The Human Condition

Stories on Love and Loss

By Sarah Watkins
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Follow Where You Go

Louis was so, so in love with him, and Harry felt the same way towards Louis. He was sure of it, right until the very moment Harry left.

It started laced within friendship, even from the days of digging in a sandbox together. Louis had stolen Harry’s orange tabby Beanie Baby and had dug a hole in the sandbox to hide it. Later on, Harry would tell their friends Louis always tried to be the boss on the playground, and stealing Mr. Mittens was his way of asserting that. Louis knew better. Even at five, he’d do anything for a sliver of Harry’s attention.

Louis had been an only child in a household run by a single mother that worked three jobs. Growing up was lonely at times. But, Harry had swooped in and taken him in as his own. His mother, Anne, showed him nothing but kindness. Even Harry’s sister, two years older and far too aloof to be associated with his antics, always seemed to have a small smile reserved for him. Harry had become his best friend, completely and without question.

Highschool came and Harry started a band. He booked gigs at the local coffee shops and always had a notepad to scribble lyrics in on hand. His music, and his kindness, made him countless friends. But he never left Louis behind. Harry always had some way of reminding Louis of how loved he was. Louis tried his best to make Harry feel the same. He wasn’t sure if it quite worked. But he did see a dimpled smile crawl across Harry’s face every time he saw Louis front and center at a show, no matter how small the venue.

Neither of them could quite put a finger on when things between them changed from platonic love to something more. All they knew was that one day, after the rush of playing an
encore at a full club, Harry kissed Louis slow and sweet and wound him tight in a hug without a second thought.

Louis left their small town for college. He traded small fields and familiar streets of Leavenworth for the buzz of Seattle with its bustling strangers and taxi cabs to take them anywhere they wanted to go. Harry moved with him without even being asked. When Louis asked him if he was sure, Harry’s laugh was loud and gentle all at once, “You’re my home, Lou. I’m always gonna go where you go.”

The city proved to help Harry’s music career. More clubs meant more people and more money. He worked at a bakery in the mornings and played gigs at different venues in the evenings. He always had little burns on his arms from the ovens and a sore throat in the morning. He never really seemed to get enough sleep and he was sure the crowds were starting to affect his hearing just a tad. But, he was happy. He was doing what he loved and had someone he loved to come home to at night.

Louis was still there at every show, no matter how many classes he’d had that day or what papers were due in the morning. Harry would always find him in the crowd. He’d moved away from the front of the stage now. He left the front row to the regulars that actually paid to come see Harry. But he was still there, hovering by the bar or humming along backstage.

By Louis’ junior year, Harry had found a bandmate with just as much passion and nearly as much talent, a bassist named Luke. He’d been playing bars in town for years longer than Harry and knew all the right people. Suddenly, Harry went from opening early in the night, to being the headlining act beside Luke. He was thriving in it.
Louis had always known that Harry would make it big. His voice was soothing and soft, with a quiet rasp that could make your hair stand on edge. Louis would beg for a song to lull him to sleep, entangled in Harry’s arms. Harry blushed and shook out his curls with nervous hands, but always eventually gave in.

Louis whispered to him late at night, in bed when they couldn’t sleep. He always promised that Harry would be discovered, sell out arenas, have platinum records, millions of fans. Harry would always get that shy little smile, dimples just peeking out. His emerald eyes would glimmer, even in the dark with all the blinds shut. Louis could remember the feel of the gentle kiss Harry would place on his forehead, the ghosts of Harry’s thumbs on his hips. “I’m not going anywhere without you,” Harry would promise.

At least one of their promises held true.

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Louis’ feet shuffled across the cool tiles of the kitchen. His mind was foggy and muddled as the morning dew still lingered outside. His eyes were half lidded and heavy as his body went through the motions of making tea. His gaze swam slowly away from the kettle to a small T.V. among piles of ungraded monologues. His finger flicked at the buttons on the remote without a second thought. He sighed as the fuzzy frame came into focus, revealing a blonde morning show host, far too peppy for six in the morning. He rolled his eyes, instead focusing back on the stovetop.

Bartholomew leapt to the counter, rubbing against Louis’ arm as he shook kibble into a small dish. A smile tugged at Louis lips as the orange paws of the tabby swatted a stray piece of food to the ground.
“So, you boys have been incredibly successful. You’re on your second tour now. You’ve sold thousands of copies of your albums. But, is there anything you regret? Anything you would change?” The blonde’s high pitched voice chimed throughout the small room.

“I think I’m quite happy with how things have turned out. Not really any complaints here.”


Louis had become good friends with Luke over the course of the few years he’d known him. He was a nice enough guy, moral and grounded. He was also the one behind the wheel the day Harry left town without a second glance.

Louis lurched forward to turn the screen off, but, froze when he heard another voice echo into the silence, “I do, actually.”

He sounded the same. Even after all this time, he still had the same raspy tone and slow drawl. Louis hand froze in the air. How could he turn it off when he’d been waiting years to hear that voice?

“Before Luke and I got signed, I was in a relationship. It was... Great. I mean, really, really great. We were best friends, partners, everything. It meant the world to me. But, I left. And... It’s been three years, four months, and eight days and I still miss everything about him.”

Louis stared at the TV as the crowd of girls behind the host screamed. He blinked slowly and let go of the breath he’d been holding. He turned and walked down the small hallway. The
wooden door closed with a thud behind him. The TV in the kitchen still chattering on as the kettle started to whistle.

