

“Luce”

It started in the summer of 2005.

I remember it clear as day, dark as night. The city raced around us and I lost my voice. Jake, my best friend since we were kids, wore the shoes I hated but they meant something or another to him so I allowed it. My hair was an inch too long, his temper a bit too scarce. But there we were; alone together on the rooftop of Forno Bistro for what seemed like the millionth time and the first time at the same time.

"Do you ever think about it?" Jake said, looking out at the city, toes on the very tip of the edge of the roof. Strangely, he looked like he could fall at any time. Usually, his stature resembles an incoming storm, unbreakable and inevitable. But today was different. He was off. I was afraid to answer, thinking my words may be just the thing to send him over.

Being the neurotic that everyone knows I am, every time you speak, I analyze every word. Do I ever think about it? That would be me, mimicking Jake's voice in my head. What kind of question is that? Of course I do. The funny thing is, I have these conversations with myself every day without really knowing the context. I get so tied up in the way words work that I can't bring myself to understand them so simply as everyone else. I caught him looking at me, expectant eyes pushing and prodding my brain waves, trying to coax me into the answer he wanted to hear. When this happens, I usually play dumb, or normal, whichever is suitable for the situation.

"Think about what? The sky at night?" I blinked my eyes slowly but never made eye contact. That's another trick I have up my sleeve. Look like you're in a movie. That way, people pay more attention to their surroundings and tend to change the subject to something more mundane. Jake knows me better than that though. I bit my bottom lip and felt the pinch of my own teeth. "No, well, yes. Do you ever think about how small we really are?" I remember fighting laughter in lieu of the moment. Two people standing on a roof overlooking the city and he's asking me if I feel tiny. I smile quietly to myself instead. He's still on the edge and has since turned his back to me, making me think the question is more rhetorical than anything.

I walk over to him and step up onto the ledge. I immediately feel a rush of cold air that knocks me off balance but not in a bad way. Jake doesn't move an inch, just watches me trying to see what he sees and feel what he feels. We do this a lot. Right now, I feel incredibly vulnerable, like everyone in the world can see me at this exact moment. I remember trying to justify that thought and coming up with nothing great, so I took a deep breath and steadied myself one more time before finally looking him in the face. "C'mon, Luce. We can't keep doing this. We come up here every weekend and just listen to each other talk about stupid shit that doesn't matter. When are we ever going to have something real to say?"

I always loved that he called me Luce. The only other person that did was my grandfather and he passed away last spring with no one around. Jake reminds me so much of him and I kind of resent him for that. So maybe I don't love that he calls me Luce after all. I wish every single day that I could have said goodbye or at least been there when it happened. Sometimes I think my grandfather would have had a little bit longer if I was there to tell him everything was okay.

"We talk about a lot of things, Jake." I am the queen of poor response. Probably because I like to keep to myself and communicating with other people is a feat in itself. I don't know which way is up when it comes to those kinds of things. I always leave too much room for interpretation, which I know annoys him to no end.

I bite my lip again, this time harder. I deserve it. Ever since my grandfather died, I haven't been able to keep my head straight. I feel it in my bones, a constant wavering, an uneasiness that is just stuck to me and cannot be plucked off no matter how long I let my fingernails grow. I feel Jake's eyes burning into me so I try again. "I mean, you know I've changed. Since the--well, you know. The funeral." There. That should end it. I never tagged myself as being cynical, but I realize now, I am. And I realize then that Jake's noticed it too.

That's when it hit me. You'd think with my constant analysis of everything I experience, I would have picked up on it sooner. I guess everyone is blind to emotion some way or another. Jake is still looking at me, waiting for some expert evaluation of my thought process, some sort of elaborate tale in which I confess that yes, I am bored and unable to string any kind of so-called 'real' sentences together in order to make this work. I have no faith in optimism anymore. What's the use? Everything is incredibly temporary anyways. Instead, all I can mumble is a lousy "I'm sorry". I feel my eyes start to tear up and as they do, the city below us blurs into a mess of lights and sound. My stomach lurches forward up into my throat and I feel like I've just swallowed a large rock.

"Luce? Are you alright?" Jake's voice is just an echo. I blink for the first time that I can remember all night. Everything instantly comes back into focus. "Yeah, sorry. I just—I'm sorry for the way I am now". Hearing those words is entirely different out loud than in my head. I look straight forward, trying my best to disappear. He reaches over and takes my hand and I almost flinch as he does so. I haven't been touched in so long. I can't remember the last time I even felt a sliver of intimacy, physically or otherwise. I finally swallow the rock. I wish I had something to wash it down with, the edges scraping the walls of my throat as it sinks once again to the pit of my stomach.

