

a lonely hunter

i.

I find the telephone box, the one you can't miss because it's bright red beneath the snow. Because a boy I once adored kissed me there. Because I welcomed a stray kitten there, named him Fitzgerald, fed him fish from a can, and read him *Tender is the Night* when there was enough light in the quaint little box.

Perhaps it is because an elusive thread ties me to this place, tucked between the park and my favorite bakery. A thread ties me anywhere, really. Anywhere that I've lived, if but for a moment, in my life of twenty-two years.

As I reach the kiosk, I catch myself on its glass panes. A splitting headache threatens my balance and slips clumsiness into my steps where grace should have been. I almost laugh. I'd always been praised for the finesse with which I walked. But after ten years of dancing en pointe, it's an inevitable side effect from the days I spent developing strength and technique, training my body to be weightless and sylph-like. I wonder if I can still wear those pointe shoes in my current state. My hands tremble, a quiet, reflexive *of course not*. The ribbons would quake in my hands as I try to criss-cross, criss-cross them.

They don't belong to me anymore. Neither my hands nor the shoes that leap and spin to the melody of my youth. After all, I have long since cut my hair, and it will never be long enough to pull into a ballerina bun.

Pushing thoughts of the hazy past away, I slip into the box and sink to a crouch on my toes. It's a bit warmer here, and I can feel my fingers again. But with the warmth returns a heavy, lulling sensation tugging at me, coaxing me toward sleep.

"Not now," I say, sliding coins of every denomination into the slot. The pennies and quarters and dimes and nickels chatter against metal, as they stutter against everything but the narrow groove. When I've given the payphone enough change, I place a call to the first number I can remember. But whose number is it?

"Tao," I breathe, a cloud of condensation forming before my lips. The dial tone is dull, frustrating.

"Hey babe," he slurs. I wonder who's more intoxicated.

"Hey," I smile, but it's a gesture neither of us can see. I imagine him standing before me, us having just left a wild party to go home. His tie is loosened around his neck, his collar upturned. He's swinging his jacket lazily, his step resembling the tango rather than a walk.

We used to dance together.

"Can I get this pretty lady a drink?" There's a smirk on his side, I know. But that's as close as we get, on two opposite ends of a call connected by wires and electricity and voices. The thought hurts a little. I imagine where he is really, half a drink away from throwing up or passing out in the usual bar.

"I think I've had enough for one night," I say, trying to steady the quiver in my breathing.

"Aw, come onnn," he nearly sings. "Let's daaance then. I'm the best in town."

"Are you now," I taunt.

"Of course," he says. "A girl I care about taught me all the moves I know."

She cares about you too.

"What I would give to slow dance with her one more time," he sighs. "But she hasn't stepped foot onto the dance floor in years."

"I'm sure she'd make an exception for you," I say, because it's true.

"Would you?" and his drunken mumble yields to a sharper, keener touch. After all, he never was a lightweight.

"I can't anymore." The words hold a grim, gritty reality that I haven't wholly understood. But they make sense to me, now. I can't anymore, I repeat to myself until I accept every letter and syllable and word. I turn them over and over, until they become a part of me. But they hurt all the same.

"Can I have a name, at least?" he's begging now.

I don't answer at first. "I'm sorry, Tao."

I click the hook switch until the line goes dead.

ii.

We must have been eight when he became my next-door neighbor. He ruthlessly corrected my pronunciation. "It's not ZEH-ven, it's z-VEN. Like oven with a Z. It's Russian."

He frightened me when we were little, when he was round and tubby and red-faced with anger. But the years had done him well. As he grew tall and slim, he grew patient and gentle and flushed with knowledge from his beloved books.

As a teenager, I liked to sneak into his backyard on the nights I couldn't fall asleep and I thought no one would notice. I guess counting sheep didn't work for him either, and he noticed. He never did object when he caught me on his hammock though. Instead, we lie there together as he taught me the constellations and their legends.

