't escape that building even when they increase the working hours. I'm considered a senior in the team, but even I can't go against the boss.

A chilly November wind blew over me. I blew a breath. A white breath spread across the busy city streets. The city lights were shining as if to blind me. I walked and passed by the crowds. I grabbed tight the sleeves of my jacket. The cold weather was headache-inducing.

I looked around. For some reason it had felt like home was only getting farther away. I didn't feel like laying down, I felt like drinking. Water was sorely needed. I guess you get thirsty in days like these. I searched for buildings on both sides. I hated bars but they were the only places that were still open. I decided to head for the nearest one to my right. The sign read 'Stardust'. Fancy name, but the door was an incredibly old looking sliding door. It looked so worn that you could see everything inside; the material was that transparent.

The bar was much more comfortable and larger than it seemed on the outside. There were quite a few people too. Half of the tables were probably filled. I went further in. To my right was the counter, which had chairs too. A few people sat across from each other and drank alone. I was thinking I should sit there too. There was a guy behind the counter, silently cleaning a glass. I already wanted to pay just for the heat provided. I kept looking around.

The men closest to my left were laughing up a storm. They had a face containing nostalgia for an era that the other bar goers had forgotten. When they twisted their face, I could not tell if they were smiling or crying. Surprisingly, on the table next to the counter, a few boys and girls that seemed high school aged were sitting. Their faces were bright red, like today was their first day of drinking. They weren't as loud as the men, but in particular the voices of the girls were considerably big. They touched each other, bonked their heads, and slapped their cheeks, making a mess. I didn't even realize I was smirking at them.

I went further to the back, where I saw a certain table. Sitting on the corner was one woman. Her seat could've filled 3 to 4 people, but she sat in the middle, alone. Her head was stuck

on the table. She seemed to be sleeping. Her hair was long, and was spread out across the table. She was wearing a suit, and probably had left from work.

I stood there and watched the woman. She raised her head. She cleaned her eyes. Both of them were red and swollen. She sighed, and turned her head to look around. Then she tried to stand up. That's when she looked to her front and noticed me. She stopped standing. She kept staring at me. Her hair was all messy and covered her face, but I could see her eyes. We kept staring at each other. She tilted her head, and frowned. She cleared her hair out of the way. Then she touched her face, as if washing it, then looked back at me. Her jaws dropped.

"Sia? Lee Sia?"

Her voice was clear and pretty. I didn't expect from someone who had just woken up from drinking. It was like a teenager's voice. Young and fragile sounding. That's right, it was one I had heard before. I could get a closer look at the woman's face now. Droopy eyebrows, smooth lips. I could tell her height since she was halfway standing up. Short. So short. We were a little apart, but her height was so cute that the suit she's wearing seemed comical. I think there is only one woman in the world who could've captivated me this much.

This woman was Song Sori.

Song Sori had changed. But once she started talking, she felt just like that 16 year old girl again. It was almost scary.

Song Sori started shedding tears even before I could answer her. I was taken aback and went to her side. She asked me if I was really here, crying. I wasn't sure what to do. I grabbed her shoulder and sat her down. She kept making these sounds while crying; not sure if they were words or moans or not. I just had a hunch, and gave her a half-filled glass of beer. She emptied it in one go. Her face blushed again. She ordered two more glasses in a loud voice. I looked at a clock, and sat next to her.

"Sia... I'm so glad... I met you ag..."

She got hiccups and could not finish the sentence. I gave her some backslaps. I still had not said anything.

"You... You remember me, right?" She asked.

"Of course. I couldn't forget you. Song Sori."

She heard this and laughed. She had looked so wretched and depressed just a moment ago, and there she was making a face with such honest happiness. I felt awkward. I even thought - shouldn't our places be switched?

"Didya think a lot about me?" She said, after sipping on some beer.

"...That is what you ask after meeting again in 10 years?"

"Hee hee hee." This laughter is the same as always. "You've gotten good at this, haven't you?"

"Then, what are you going to say if I told you that I did? Creeped out, for sure."

"I'd be happy."

Song Sori grabbed a glass to drink, looked at my face in the middle of it, and put the glass down. Then she smiled at me. I could not help but laugh after that. Maybe I hadn't changed at all in these 10 years. But I was no longer the self-serious girl I was. It's not an embarrassing thing to express joy when you feel joyous. I felt joy when Sori said that.

"Then did you think about me?" I asked.

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" I frowned.

"I did! Sure did." Song Sori laughed, banging the table.

The table shook, which made the other glass spill out. I looked at the glass. Earlier, Sori said that she'd pay for it all. That wasn't really the problem. I don't particularly like alcohol. But I hate getting drunk. Any pros to drinking is severely outweighed by the cons of a hangover. On principle I try not to drink alcohol even at staff get-togethers. Same with beer.