**

Harry’s arms wrapped around his waist as they curled together in a blanket grass. The swing set they’d spent countless nights playing on creaked as the midnight wind whirled against the leaves of the trees. Louis cuddled closer, reveling in how the warmth of Harry’s body would chase away the chill of the night. The moon was full and bright hanging in the sky. The dance of the city lights were still bright just over the hill. Car honks and traffic still traveled quietly on the wind. But, they’d driven far enough out of the city limits for the park to feel like their own.

“I love you,” Louis’ voice whispered. He curled closer into Harry, lifting his back off the dewy grass.

It wasn’t the first time he’d said it. It had been long since the first exchange of the words, nervous and shaky. Now, it had changed. It was familiar and safe, knowing the other felt the same. It still made something deep in his stomach dance and a little blush painted on Harry’s cheeks. He was still just as excited to be around Harry as he was back in the days of sneaking kisses before the ring of the bell in the school hallway. Louis was grateful for that.

“Lou, we should talk,” Harry spoke quietly. His thumbs became still in their circles on Louis’ hips. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Do what? Are you cold already? We haven’t even been here that long,” Louis tilted his head with a quiet laugh.
Harry sat up. His calloused fingers came up to run through his messy curls, “A scout was at Joe’s last week when we played. He called Luke, they want us to record a demo track.”

“Harry,” Louis brightened. He brought his small hands up to Harry’s cheeks, “That’s amazing! Why didn’t you tell me?”

Harry’s hands gripped Louis’s wrists. With a small pull, he dropped them back into Louis’s lap. “Because I can’t do this and be with you.”

Louis froze in place. The bright smile melted off his face, a confused frown replacing it instead, “H, this is what we’ve always talked about. Remember? We... We’re in this together.”

“Louis, I can’t.” Harry gritted out between clenched teeth, “Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

Louis shuffled his knees closer only for Harry to pull back further, “What are you talking about? When is the last time we have done anything without each other’s support? I love you, I’m want to be there for you any way I can be.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Harry shook his head. “I don’t need you this time.”

Louis open his mouth before snapping it shut again. He narrowed his eyes. “If you leave me... that’s it. You don’t get a second chance. You don’t get to throw away all the time I’ve spent on you and then change your mind.”

“I won’t change my mind.”

Louis sat there stunned. An owl called somewhere in the distance between the screech of faraway car horns. His teeth ground against each other. He rose to his feet, brushing the strand of wet grass off his jeans. “I’m taking the car. You can find your own damn ride.”
Louis watched Harry’s eyes study the blanket of green beneath him. He stayed silent. Louis nodded. He spun on his heel and made his way to the red car parked only feet away. He paused at the dented door, hand hovering on the handle. He looked out at Harry, still sitting in the grass. Louis shook his head and drove away without a second glance.

His hands steered down the traffic laced streets on autopilot. Louis paused when he got to his street. He parked outside their small apartment. He let out a deep breath and turned the engine off. He found himself waiting, sitting there in the dark, keys still dangling in the ignition. Moments stretched into minutes, and then to hours. Only when the bright hues of the morning sun began to peek over the horizon did Louis unbuckle his seatbelt, open the car door, and drag his heavy feet up to their bedroom and let himself collapse on the bed.

Louis cried then. He cried because he was sure Harry’s voice would sound beautiful disseminating around the walls of an arena, and he was sure he’d never be there to hear it. He cried that for the first time, Harry hadn’t returned his ‘I love you’. He cried because Harry hadn’t wanted to celebrate the one thing he’s waited for his whole life with him. He cried that he’d wasted so many years of his life completely in love with someone that could walk away as if he’d meant nothing. But mostly, he cried because for the first time, Harry hadn’t come after him. And Louis doubted that he never would.

**

Today was a bad day.

Carter could see that from the moment Louis walked into the teacher's lounge. The slump of his shoulders and downcast eyes told him everything he needed to know.
Carter sighed. He’d been doing this for nearly two years now. He and Louis were hired around the same time. Louis as a drama teacher, Carter as English. It was chance that they’d both sat at the same table in the lounge that first day. But, the way they communicated was pure fate. They shared a sense of humor and the same introverted demeanor. They stuck to only talking to one another, and really that was all they needed.

It hadn’t taken long for Louis to open up. Especially after Carter had mentioned the way Louis turned even further into himself a few days every month. He could see that Louis was struggling. He hadn’t needed the whole story to know that. Try as they might, the only thing that brought Louis out of moods like this was time.

“Hey Lou,” Carter gave him a small smile before turning his attention back to his sandwich.

Louis fidgeted in his seat. His eyes roamed the ceiling and he wrung his fingers together, “He talked about me today.”

Carter looked at him in silence. He knew who ‘he’ was. Harry was the only ‘he’ Louis had ever felt was important enough to talk about as long as he’d known him. What had him at a loss for words was the fact that Louis was talking about him on a bad day. It was rare for him to talk at all on a bad day, and next to impossible for him to talk about the source of his pain.

“What did he say?”

Louis rubbed his wrist, nails slightly digging into his skin, “He said he still misses me.”

“Can he even do that?” Carter’s eyebrows furrowed together. “I thought he was the one that left.”
“He was,” Louis shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe it was just a publicity thing.”

“What if it wasn’t?” Carter asked. A few long minutes passed without an answer. “Maybe you should go home for the rest of the day. An early weekend? I’ll cover for you.”

"No, no. I’m alright," Louis’ rejection came without a single thought. The excuse tasted bitter and wrong in his mouth.

Carter watched him for a moment, his eyebrows drawn together. A loud sigh followed. "Lou, you know you’re not going to get any work done anyway. Take the day. Get your head sorted out.”

Louis’s eyes scoured the pair boring into him. He his eyes for a moment with a sigh before slowly nodding.