His infatuation with the cosmos grew on me. I fell in love with the universe in its lovely wholeness, disciplined by a beautiful, implicit order. This limitless divine creation we call the night sky became ours, one constellation at a time. And those sleepless nights became infinitely more bearable, counting stars.

Those were the moments I held close, when life was not quite real but death not either. Scattered between banality and routine are these rare instants that shimmer even at dawn. They catch the budding morning rays at six in the morning when I'm still awake, battling a darkness that I can no longer escape. Instead, the cruelty swallows me whole, crushes my bones with loneliness and cripples my body with inexplicable sadness. I am fighting a losing battle against my demons, against myself.

Perhaps I am living in one such moment. The howling wind curls around the telephone booth, but for now, I am guarded. I watch as snow stays suspended in the air, the flakes growing and changing in their slow, unlit descent. Here, I feel a thousand times removed from reality.

Ironic, huh.

This red box connects me to memories, to people, to the very fibers of reality. And so, I reach to insert more money and dial the next number that comes to mind. As I lean against the wall of the booth, the cold grows in patches against my parka. It is a brief reminder that I can still feel.

Finally, he picks up.

"Hullo?" he drawls. "Is everything alright?"

Unlike what hampers my senses, sleep hides beneath Ziven's sluggish, drowsy words.

"Yeah, I'd say so," I whisper. I sink to the concrete floor before my knees can collapse against my will. Cradling the receiver with two hands, I listen closely.

"Who is this?" he says through a yawn.

"A friend," I say simply.

"A friend should know that I have lectures on Saturday mornings at nine," he laughs. "I like to get my rest."

"Come on, it's not even midnight."

Both of us laugh now, and it's easy. Our hearts connect when our sounds meet. Through the telephone wire, I am embraced by an awareness of safety. It coats my insides in blooming colors where a kingdom of gray reigned with its monotonous wash.

"A friend would also know that you're already working on your Ph.D. Soon I'll be calling you Dr. Ziven," I say. "But when we were kids, nothing was more important than piecing together the night sky with legends."

"N—"

"My favorite is still Lyra," I interrupt. Detecting a breath of satisfaction from Ziven, I tell him the story he once taught me. "Legend has it, Apollo gave Orpheus a harp."

I pause to let the sharp pain in my temples subside.

“His music was s-sweeter...” I bite my lip and focus, in hopes that I could articulate. “Than that of any mortal. He could soothe the broken-bodied, bring joy to the weary hearted, change the course of rivers as his fingers danced across the strings of his lyre.

“He married the beautiful Eurydice, but she died soon after their wedding. So stricken with grief, Orpheus ventures into the underworld to win her return. His lovely music convinced Hades to relinquish Eurydice, under one condition – Orpheus must not look back to see if she were following until they had returned to their world. Should he doubt Hades, his beloved would stay in the underworld. Before Orpheus took his final steps into the light, he turned to gaze upon his wife. She fades before him, with only one word: Farewell.” I swallow and mentally count to ten. If I’m not careful, my speech will slip between my fingers like fine sand.

“When he died, Zeus placed his magical harp in the sky... as Lyra.”

A comfortable silence stretches from one phone to the other. He finally finds the words: “You’re a good friend.”

Of course.

We used to count the stars together.

“Lyra’s leading light is Vega, only twenty-five light years away,” I add, but I’m only rambling. “It shines pure white.”

He’s quiet for a while. “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“You’re still my leading light,” he says. “But I’m pretty sure you don’t shine pure white.”

“Thank you,” I say.

“Wait – ”

I hang up.

Farewell. I let the receiver swing as I wipe away tears with the heels of my hands. My vision blurs again, but it's not from crying.

iii.

I'm not done yet, though. This thought picks me up and I reach for the receiver again. Everything I am and have been shakes as I try to clear my mind one last time. Ten numbers, that's it. I mess up the first time.

"Dammit," I slam a weak fist against the glass of the booth. Reminding myself that my change is limited, I try again.