I grabbed the glass of beer and downed it. My throat felt great. I finally remembered after drinking it that I first came to this bar because I was thirsty. I felt my face blushing. Drowsiness came after. I sent the cold beer down my throat again to wake up from it.

Song Sori was looking at her phone. She was going through a bunch of pictures. She deleted any that had a certain man in it. Sometimes it was him just by himself, or sometimes he was smiling beside Song Sori. She looked at each of these for 1 or 2 seconds and deleted them without remorse. It was as if she was recollecting every moment inside each of those pictures, only then to banish them from her mind. Her face didn't seem to show any emotion while doing this. But I saw great rigour in that face.

She stayed a little longer at this one picture that simply showed the man's back.

"Who is that?" I asked.

Song Sori did not say anything for quite some time.

"He was... my boyfriend."

She drank some more beer and continued.

"He packed his bag yesterday. And he left. I don't... don't even know what to think."

"Maybe you don't really need to."

“He told me he likes someone else now. First time I heard of it. Said we should stop before he cheats on me.”

“...” I groaned.

“I feel like I need to talk to him. But now, I don’t know. I just... don’t want to remember anything.”

There was pain in Song Sori’s voice. I heard that pain and felt hurt myself. It wouldn’t have been too weird if I had cheered internally. But I wasn’t hurt because I still liked her. I just didn’t want to see Song Sori in such pain. If I could lessen that pain for her, I could do anything. I don’t care about myself. I don’t need Song Sori. If only she’d smile once again...

“You know, he proposed to me.”

“The guy did?”

“Woke me up in the middle of the night. Just to tell me that. That was one year ago.”

“...” I also drank.

“I guess life doesn’t just go the way you want it to all the time. Everyone loved me when I was a kid... For absolutely no reason at all. Maybe I grew too used to it. Got too arrogant.”

“Yeah. I know well. I know the feeling.”

It was true. The perpetrator was sitting right in front of me. Would Song Sori be comforted by these words? I’m an adult and I still have no idea about the way people think. But, perhaps, the way I squirmed to help her despite that is what was truly human. I asked Song Sori.

“Did you like him?”

“Yeah. But...” Her voice lost strength. “Maybe it was just me.”

“No.”

“Huh?” Song Sori looked at me.

“I’m sure that guy loved you too. But people change. That’s... you can’t blame anyone for that.”

Song Sori turned her head and laid her head down on the table. I’m not sure what I was thinking, but I patted her head. She didn’t show much reaction. So I kept doing it. Her hair was so silky. It was a little messy because it hadn’t been combed in awhile, but there was such a beautiful feel to it. I kept patting her until I emptied my drink.

When we got out of the bar, it was well past midnight. Song Sori stumbled, and I helped her stand. But Song Sori pushed me aside and started going on ahead. She hummed as she walked. It was a familiar tune but the lyrics were so mumbled to the point of unrecognizable. I looked at her back and laughed. I followed her.

My phone rang. It was from the chief editor. I picked it up. He told me, great work. Then he started through the articles I gave ok to, pointing stuff out. He told me to fix them by morning. I just kept saying ‘I got it’. I wasn’t paying attention. I told him ‘yes’ and accidentally let out a

hiccup. The boss laughed, asking me if I was drunk. It came across as a surprise to him. I didn't answer. He told me, take care then; also, sorry. Then he hung up. I wanted to spit.

Song Sori was standing in front of me. She stared at me. A bit similar to when we just met before. I told her I was sorry, that it was a call from work.

"Beatles..."

She seemed a little out of it when she said that. It was true. My ringtone was the Beatles song "Here, There and Everywhere". For what reason did I have the first song Sori ever made me listen as my ringtone after all this time? Perhaps my love was more lingering than I had thought. Or maybe it was my final will, of never wanting to forget my memories of Song Sori while also letting them go. There is always the possibility it's just a very good song.

"You still listen? To the Beatles." She asked.

"Just the Beatles? I still listen to everything you let me hear."

"Oh... oh... Alright..."

Song Sori wept quietly. She wiped her tears. I looked around us. There wasn't anyone but us on this road. No houses. The stores were closed too. This should have eased my mind. But I could not relax. Is she crying of joy? It looked like it. What am I supposed to do then? I wanted to make this girl smile again, no matter what.

"You know, cause of those songs, now I write songs myself... Haha. I thought that was funny." To be honest, I wasn't sure what I was saying. I had no idea if it was actually funny or not.