The man in front of him smiled softly, as if he was trying to encourage him. For a moment he let himself see what he had built here. He had friends that cared about him and a job he loved. He’d done that, and he’d done it all on his own. He didn’t need Harry to make this life for himself. He’d found this sliver of happiness all on his own.

**

Louis didn’t sleep that night. His eyes were swollen and sore from crying. His head ached and his throat was sore. But going back into that bed, cocooned by the smell of Harry’s cologne and staring into the eyes of that ragged tabby Beanie Baby Harry refused to sleep without, seemed like the worst possible thing.
Instead, he’d made himself countless kettles of tea and sat at the table. His chair sat facing the door. He lost track of how long he’d been sitting there. He couldn’t bring himself to care though.

His head snapped up from his mug and his fingers brushed his tangled brown hair out of his eyes as he heard a key twist in the deadbolt. His tired blue eyes watched as Harry stepped in, Luke lagging behind.

His green eyes seemed almost startled, like a fawn seeing a hunter for the first time.

“You’re here.”

Louis rolled his eyes. He stood up, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yes, Harry. This is my apartment. I live here,” He spat out. He’d be lying if he said he didn’t feel the slightest bit of guilt as he watched Harry duck his head and toe off his shoes.

“I know. I just thought...” Harry’s mumbling trailed off as he left the room.

Luke lingered by the doorframe. His eyes wondered across the room, avoiding Louis’s. Louis dropped his arms and a sad smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

“Don’t act like you haven’t been here a hundred times before, Luke,” Louis tried to choke out a chuckle. “It’s fine, you can come in. Harry’s a big boy. He made his own choices.”


Luke turned slowly, a hint of sheepishness to the bow of his head. “Yeah?”
“Congratulations, this is huge for you guys.”

His eyes softened. He took three steps and raised his toned arms up, wrapping around Louis with a thump on his back. Louis wasn’t sure what he was expecting. But it definitely wasn’t a hug.

Louis sunk into the warmth and felt his eyes start to sting. He was losing all of this. Not just Harry, but the life they had built together. He was losing Luke. He was losing Anne’s special cinnamon hot chocolate at Christmas time. He was losing the dog that he and Harry had started a savings jar to adopt. He was losing everything he’d known since he was five.

Luke pulled back and gave him a smile, “You take care of yourself, Lou.”

Louis nodded and turned to his chair. He grabbed the green hoodie off the back and tugged it over his head. He pretended not to notice the way the sleeve hung off his body, stretched out from Harry’s larger frame. He tugged the worn hood over his tangled hair. His feet led him out the door without a second glance behind him.

By the time he found himself home again, the apartment was more barer than it had ever been. The beige walls were now marred with rectangles, just a shade lighter, where prints of Harry’s favorite Monet paintings and signed concert posters had hung in their frames. Louis’s row of tattered Vans stood lonely by the door without the company of Harry’s boots. Even the small white refrigerator in the back corner seemed out of place without the mosaic of magnets Harry insisted on keeping.

Louis walked slowly in circles around the small sanctuary that no longer felt like home. Every missing piece of the apartment should have warned him. But even still, Louis swore every ounce of oxygen left his body seeing Harry’s scratched key shining in the center of the table.
Six months had passed before Louis’s hand finally learned to stop searching for Harry across the sheets in the moments before the rest of his body woke up. Instead, he learned to keep his hands tucked under his pillow while he slept. Instead of sleeping on the left side of the bed, his body started migrating to the middle of the bed during the night and he learned to revel in the extra space. He was learning, day by day, to live on his own. To be his own person. He was finding a way to be just Louis, without the “and Harry” always attached.

In fact, he even asked a blonde in his Modern Playwrights class out for a drink. Or he would have, if Harry hadn’t called and sent him reeling back to square one.

Louis had deleted his number from his phone in an angry blur one of the first few weeks he was gone. Even then, the minute Harry’s number showed up on the screen, Louis knew without the help of Caller ID.

“Harry?” Louis squinted at his alarm clock in the dark. “It’s 2 a.m. Why are you calling me?”

“Lou,” His voice broke a little at the end.

Louis sat upright in bed, stomach lurching. He’d heard that voice plenty of times before. He’d comforted him through tears more times than he could count. “Is everything okay? Are you okay?”

Harry’s sniffle echoed through the line, “I miss you.”

Everything in Louis gave in instantly. He didn’t care it’d been six months without any word. He didn’t care Harry uprooted his life and left him alone within the span of two days, or
that he’d been an ass about leaving. He didn’t care about the extra space in the bed or how much
easier deciding what to have for dinner was.

All that mattered was that Harry was calling. Harry was upset and chose to call him.

Harry *missed* him.

Louis shook his head, “Then come home.”

It was so, so easy. So simple. Nothing else mattered, just Harry. Everything else they
could figure out. Louis ripped the covers off. He picked his jeans off the floor, tugging them up
his ankles. He kept the phone tight to his ear against his shoulder. “Just come home, H. We’ll
figure it out.”

“What?” The sniffles stopped. “No... Lou I can’t do that.”

Louis barely paused, “Fine, okay, fine... I’ll come to you. Just text me an address, okay?
I’ll find a flight tonight.”

“This... This was a mistake. You can’t come here Louis.”

Now he stopped. Every cell in his body froze. “What? You just said...”

“I know what I said,” Harry snapped. “And now I’m saying it was a mistake.”

“No. No, you said... Har, we’ll figure it out. Just let me come.”

“Listen, it’s late and I’m drunk and your number was there, okay? That’s it. This was a
mistake.”

