

Wandering Under a Yellow Sky

In my room, the plastic analog clock on my dresser is ticking. The sound reverberates in the stagnant silence, bouncing off the walls and invading my mind until all I hear is the roaring *tick, tick, tick*. I begin to count each tick: *one, two, three, four*, and I shift my head on my pillow and continue to stare at the dark ceiling, where the dim yellow glow from the streetlight outside reveals shadows of the old stickers I'd pasted on there when I was seven, all of them now scabbed, peeling, and dirty with years of dust.

Two hundred sixty seven, two hundred sixty eight—the pharmacist said the pills would take anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour to take effect. That seems like an awfully long time—you'd think prescription drugs were more effective. But considering that I haven't slept at all in over fifty-two hours, I'm more than happy to wait.

It's unsettling how quickly I changed my mind about my prescription. A few days ago (four days? five? they all blend into one never ending period when you don't sleep to section them out), while Izzie was driving me back home from the clinic as always, she showed me my therapist's note. "He's insane, prescribing you pills when he knows what just happened in February." Her eyes flitted over to me. "But if you want them, we'll go to the pharmacy now."

"Sure," I said, resting my head on the foggy car window. I didn't care what Izzie did for me. The rain stained the sky a heavy gray, only made worse by the exhaustion that hung thickly from my eyes and seeped into my bones.

For the first few days, I left the pills untouched in their orange plastic container. Every time I glanced at them, sitting innocently on the kitchen counter, my body would involuntarily shudder, like it was shaking off a demon. But a few hours ago, I was standing in front of the bathroom sink, staring down at the water running out of the faucet and disappearing into the drain as if fleeing from the bathroom light. The insomnia was the worst it had ever been. Izzy had walked in on me, and she sighed, the sound wheezing out of her throat like a strangled balloon. "Try one of those pills, little sister. You look awful."

Three hundred ninety one, three hundred ninety two—maybe my counting is making it worse. I stop and instead begin tracing the patterns on my blankets, following their twirling path with a fingernail. My arm makes a long, sliding sound against the covers, like the zipper on my

windbreaker when I would pull it up to my chin and go on my nightly walks. This is the first night I'm breaking my routine, and I sure hope it's worth it.

My mind lingers over how I'm missing the biting chill of the early morning, its raw stinging on my face a sharp reminder that I'm alive. I'm missing the still darkness, present hours before the sunrise and broken only by the uneven slapping of my beat-up sneakers against the sidewalk. For the past few weeks or so—I can't bother to remember when it all started—instead of joining the rest of the world in bed, I would wander down the rows of lawns littered with plastic garbage bags. (Strange bushes, my mother used to call them). I would wander past each tiny house with shingles covered in flourishing algae and creeping vines. I would wander under the dark sky until my feet throbbed and skin blistered from the late-winter cold.

On some nights, including the night outside my window right now, the sky was tinted yellow—a thick, deep, sickly yellow that suffocated the few stars that were normally bright enough to overcome the local light pollution. The yellow made my neighborhood seem like another planet, and I would be alone in the world, walking underneath this foreign atmosphere. Every night when the yellow sky would appear, I would stop in the middle of the deserted street and crane my head to gaze at its pulsing, bilious beauty.

Once, I mentioned the yellow sky to Izzie, who was chopping onions with a comically large butcher's knife at the time. Wiping her eyes with her arm, she had sighed. "That's called skyglow, sis. It's caused by pollution."

I decided not to tell her how I spent my nights soaking it in.

I stop tracing my finger along my blanket and try to concentrate on breathing. "Four seconds in, four seconds hold, seven seconds out," my therapist had instructed during a session a couple weeks ago. Sitting across from me in a fleecy gray armchair that smelled faintly of disinfectant, he demonstrated, then insisted I try. But while the breathing was supposed to relax my mind, with the falsely cheery *Not all who wander are lost!* posters glaring down at me, my breath could only come in quick, one-second bursts. After a few tries, he finally stopped with a sympathetic "when you get home, try it out on your own."