"Write songs? You, Sia?" Sia raised her head. She was crying just a few seconds ago, but her eyes were perked up again.

"Huh? Yeah..." Her reaction was a little stronger than I expected so I didn't know what to do.

"Let me hear."

"What?"

"You have to let me hear it. Let me."

Song Sori came right up to me. She kept looking at my eyes. She grabbed my hands. Her white breath even reached up to me. I couldn't win against her. She had stopped crying, so I thought I must've done something right.

I turned on the phone in my hand again. I searched for the demo I recorded that morning. It only had the acoustic guitar arrangement. The melody was in my head. I had it saved so I could come up with the lyrics at work today. And I did.

I fumbled and played the demo. I increased the volume a little and put it right next to Song Sori's face. The acoustic guitar sound decorated the winds. Sori listened to it intently.

"Does this have lyrics?" Song Sori said, as if she already knew the answer.

“Huh? Yeah.”

“Sing it for me.”

“What? No!” My answer was obvious.

“Sing it for me. Please. Just like that time when you sang at my house.”

I hesitated for a moment. My gut reaction was “no”. But why? Because I am embarrassed? What kind of childish excuse is that? I looked at Song Sori. She was asking me, looking straight into my eyes. That’s when I finally realized. That I could not deny this woman. I was already determined to do anything for her happiness. The person I love was pleading with me to hear my voice. How dare do I say no to her!

I closed my eyes. The first verse had already passed. I started singing from the chorus. I had to sing in a lower register than what I had in my head. I placed my hand on my chest, feeling the vibrations and controlling my tone. I held onto Sori’s hand with my other hand. My voice was shaking from the cold winds. With every line I sang, I let out another breath. I kept singing, even as my lips froze. I sang for my only audience. Song Sori held my hand tighter. I also held hers stronger. I sang without stopping. That song seemed to spread out across the night sky. The music turned into air, and disappeared, then became sound again.

*When we closed our eyes and sank ourselves into the music
That moment was our greatest masterpiece*

Afterword - 'Summer Heartbreak Postmortem'

The history of 'Summer Heartbreak' the novel began the same day as 'Summer Heartbreak' the album. I usually work like this. While making an album, I write a story based on the music, or I start making a song while writing a novel about the same thing. For me, these mediums are nothing more than tools of storytelling, meant to convey these stories. So if one does a better job than the other, it is obvious that I will use that one instead.

Since it's like that, it's not a bad idea to listen to the album while reading this work. I used excerpts from the novel as lyrics for the album, and added lyrics from the album to the prose of the novel. But the album doesn't tell the same exact story as this novel. The chronology of events are a little jumbled. Albums, by nature, find it hard to tell a straightforward story, unless it's a full-on musical. So I switched around the tracklist a lot while composing the songs. What is most of all important to an album is the flow of the music. In a way, the 'novel' of Summer Heartbreak tells the story of Sia the 16 year old, while the 'album' of Summer Heartbreak tells the story of Sia the adult. It's the same story but from a different angle, in a different context. Instead of looking at the album as a musicalization of the novel or looking at the novel as a novelization of the album, it's better to say they are the same story but created under different toolsets.

This is how I ended up creating this work. It was the summer of 2019. I was put in some 'media creation' club. It would only last for one month. I was tasked with creating a 'video media' in this class. Anything was fine as long as it was a video. A film, a vlog, a let's play, etc. I had always wanted to make a music video using my music. So it seemed like a tall order, but I decided to create a music video. I didn't really have a song I liked among the many I had made in the past. So I decided to write a new one for the video. That song is 'Rock 'n' roll saved my life', written on the last day of May.

When I composed this song, the storyboard of the video was more or less already there in my head. But it's not like I intended for there to be a certain story while writing the lyrics. I just wanted to express 'the mindset of a girl heartbroken over a love not meant to be.' At this time, the 'you' in the song might've even been a boy. I hadn't decided yet.

But as I started drawing the storyboard for real, these two characters started to take shape. I wrote a few more tracks in the process. 'Deep Nostalgia' and 'The Smith and The Cure' were among these songs. (These were actually the first songs I wrote, which is why these are the tracks Sia writes in chapter 10.) So naturally I started writing this novel to flesh out these characters. This is the origin of Summer Heartbreak.

I was put in a tricky situation. The music video, the album, the novel - I had started working on all three at once. I shifted most of my time to making the album, which I believed I could finish the quickest. This may sound strange. Typically, people are under the impression that creating an album containing 30-40 minutes of music is quite a time-consuming project. But

at that time I had already been making music by myself for more than 3 years, so it was easily where I was the most confident. I had written books for much longer than that but I hadn't really completed anything recently, and the music video was literally my first voyage into the medium. So I focused on making the album. This was around June 17.