Louis swiped his tongue over his front teeth. He nodded slowly, “Don’t call again.”
His phone hit the bedroom wall. He sat staring at it for a breath before scrambling after it. Louis cradled the phone between his hands. A shaky finger traced a new crack that had appeared on the screen. His tired eyes watched the dark screen for hours before sleep finally came.

When the sunlight filtered through the blinds in the morning, Louis found himself securely on his side of the bed, his hand reaching out for warmth that wasn’t there.

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Louis woke up curled in the old green armchair, his neck at an awkward angle. Bartholomew leapt off his lap. He stretched his paws out, chest close to the ground before padding off towards the knock at the front door.

Louis followed after him. He walked slowly and rubbed the sleep from his eyes with a yawn. “I’m coming! Sorry guys, I didn’t mean to fall...”

Louis’s words froze in his mouth the moment he opened the door.

He was taller now, but not by much. Where he was once lanky and lean was now filled out with muscle. His brown curls hung longer than he used to keep them. They weren’t as much as ringlets anymore as they were waves, falling halfway to his shoulders. His eyes were the same. They still had their gold flecks sprinkled within the green. His eyelashes were still thick and long, casting shadows along his cheekbones. They had bags beneath them now. Purple and dark. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days.

His hand had been raised in a fist, ready to knock on the door again. It fell limply at his side. Louis’s eyes followed the trial. They stayed trained on the thick silver rings adorning each finger for a beat.
“Louis,” Harry’s voice was hoarse.

Louis’s hand tightened on the door. Bartholomew rubbed against his legs and mewed up at Harry. A dimple peaked out as Harry squatted down. A large hand lifted towards Bartholomew’s freckled orange nose.

“You got a cat.”

It wasn’t a question, but Louis nodded anyway. “Why are you here, Harry?”

Harry straightened up. He scuffed the toe of his black boot against the stone of the stoop.

“I know it’s taken me awhile. I’m sorry, Lou.”

“You’re sorry?” A bitter laugh slipped past his lips. “It’s been years, Harry. You can’t do this.”

“I know. I know, but I’m here now. I want to figure this out.”

Louis stepped forward. His bare feet stepped onto the cold stone. He moved forward another step, shoving a finger into the warm fabric of Harry’s shirt. “You left, Harry. You.”

“I know. I’m so sorry,” Both of Harry’s hands wrapped around the hand against his chest. “Let me make it up to you.”

Louis pulled his hand from Harry’s, “I have a life here. I have a job. I have friends. You can’t just come here and expect things to be the same.”

Harry stepped into Louis. His hand swiped a piece of hair out of Louis’s eyes. His thumb traveled down the plane of Louis’s cheek, coming to rest there. Louis’s hand lifted to Harry’s wrist, everything in him telling himself to rip it away. The second their skin met, the fight left his
body. Louis tried not to lean into it. Really he did. But, even after all these year, after all the pain and the anger, Harry still felt like home.

Harry craned his neck down slowly. He rested his forehead against Louis’s, “Then let me try to be a part of it.”

“Do you have any idea what you put me through? I should hate you.”

Louis could feel Harry’s breath fan across his lips with every exhale. He stared as Harry screwed his eyes shut, “But you don’t?”

“I tried to, I really tried.”

“Let me make it up to you. Please, Lou.”

Louis stared into Harry’s familiar eyes, “I’m not going to make it easy.”

Harry laughed, loud and sudden, “I think I’m up for the challenge.”
Deep Wounds

The cold tile pressed against her bare legs. On top of her head sat a pile of brown hair, matted from days spent in bed and not one swipe of a comb. Her pale face turned towards the bright window. Her fingers gripped a shining silver blade. Hangnails and bloody nail beds, bitten from anxious nights, held on to their one source of solace.

Her dark eyes moved towards the floor sluggishly. She mapped the pools of red under her legs with a small sigh. Two of her shaking fingers reached out to rub at a dry patch.

How many times you can use a mop before the shaggy head is permanently dyed with a soft pink? She shook her head. It wouldn’t get to that point. She’d buy a new one. She tried to recall any advertisements she may have seen about cleaning products on sale. She wondered for half a second why no one had ever thought of making mops in black.

She looked to her shaking legs, peering at the angry red lines among the sea of already pink, puckered waves. A trembling breath left her chapped lips. She scratched at her leg, flaking off the dried tracks of blood.

Around her small wrist, charms clanged against each other. A ghost of a smile tugged at her lips. Ryan had begun giving her charms only a year into their relationship. The first one had been a small aluminum coffee mug. It had been a gift for their first anniversary, its purpose to commemorate the first day they met. He had taken her caramel latte to-go cup off of the counter in a rush, instead of his own plain black coffee. She had chased him out of the shop to set him right, asking how he could ever expect a lady to drink something so bitter. She’d been genuinely outraged at the time. Now she could only feel a sense of fondness recalling the event. In the years since, Ryan had given her countless more, each chosen with care. She never took the heavy
bracelet off, even to shower. Yet here she was, barely even trying to keep it from dangling into the small pools of blood.

Her eyebrows furrowed for a moment. Why couldn’t she stop? She had everything she needed- a warm house, a loving boyfriend, a secure job. She should be happy. Why the hell did she always end up here?

A knock at the door stirred her attention away. She should say something, assure him that she was okay. She should say something. Her tongue was dead in her mouth.

“Emily? Are you alright?” He truly did have a beautiful voice. He should have become some sort of speaker. Maybe he could travel to different schools and motivate the youth of tomorrow. He’d be good at that.

“I’m going to come in,” He called softly, as if not to scare her away.