I hadn't, but since tonight is already proving itself to be such a night of change, maybe it'll help. I breathe and count, breathe and count, and at first I can feel my heart slowing down.

Maybe the pills are working! But during the third *hold - two, three, four*, the ticking of my clock creeps into my mind. It sneaks in quietly at first, but like a virus it spreads and fills my senses, drowning out everything with its unchanging march.

The ticking sounds like mechanicalized dripping water, which reminds me of the leaky faucet in the bathroom. Izzie kept meaning to call someone to fix it, but it had been weeks and still no one had come. So it kept dripping, and every morning when I trudged into the bathroom to wash my face, the basin would be wet from the faucet's tears.

Recently, I've had to be much more careful when I go to the bathroom, because there's the looming risk of glancing up and seeing the blue-gray bags under my eyes, which have only grown darker and deeper. The last time I saw my reflection, hate for the wrinkled skin layered on my face pumped through me like a poisonous drug. Skin tinted a laundry-lint gray, reflected back at me in a clouded, foreign image.

Tick, tick, tick. The clock is too loud; I can't hear myself breathe anymore. My eyes flick open to the shadows. In my haze of insomnia, the stickers on my ceiling look like they're dancing, circling around in a slow-motion *Danse Macabre*. I blink, and suddenly, the face of a woman appears among the dried adhesive. Her gaunt cheeks and tired eyes form themselves into a twisted smile—actually more of a grimace—and then she disappears. It was only for an instant, but I'd know her sunken eyes and pointed chin anywhere. I can almost hear her voice whisper surreptitiously from across the room: *Go do your homework. Ma needs to be alone right now.*

I squeeze my eyes shut and hug my blankets to me, spooked by the image and the memory. I'm reasonably certain that she's not real. My mother left for good about a month ago, and she can't come back even if she wanted to. But I'm so exhausted that I can't be sure. When she left in the past, swallowing handfuls of ashy pills in pitiful attempts to flee from this world, she always managed to find her way back. There had been hospital visits when I was nine, then thirteen, then three within the last two years, and each time, the rhythmic beeping of all the tangled machinery had told me that yes—she was still here. Stuck on the same world as mine.

But last month was different, I remind myself. Izzie had arranged everything, like she always has. The two of us had stared blankly down at our mother sleeping quietly in a cheap wooden casket, her face tinged a cold blue but looking the most peaceful I had ever seen her. I

had stared down at this familiar yet foreign face, trying to comprehend what my mother had hoped to find. I had stared until Izzie pulled me away and drove me home through the icy February night.

I brave a glance at the ceiling again. The stickers have stopped moving, and my mother is gone. I curl up on my side, every muscle aching, every hope of rest extinguished. The clock keeps ticking on, obnoxiously reminding me of every sleepless second that passes. I wonder what would happen if I stopped it—if I dared to cut short this interminable night. I had those pills. Izzie would take care of everything. (Like mother, like daughter, as they say.)

I wonder if my mother found whatever she was searching for. Is she happy in her new world, high up above the heavy yellow sky? If I showed up, would she finally smile at me, or would she only grimace and send me away?

My mind is bleary and filled with fog. I can't figure out the answers, and the clock won't shut up. It all irks me immensely.

I heave the blankets off of me and sit up. The blood empties from my head for a moment, and I nearly black out, but I hug my blankets and get a grip on myself. My fingers ache with aged weariness, but I trudge across my room and force them to wrap around the ugly plastic clock. I grab the infernal thing and hurl it against the wall with all the force that weeks of resentment can muster. My breath hikes, and I do it again, and again, until I hear Izzie's heels pounding towards my room. The ticking falls silent.

Izzie wrenches open my door, and I can just make out her outline, with her chest heaving and her eyes glinting fearfully in the dark. Before she can yell or scold or sigh, I push past her and stumble to the front door.

"I'm fine, Izzie," I say. "I'm going for a walk."

I turn and glide out the front door. My bare feet lightly slap the cool, concrete sidewalk below me. Above me, the yellow sky rolls and shifts and glows, watching me wander in the deserted night, listening to my feet tap out a new *tick, tick, tick* to their own leisurely time.