After 6 weeks of production, Summer Heartbreak the album was done. I self-published the album on bandcamp.com on the 9th of August. At the time the media creation class was already over and I had not finished my task in time. But the album garnered more reaction than I expected. It was the first album where I wrote the lyrics only in Korean, but my foreigner friends showed passionate responses. They were fascinated by the sound of western emo music akin to 'weezer' combined with the sensibilities of Japanese indie rock a la 'Yorushika' or 'supercell'. (Though in actuality, while all of those were inspirations, my biggest influence was 'Shinsei Kamattechan'.)

The album was out so I started working on the music video again. And after 1 month I completed the MV for Rock 'n' roll saved my life. This MV was mostly inspired by Yorushika's MV for '言って(Itte)'. I think it came out better than I thought. Once I was finally done with the video I sent a mail to the teacher of that media creation class, who was quite impressed. She told me there weren't many kids who completed something of this level. (I honestly don't want to fill this afterword with self indulgence, but that's what I heard.)

The only thing left to finish was the novel. I tend to work fast with music. Give me 15 minutes and I can compose you a song, give me a day and I'll complete the instrumental, and with one more week I can write lyrics and record vocals. I don't really have quality standards when it comes to music so I tend to just make it and try posting it on the internet. But writing is different. I've written stories since I was very young but speed was never on my side. Writing a few dozen words can take weeks; and of course, even that I throw away most of the time and start writing it all over again. No matter how hard I try, it seems like writing will always just be a slow activity for me.

So after around 16 months of writing, I completed this novel. The album took 6 weeks, the music video took around 2, and this novel took about 64 weeks.

I don't have much to add on the story itself. I just wanted to write the kind of GL/Yuri story that I like. Painful but bittersweet, and obnoxious but relatable - that's the kind of story I wanted to tell with these two girls. But I wanted to avoid the cliché of 'a bright cheery girl saves the depressed girl'. In fact, Song Sori never does save Lee Sia. One can't go on hoping for other people to save you. In that situation, the best you can hope for that person is to hope they can save themselves. (This is something taken from Bakemonogatari. "You're the one who can save yourself.")

As I wrote this book, I wondered whether I should use a first person narrator or a third person narrator. If I had used third person, I think it would have read better. Some of the more obnoxious parts wouldn't be there as well. But I thought Sia was this novel itself. Her thoughts, her state of mind, and her worldview - without these things, the novel would lose what made it special. It was actually very difficult to write from Lee Sia's perspective, and

that must've been one of the main reasons why this book took so long to write. She's truly an unstable mind beyond the point of tolerable. The pain you felt reading it cannot compare to the pain I felt while writing it. So I thought it was important to begin and end the story from the perspective of her as an adult. No matter how lost you were as a little lesbian girl, in the end everyone grows up.

Writing the ending is also one of the reasons why this took long. Chapter 2 to chapter 9 were all plotted in my head from the moment I had finished the album. The meeting of Sia and Sori, the summer they spent together, and the day they broke up. All I had to do was just put these moments in my head to words. (Of course, the version you read is the draft created after countless revisions.) But I felt the story didn't feel complete with just that. So I decided to open the first chapter from the perspective of Sia as an adult, making the 'main' story part of a frame story. But I honestly had no idea how I'd end it. I kinda think I could've just ended it at chapter 9. But even though I like bitter endings, I thought this was the 'empty' kind of bitter. It was like the storyteller wanted to stop during the middle so they made up an ending along the way. That's why I decided to write chapter 10.

To be honest, I could write another whole novel from chapter 10. The story of adult Sia and adult Sori trying to rekindle their once innocent relationship again while they live as adult women. If I wanted this book to be a full length novel, I could've written that story. It would take another 16 months, of course. I still could write that story. But then it would feel like the first half only exists to prop up the second half. Not that it's wrong to structure a story that way - but I think this story is just fine enough with 28,000 words.

Summer Heartbreak is essentially my debut novel. I've been writing as a hobby for over 10 years now, but under numerous accounts and pen names. And none of the stuff I wrote back then is any good. I've mostly released music under this JohnJRenns name, and I've only posted a few short stories and a serial on hiatus. (It's a romance story called 'Too Much'. I think I'll one day wrap that up. Though I don't really like it...) Summer Heartbreak is not a perfect story but I think it's a good introductory piece to JohnJRenns as an author. I hope you enjoyed it. And I hope to create more GL stories under this name in the future. And if you want to, please listen to my music as well. I seem to have more talent in music than literature, so that's what I make most of the time. I plan to release an album every month for the year of 2021. I welcome you to look forward to that.