Logically, she knew she should move- cover the blood on the floor, lock the door, assure him she’d be out soon, something. But, she felt as if every cell of her body was made of lead.

Her head lifted to meet the door as it creaked open. She watched his face fall, just a little, and wanted to curl in on herself. Why did she keep doing this to him? Why wasn’t she stronger?

He closed his eyes for a moment a took a deep breath before kneeling down on the sticky floor to her level.

“Oh, Em...” He sighed quietly. She could tell he wasn’t quite frustrated. Maybe hurt? Disappointed? She thought that was probably worse than him just yelling at her. “We need to get you clean.”

She just barely nodded.
She should say something- an apology, a false promise it won’t happen again, a plea for him not to leave, a thank you. She should say something. Why couldn’t she get her mouth to move?

He dabbed a wet cotton ball against the tender cuts. A quiet hiss escaped from beneath her clenched teeth.

He delicately placed small squares of gauze, a patchwork quilt among her skin. He pressed medical tape along the edges. His green eyes focused intently as his mind fought to stay calm. The moment the last bandage was secured, he pulled his hands away, as if her skin was volatile acid, bubbling up to burn him. Something in her chest ached.

“Better. I’ll be right back, okay?”

She nodded her head and pulled her knees to her chest. She winced at the stretch of the skin before settling. She looked at the floor and sighed. How much do they spend on medical supplies a month? How many landfills had he filled with her bandages? How the hell was he not tired of cleaning up her messes by now? She wondered how he could love someone as selfish as she was.

“I’ve got the fuzzy socks you like, the ones with the pandas.” He tried to give her a small smile, waltzing into the room with a bundle of clothes in one hand, and the mop in the other.

He slid the warm socks onto her feet and gave her a small kiss before turning to the floor. He grabbed the shining razor and threw it in the garbage, the same way he always did. She saw him furrow his eyebrows together and narrow his eyes at the small piece of metal. A wave of guilt crashed into her body.
Ryan had gone through the apartment countless times, searching for a stash that simply didn’t exist. How could she tell him that something possessed her to drive twenty miles out to a small ma-and-pop shop to buy new packs? How could she articulate that she always bought a few other items alongside the razors, only to throw them out in the trash can outside the storefront? She knew that wasn’t normal. She didn’t want to drive out of town, just so she could browse her options without fear of someone seeing her. But she did.

Her mouth stayed closed as she watched him work. The movements were mechanical now. The floor was glistening and wet, the tiles now returned to their pearly white, before he had a chance to think about it. He put the mop in the bathtub and closed the curtain.

He turned the knob to the sink with his elbow and ran his hands under the hot stream. He scrubbed harshly against the skin until the water ran clear. He took a second to breathe. His eyes focused on the drain, watching the last of the bubbles be swallowed.

“You can’t keep doing this. You’re going to destroy yourself,” He finally spoke to her.

Ryan turned to her, cradled her face in his hand. He swiped the pad of his thumb across the expanse of her cheek. His green eyes, once bright and sparkling, looked muddled and worried.

She did that. She was the reason he woke up throughout the night to check on her and why none of their doors had locks. She was the reason he had to think everything she said three times through before trusting it. Her eyes searched his for a second before she had to look away. She knew she wasn’t just killing herself. She was ruining him too. That knowledge stung more than any wound ever could.

She turned her head away. “I know.”
Mutual Destruction

Ryan walked down the sidewalk and faced the door to Apartment 5B. His hand reached out for the knob, but stilled when it came to rest on the cool metal. He closed his eyes for a moment and sighed.

His body was tired, along with his mind. He wanted with everything in him to relax for the night. At the back of his mind, he wondered if that was even possible any more. It seemed like the opportunity hadn’t presented itself in years.

He twisted the key in the lock and pushed the door open. He toed off his shoes by the doorway and laid a briefcase down alongside them. His eyes wondered around the apartment. A pile of dishes still sat cluttering the sink. He sighed. He wondered if she had even made it into the kitchen to see the note he’d left, asking her to tidy up throughout the day.

“Emily?” He called into the apartment, his voice echoing off the olive walls.

He checked the bedroom, half expecting her to still be cocooned under the covers. Seeing the bed empty, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He knew this routine by now. She barely left the comfort of home these days. He knew where she’d be.

He allowed himself a small moment of quiet before making his way to the white door of the bathroom. He knocked once. “Emily? Are you all right?”

He waited for only a second. He knew the chances of her responding were close to nonexistent. “I’m going to come in.”
He knew he shouldn’t be surprised anymore. He’d been dealing with this for over a year now. He wondered if maybe he should be used to this by now. But how do you get used to the sight of the woman you love covered in her own blood?

He closed his eyes for a second. He took a deep breath trying to muster the energy to put her back together once again. He knelt down to her lever, ignoring the rub of dry blood on his slacks. “Oh Em… We need to get you clean.”

He pressed a feather light kiss to her forehead before weaving an arm around her back, and another under the crook of her knees. He lifted her frail body with ease and wondered, not for the first time, how long it had been since she ate. Should he force it? No, no he couldn’t do that. She’d only get worse. No, he’d just hope a good day comes soon and treat her to all her favorite foods. That seemed like a better plan.

He sat her down on the white countertop next to the sink, letting her cold feet dangle down into the air. He brushed his thumb against the jut of her cheekbone. He knew it would make her feel better if he talked to her. But he was tired. He had spent all day sifting through law folders and calming distraught clients. He didn’t want to take care of someone else when he finally got home. He would, of course, because he loved her with everything in him. That didn’t mean he had to be happy about it.