"I'm sorry, that is not a valid number —"

I punch in ten more numbers, and the dial tone that ensues relaxes me. I sink back to my crouching position and cry. My chest heaves with each deep breath, but they cannot conceal the pants and gasps that hide between. I shouldn't be such a wreck.

"Hi," I say, breathless.

"Hi," she says, as puzzled as I am exhausted.

"I have a confession."

"Go ahead," she offers. Vianne is honest and brave and kind. I will miss her.

"I'm dying," I say quickly, quietly.

"What?"

"I'm..." I savor the words between my lips, "...dying, Vianne."

"How?" her voice is concerned but resolute.

"I overdosed," I say. "I think. Xanax."

Pressing my forehead to the glass, I try to fend off the migraine, but I can no longer escape the pain. "I don't remember how many I took. Sorry."

"Just the pills?"

"No. Whiskey. Lots of it."

"Are you in pain?"

"Yes," I breathe.

Neither of us says anything. I like it better this way, I think. After all, it's getting harder to speak.

"Would you like to hear a story?" she asks, and now the tremble has found her voice too.

"Mhmm," I press my lips together to keep them from shivering.

"I," but all I can hear are the hiccups and sniffles I gave her. "I was eighteen years old and couldn't remember why the sun rose each day. Getting up was a pain, doing something with my day an impossibility. Things weren't really going the way I wanted them to, so most of the time, I cut class and slept some more and ate far too much junk food. I wasn't helping myself out.

"For every seminar I missed, every lecture I ditched, I shrank further into myself. The first paper I refused to write, the first midterm I couldn't bring myself to take... those were the hardest ones. It got easier though. The guilt that used to catch in my throat became something I could simply swallow. But the anxiety of leaving my room rose like walls around me. I couldn't break them down anymore.

"Even singing couldn't make me smile any longer. A music major who couldn't stand the sound of her own voice. A petty irony, really. It must have been several weeks since I'd seen another person, but she begged me to open the door. I'd seen her several times in our music theory class, but I didn't think she'd notice my absence. She'd collected all the class materials I'd missed, books and CDs and papers.

"She didn't blame me for not showing up all of second quarter. She didn't push me. She told me about herself, and I listened. At the end of our encounter, she smiled and left. She came back and told me stories... about her life on stage in leotards, about the cute waiter at the restaurant two blocks down, about everything. I only listened. She didn't give up on me, though. She came back, sometimes with a drink for me, other times with her favorite novels. I'd read them and laugh at her messy annotations. All this time, she stood by my side until I found my voice and told her my stories.

"One day I sang for her until I was broken by sobs and she hugged me until things felt right and the next day, I went to class. And now, now... I want to pull her up and embrace her and tell her stories the way she told me hers. Am I too late?" she asks.

"No, of course not," I assure. "Vianne."

"Yeah?"

"Sing for me."

She wipes away tears and searches for a song. Her voice starts hesitantly, but she finds strength in each verse, pride in every chorus.

*Go ahead as you waste your days with thinking
When you fall everyone stands
Another day and you've had your fill of sinking
With the life held in your
Hands are shaking cold
These hands are meant to hold*

*Speak to me, when all you got to keep is strong
Move along, move along like I know you do
And even when your hope is gone
Move along, move along just to make it through
Move along
Move along...*

I feel at ease, her voice rocking me into sleep's open arms.

*So a day when you've lost yourself completely
Could be a night when your life ends
Such a heart that will lead you to deceiving
All the pain held in your
Hands are shaking cold
Your hands are meant to hold*

My eyes close, but I am still listening.

*When everything is wrong, we move along
(go on, go on, go on, go on)
When everything is wrong, we move along
along, along, along*

Thank you, Vianne.

*When all you got to keep is strong
Move along, move along like I know you do*

*And even when your hope is gone
Move along, move along just to make it through*

I love you.

*(Go on, go on, go on, go on)
Right back what is wrong
We move along*

“Nyx?”

Drawn-out, cold silence.

“Say something! Nyx, please...” she begs, but a sinking realization breaks her into desperate cries. Only she can hear them now. “Nyx!”

We used to be alive together.