We are still standing on the ledge. It's only been 10 minutes since I hopped up next to him, but it feels like hours. His hand is still in mine. Although a bit cold and too big for my liking, it comforts me. Strangely, this is the first time in months that I've felt any sort of okay. The comfort hasn't washed over me like a miracle. Nowhere close. In fact, it's only pricked the surface, but it's enough to get my blood going and my head tingling. For all the shit he talks about existentialism and how small we really are in comparison to the 'oh so grand' universe, Jake sure knows how to create a moment. Maybe that's why I remember this night so well. He was different, he was off,

he was new. I fixated on that fact and relished the thought of us being something more than Lucy and Jake. A little inconsistency never hurt anyone, right?

But then I stopped. My instinct to overanalyze kicked in again and I started getting nervous. I could feel my hand sweating in his and that made it worse. I shook my wrist away and stepped down from the ledge. "I have to go", I said almost breathlessly, headed for the stairwell with no intent of turning around to see his reaction. I pushed open the door to the stairs with all my might and felt the hot air from inside sink into my skin and the crack of the door as it hit the cement wall behind it. I felt myself slow down as my brain got dizzy and my lungs fought for oxygen. I ran down two flights of stairs to the hallway of apartments that were above Forno. The funny thing is, we didn't actually know any of the tenants. For coming to this rooftop almost every weekend for the past month, you'd think we'd at least have brushed someone else's shoulder or caught a name or two in passing.

I turned the corner to reach the stairs leading out to the street and hit something hard. My mind went blank as I found myself on the floor, sprawled out on the carpet confused. I looked up, shielding my eyes from the harsh hallway light and I saw a hand outstretched in my direction. "Are you okay?" An unfamiliar voice filled the hall. It was deep and sultry, like coffee beans right out of the bag. He smelled like cedar and didn't seem hardly as phased as I must have looked.

"Are you okay?" He repeated himself almost exactly in the same tone and tempo as I wiped my eyes and took his hand. He brought me to my feet and I managed a small "Yea, sure" as I walked quickly past him down to the stairs to the street. The summer air was hot as my feet hit the sidewalk on Milwaukee Street. I had no sense of what time it was. I have a terrible habit of not being particularly aware of that sort of thing. I get so caught up in the here and now that the past and future become mere brushstrokes in a complex painting by some artist I've never even heard of or care to know.

I heard Jake call my name from the roof. I was surprised that he didn't come chasing after me, but I guess that's every girl's expectation with a boy you kind of sort of think you could have a thing with. I ignored him and kept walking. My walk quickly turned into a run and soon I found myself running faster than I ever had before. I made it home in half the time it usually takes by metro. Or at least it seemed that way. Jake and I always took the metro down to Forno on the weekends. We both live on the other side of the city where everything is happening all at once and you can barely think straight. I always met him at the Red Line downtown; he always came up behind me and scared me. He really has a child's enthusiasm. I hated him for that, but I was learning to deal with it. At least then I knew, for a few seconds, someone was looking for me.

I opened my front door and crept quietly into my dark apartment. I fell onto my bed face first, my breathing stifled by the handmade quilt my mother had sewn me last Christmas. I let the scent of home seep into my nostrils and latch onto my hair and clothes. Everything was finally still.

Slowly, I rolled over onto my back to face the ceiling fan. I watched as the blades went round and round but never changed. Such consistency for something that is almost constantly in motion. I

counted the revolutions up to thirty when I heard a knock at the door. For a split second, I thought about pretending I wasn't in my apartment. But then, in a random act of martyrdom, I found myself getting off the bed and walking to the door. I watched my seemingly alien hands turn the three locks counter clockwise and pull open the door.

There in front of me was the coffee-voiced man who I quite literally ran into not an hour prior. How did he know where I lived? Did Jake tip him off? Why was he even here? I felt my mouth dry up and my limbs shake. "Well, can I come in?" He had a voice I liked enough for a stranger's and an already proven courteous nature, so I stepped aside and let him in. For some reason, that night I needed something or someone I never knew before. I needed something fresh or dangerous or just plain strikingly unabridged. Sure, Jake holding my hand mid-panic was certainly new, but that sort of instinctual nurturing was kind of expected from the boy I grew up with.

"What are you doing here?" I stammered. "How did you find me?"

He had been looking around my apartment, undoubtedly judging me for my taste in thrifted home décor and Mommy-made quilts. His eyes met mine and without saying a word, he pulled something from his jacket pocket. "You left this...at the bistro. Er, I mean, well, I found it on the floor after you left." In his hand was my necklace. The one I always wear no matter what outfit I choose. It has a small watch pendant that opens and you can hear ticking if you hold it close enough to your ear. On the inside, there's an engraving that says 'Time will tell'. My grandfather gave it to me the day before he died.