He looked at her hollow cheeks and dull eyes. He fought to swallow his frustration. He knew this wasn’t her. The Emily he remembered was bright and bubbling, always laughing and singing to him in the car. This Emily talked low and soft, afraid that she’d say something wrong. The Emily he fell for loved to sit in the park for hours watching the birds. This Emily struggled to get out of bed in the morning. She’d even been fired from a job she had once been so thrilled
to get. She always used to be so excited at the prospect of going to work at the small shelter, eager to find animals homes. She’d even let that slip away.

He tried to tell himself she was trying. He saw the tear tracks after her therapy appointments and saw the way she’d shake her head and come to him for a distraction when the thoughts got particularly loud. She told him that she was trying. He reminded himself of that as fiercely as he could. But, my God, how many more months could he watch the girl he loved destroy herself? How could she keep doing this to him?

He remembered the first night they’d moved into the apartment, just out of college and excited for a life of their own. They had sat cross-legged on the cool kitchen floor, not enough money in their bank accounts to buy a table and chairs yet. If they’d had a clock, it would have read an ungodly hour. The moon was hidden away, but the sun not quite awake.

The light of the refrigerator bounced off the empty walls and the tiled floor. A jar of dill pickles lay abandoned near the wall, droplets of juice tracking a path on the floor where they’d passed it back and forth. Her bare feet and cold toes fumbled and stepped on his as he lead them around the Insignia spotlight. Her laugh provided a playlist that lasted far into the morning.

He chased the memory out of his mind. That music had stopped years ago.

He grabbed a dark blue washcloth from the cabinet. Not white. He learned within the first few months of this that white towels stain easily. Neither of them needed faded pink stains as reminders, they already had enough of those in the roadmap of her thighs and along the canvas of her inner arms. He wiped away the dried streaks as gently as he could. Everything in him fought to scrub the blood away hard as fast, destroy any reminder of the habit. He made himself slow down. He needed to be calm.
He focused on the task in front of him. His fingers worked mindlessly, soaking a small white ball in peroxide and pressing it onto the angry red lines. He narrowed his eyes at the cuts when he heard her hiss in pain. Of course she could feel this pain, the one to ward off infection. But, she was immune to ripping her own skin to shreds?

He laid the white bandages against her skin, secured them with tape. He worked as fast as he could, not wanting to look at the wounds any longer. He finished the job and moved toward the door. “Better. I’ll be right back, okay?”

He walked into their shared room. He sat on the bed for just a moment. He rubbed at his eyes. He was tired of this. He missed his Emily. He knew it wasn’t fair, but he couldn’t stave off the small bubble of anger sparking in his stomach. After all they’d been through, after all he’d done for her... How could she put him through this week after week?

He forced himself to his feet and grabbed a tattered pair of soft socks off the dresser. He made his way back to the bathroom. He grabbed the familiar mop off of the hook just outside the bathroom door. He barged back in and tried his best to give the broken girl a smile. “I’ve got the fuzzy socks you like, the ones with the pandas.”

He unrolled the soft fabric onto her small feet. He gave her one quick kiss before turning his attention away. He carefully grabbed the razor off of the stained tiles and threw it into the almost-empty trash can.

Where did she keep finding these? He was sure he’d gone through every drawer in the house and threw out every single one. Did she go out of her way to buy them? Would she really do that to him? He shook his head and grabbed the mop.
He scrubbed at the floor. His movements were harsh. He could tell that he was pressing
down harder than he needed. He thought just maybe if he could clean the mess well enough,
maybe something in her would want to keep it clean. He threw the mop in the shower, too
drained to wash it out now.

He rubbed his hands together fiercely with soap over the white sink. He made sure to get
under his nails too. The water was too hot, but he didn’t bother to adjust it. He turned the small
silver handles to stop the flow of water, yet still didn’t look up. He kept his attention on the small
drain and forced himself to say something.

“You can’t keep doing this. You’re going to destroy yourself.” He bit his tongue to hold
in the ‘and me’.

She couldn’t even meet his eye as she spoke. “I know.”
Flaws in Our Fur

The bear you made me for our first Christmas sits on his pedestal on the shelf. I woke him from his permanent slumber next to my pillow the night that you admitted you no longer wanted to try. I couldn’t rationalize keeping him there, knowing that I would never sleep next to his creator again.

From the first time we met, I knew that you were dangerous. Your eyes were too blue and your smile was too bright. Something in me knew that you wouldn’t know what to do with someone that could love you as fiercely as I would. But, I didn’t care. You were reckless. You were that first gasp of air after coming up from a long dive. You were a rush of adrenaline when all I’d ever known was monotony. You were everything I was afraid of experiencing.

Something in my gut knew you wouldn’t be good for me, and this lopsided, messy bear should have been the road map I needed to run away.

The black beads that once gave him sight are long since gone. His head is cockeyed and his ears are far too pointed. The bump of his snout is more shaped like a lemon than a natural oval; the soft stuffing that made him has started to spill from its seams. He has so many flaws in his tiny body. The more I look at him, the more I’m sure that we did too, even from the very beginning.

The first time one of his eyes came loose from their stitching and disappeared, I didn’t think much of it. You had always been terrible at sewing, why would it mean anything other than that? I had already forgotten about the way we fought the night before.
You’d forgotten about our plans, and instead made them with her. I gave you short responses on the ride home and wouldn’t meet your eyes. Yet, I still gripped onto your hand, shielding it from the cold of the winter night raging outside the windshield.

You’ve always been so stubborn. I have too. But, I gave in first. Of course I did. Don’t I always? I tried to yell at you, furious at your tendency to forget, and mine to remember. Instead, my voice came out shaking and soft. You closed your eyes and sighed. You pulled the car into a gas station down the road. You opened the car door and walked away. When you came back, you opened the door on my side, pushed my favorite chocolate bar into my hand and pressed a soft kiss to my forehead to accompany it. The rest of our journey home, you held my hand tighter and whispered apologies nearly as soft as your lips.

The night I came to your door hysterical was the same night the soft green heart on my bear’s chest started to come off of the fur there. My cat, the one I’d shown you countless pictures of and insisted could be best friends with yours, had gotten hit by a car. My father had buried her under my favorite apple tree in the backyard and called me. I couldn’t have made it through the phone call without crying, even if I had wanted.

I rushed to your apartment, parked my car, and without even turning off the headlights, knocked on your door. As soon as the door moved just a fraction, I launched myself into your arms, thinking about nothing but the warmth and security you never failed to provide. You tangled your hand in my hair, and your chest moved against my cheek as you sighed. Gently, you pulled away and explained that I needed to leave, you had friends over. My stomach dropped, as salty tears fell more steadily. All I could do was nod and kiss your cheek with a pathetic smile, desperately trying to prove that I was okay. I curled up in bed, held my bear as tightly as I could, and picked at the fraying edges of the green velvet heart.
Not even an hour later, you were at my door with my favorite flower and a mouthful of apologies. I forgave you without question. You stayed with me that night, sitting through my favorite movie, even though you couldn’t stand the songs. You even fed me Pocky from your own secret stash. I’d forgotten how upset you’d made me in a heartbeat. But the truth is, that little green heart is still halfway off and there’s still a mascara stain marring the white blanket of his fur.

The first time we slept together, you had just gotten a promotion. I unlocked your apartment and filled the kitchen with your favorite foods. I ran you a hot bath and lit the house full of candles just before you got home. When you walked through the door, you didn’t bother with a greeting, but instead kissed me as if I was the very thing that had brought you home.

You’d carried me to your bedroom, your lips against my neck the whole time. The words you whispered against my skin would have made even the most famous poets jealous. The kisses you trailed down my body simmered with a heat not even the stars could muster. And after, you held my hand and washed my hair with a gentleness that not even a newborn butterfly could evoke.

You helped me dry my hair and placed one last kiss on my shoulder before asking me to go. You walked me to my car and promised we’d meet up for breakfast in a handful of hours. And I was fine, really I was. But, then I came home, crawled into bed, and noticed a hole in the side of my bear’s stomach. My fingers rubbed at the fluffy filling spilling out onto my sheet, and I completely fell apart.

Even now, the lilac ghosts of your fingertips peer up at me from their throne on my hips. The smell of your sandalwood shaving cream still lingers on the pillow you liked best. My ears
still strain to hear your laugh from across the room. My heart still hopes desperately, without reason, that you’ll decide you want to try again.

But, the bear you made me now sits on a shelf. He is broken and bruised and flawed. My fingers are covered in pinpricks from trying to repair so many seams and my sewing kit has run out of thread. I can’t continue to repair something that breaks over and over again.

Instead, he will sit on my shelf. Now, his position by my pillow will be filled by a small blue bear that I have sewn for myself.
Pillow Talk

The worn oak door stood not quite closed, yet still hid the view of the long corridor leading to the front door. The white of the hallway, spotless without the clutter of even a single photo frame, now dripped with abandoned clothes. Behind the door, a desk huddled in the corner hid unfinished pages in the drawers - a poem he could never quite articulate. The black nightstand balanced coffee mugs along its surface. A feather soft comforter wound its way around the legs of the dark bedframe, and just above rested two pairs of legs tangled up together.

Shadows danced along their skin and wandered around the folds in the sheets around them as headlights passed by the bay window behind them. The sleepy hands of the clock reached out towards 3 a.m.. His attention focused in on the smoke spirals reaching out into the air from his cigarette, and her attention could do nothing but watch the lips that blew it out.

Her body curled against him. A messy head of hair settled into the crook of his neck and a fingertip traced mindless designs along the expanse of his chest. Grey sheets tangled around their intertwined legs. A shiver ran down her spine, the air cooling the sweat that had settled there. She snuggled in closer to him. The familiar scent of warm cedar bodywash that she knew lived on the second shelf in the white tiled shower and a tang of tobacco settled into her nose and loosened her muscles.

She had always been disgusted with smokers until she met him. Now she couldn’t count the times her fingers had swirled around the smoke and little giggles escape her mouth. She had a sneaking suspicion the image of him in his leather jacket leaned against his car, a cigarette caught between his lips, would never quite leave her mind. He was her exception to so many
things she’d always thought she had a solid stance on. She wondered why she couldn’t bring herself to care.

She pulled back to watch his face. Her eyes studied his as he studied the clock. She whispered quietly, cautious of breaking the silence dancing around the room, “Should I go?”

He took in a deep drag and nodded his head slowly, “Yeah, it’s getting late.”

Against his taut muscles, her body deflated and sunk towards the mattress. She gave herself until a count of ten before sitting up. Her small feet dangled off the bed, her toes brushing against the hardwood floor. A small breath left her lips as she scooped her bra off the floor and settled the lace adorned straps onto her bare shoulders.

His fingers pressed the warm butt of the cigarette into the full ash tray on the corner of the nightstand, hidden among the mugs. He shuffled underneath the sheets and wound an arm around her waist. Without a thought, she leaned against him. Her eyes fluttered shut. This. Why couldn’t it just stay like this?

He broke the magic of the moment. “I can tell when you’re thinking something. What’s going on?”