"I've seen you around before", the man said softly, still holding the necklace outstretched. I gradually took my eyes from the pendant and met his. "You and that kid hang around the bistro a lot. You're always up on the roof talking. I never hear you laugh, though."

"His name's Jake," I say shyly. "He's my best friend. Who are you?" I'm scared to know the answer to that question but sorely intrigued as well. I bite my lip in the same spot I did earlier in the night and find that it's bulged into a small open wound. I cover it with my hand lightly and can feel how hot my breath has become. It smells like the wine I had at dinner that was far too bitter but I drank anyway to feel the room pulse. I remember wanting something stiffer. Maybe then I wouldn't be so ill prepared for what happened next.

The man took a deep breath of my stale apartment air and looked at me hard. "Lucy, I'm your brother." The words came through my ears and melted into my skull, dripping down my spine. It set my skin on fire as I could feel every hair on my body stand up like a porcupine's quills in defense. I felt the room pulse, but this time it wasn't wanted, like a loud drum in my head that wouldn't stop. I fell backwards and cried out, "Nate?" before crumpling into a pile onto the floor. Nate rushed to my side and opened my left hand to place the necklace between my frail little fingers. I couldn't think. All I could do was look at this stranger who I let into my house; who I let confess something I frankly could not believe was true. Not after all these years.

My brother, Nate, was someone I didn't remember. From what my mother told me, we were ten years apart. She had him when she was sixteen and, with self-righteous judgment, gave him up for adoption when he was born. That was all I knew. There were no videos, no photos, no phone calls. He existed purely in my imagination and exactly as he was in front of me now: a stranger. I was at a loss for words. I struggled to bend my fingers back towards me to grasp the necklace he had placed in my trembling hand.

"I know this is sudden and you probably never thought you'd meet me or even know me at all. But here I am. I won't hurt you, I promise. I want to know you, little sister. I want to be a part of your life. I brought you your necklace because I know how much he meant to you." Nate said all of this with such hasty confidence. His eyes were pleading, my heart was beating so fast I swore it was audible. I switched my glance between the necklace and Nate, back and forth, trying to make sense of the situation and failing miserably. "It's okay," he said reassuringly. "I'm here now." But it wasn't. I wanted to run just like I ran from Jake. I wanted to scream and for Nate to leave and for things to go back to normal, but I knew right then, they never would. It was like my grandfather dying all over again. Everything was pulled from me, leaving me naked, barren and unable to process. Nate hugged me tight and that cedar smell I barely recognized before now became eerily familiar and comforting.

We sat on my bedroom floor for a long time. We talked about how he grew up never knowing my mother or me, but hearing stories and meeting people that did. He began putting together the pieces when he was about my age. He wanted to find us so badly he moved to the same city and kept collecting clues. It was pure coincidence that Jake and I found the rooftop at Forno and began staking a claim every weekend. It was pure luck that Nate picked the one apartment above the bistro, the one he didn't really like but fit his budget perfectly. I thought it odd he didn't ever try to contact us directly, but he explained he wanted it to happen the way it did: on accident. I guess patience does run in my family after all.

I began to open up to him as well, something I am definitely not known for, especially with people I've just met. My entire life, my heart felt like it was being kept inside a metal cage, locked away for only me to figure out. But tonight, I felt free. For the first time since my grandfather died I felt safe. Expressing myself, telling my side of things, being vulnerable wasn't scary. I wasn't overthinking or analyzing what came next. The words just floated out of me, into the air and into Nate's ears like they were meant to be heard. I told him about the nights Jake and I spent on the rooftop and filled in the blanks where he had listened in and known it was me all along. I understood Jake's curiosity now, about how small we really are; how fragile life really is. I looked at the necklace in my hands. I traced the engraving with my thumb. I mouthed the words: 'Time will tell'.

I knew then why my grandfather gave it to me. It was such a compelling realization. Things can change so abruptly, arresting you and everything you've ever known. Holding your mind hostage until you give in and accept it as it is in its newfound form. But the thing is, change is the only constant and time stops for no one. My grandfather couldn't evade death the same way I couldn't predict the future.

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I learned that sometimes, you can't run from everything. Things always have a way of catching up to you when you least expect it because life is an infinite race. When you think you're in the lead, you always forget you've got a blind spot. And that's when it happens. You see it occurring in pieces, in short blips until your brain makes sense of what's actually going on. Those first few seconds of the unknown are where most of us will pause to examine our surroundings, where we question how we were ever naive enough to let our guard down.

It's only when the race is over, your muscles aching and your lungs sharp and wretched that you realize, though you trained most of your life for moments like this, you never really had a fighting chance in the first place.