She lifted her shoulders only to let them fall again. “I just… I don’t know. I sometimes wonder why you never ask me to stay.”

“For me, you staying means more. That’s something that branches into relationship territory. It’s sort of intimate, don’t you think?” He pulled back, leaving her back cold once again.
She turned to face him, legs crossing atop his, “Is it any more intimate that what we’re doing now? It’s three in the morning. ‘Friends’ aren’t still in each other’s bed at three o’clock. ‘Friends’ don’t have the kind of conversations we do, or talk to each other the way that we do. I know more about you than anyone else in your life. We’ve already passed intimacy.”

His dark eyebrows scrunched together. “Where is this coming from? I thought we talked about this. You told me you never wanted something serious. This was fun... Casual. You were the one to bring that up.”

“I know, you’re right... I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to care about you as much as I do. That wasn’t exactly part of the plan.” she tried to force a laugh. Even in her own ears it sounded plastic.

He tangled a hand in his dark hair. “What do you want then? Honestly, without considering anything else in the world. What do you want?”

“If I didn’t know exactly what you’d say, I’d tell you that I want you in every way imaginable,” She shook her head and watched the sheet beneath her. “I want everything we already have, but I want you to not be afraid of letting me stay. If I didn’t already know exactly what you’d say, I’d tell you that I want to be yours without a time frame.”

His fingers anxiously reached for his box of cigarettes. He pulled one out and tapped the end against the side of the carton, “It’s not that easy... We can’t do this.”

She shook her head and pulled herself up. She let her arms worm their way around his neck, “Why? Give me three good reasons why.”
“It would never work, you know that. I can’t even drop you off at your dorm without worrying if people will see and what they’ll think. What about your parents? ‘Hey mom! Hey dad! This is the thirty-year-old I’m sleeping with! Isn’t he nice?’ I don’t think so. It could never happen.”

Her eyes wondered towards the dark ceiling, “Fine, that’s one.”

“It’s a damn good one. I can’t do that to you. You need someone to bring home for family dinners. I know how close you guys are. I know how much that means to you and I can’t give you that.” He threw the box to the side and reached his hands out towards her hips. He pulled her just a fraction closer.

“But does that mean it’s not even worth trying?” She leaned her forehead against his, “I don’t care about that right now. If we know why we’re together, I don’t really care what everyone else thinks. Give me two more reasons. If you can give me two good reasons, I’ll drop it. I’ll head home and nothing will ever need to change.”

“I just got out of a twelve year relationship. And you know the way that ended. I wasn’t good for her. I was bored and I was inattentive and I was too distracted by other people. I can’t be an exclusive partner in the way you’re going to want.”

Her back straightened, “You can’t decide what I want without my say. But, fine... That’s two, give me one more.”

His eyes poured into hers. She watched a small frown begin to pull at the corners of his mouth, “Don’t make me say it.”
“If you have a reason why this wouldn’t work, say it. If you think something is so important that it will ruin any possibility of us being together, I need to hear you say it.”

He pulled back. She pretended not to feel the sting, “I don’t want to hurt you. You know what I’m thinking, don’t make me say it.”

She stared at him through the dark. A car flashed by once again and he sighed slowly, “Emilia, okay? I’ve been with her for months. We have fun together. You can’t expect me to walk away from someone I was seeing before I even met you. I can’t just drop everything and everyone to try out some happily-ever-after that we’re not even sure will work.”

She let her eyes fall the sheets once again. She shook her head at herself. You’d think it would sting less after this long, after so many cancelled plans to see her instead. But, it didn’t. It was just as sharp as that first time watching him walk away and towards her.

“So, Emilia,” She nodded. “She’s your third reason.”

She waited a beat for an answer before she realized she wasn’t going to get it. For a moment, she wondered what her life could look like without waiting for him. Who would leave haikus under the windshield wiper of her Bug to find in the morning? Who would send her pictures of baby bunnies before an exam? Who would make her lose her breath and give her goosebumps the way he had? She shook her head and chased away the thought.

She lifted herself up off the bed and pulled on her clothes, telling herself the extra layers would chase away the cold now lingering in her muscles. She turned towards him only to see that he hadn’t moved an inch, “That’s it? You’re just going to leave?”
On their own accord, her shoulders lifted in a quick shrug. She moved to sit close to him once again. She laid her head against his chest, “There’s nothing left for me to say. I know I won’t change your mind. And you need your rest, I know you have a long day ahead of you.”

“I do care about you.”

She nodded before lifting herself up again once more. He moved to the edge of the bed, leaving his arms circled around her waist, loose but firm. “I know you do. Just not quite as much as you care about her. I get it. I asked for three good reasons and you gave them to me. I told you, I’ll drop it. Nothing needs to change.”

She turned around and grabbed a shoe off the floor. She heard his anxious fingers moving the sheet behind her, but didn’t turn, “Then why does it feel like it already has?”

She faced him with a small smile. His face always looked so sweet at this time of night, the stress of the day faded away. He looked younger, less jaded. She pressed a light kiss against his soft lips, “Because we’ve been pretending we don’t know where each other stands for months. It’s harder to pretend when you’ve heard the truth.”

“Will you still come tomorrow night?” His voice was almost a whisper. If she didn’t know better, she’d let herself wonder down the rabbit hole of thinking he didn’t want her to go.

She did her best to muster a smile, “Of course I will.”

He kissed her once, steady and familiar. Even now, her heart slowed in contentment. The tension in her shoulders started to ebb away. Once more she found herself pretending that those words were all that she needed. She didn’t need to be his if she had this little sliver of happy.