

Heartbreak Incarnate

By Emily Bittner

I remember being encased in black. The feeling of never-ending emptiness threatened to consume me whole as it swallowed me from the inside out. I felt everything and nothing at the same time. I didn't notice it at first, the emptiness. I suppose I had never truly known any different. I didn't notice I had been asleep until I awoke.

I can only assume that I wasn't truly alive until she died. The beautiful, petite girl lying idle beside me. Her hair swept out in thick tendrils along the ground. Her hands crossed delicately on top of her chest—a chest that is no longer rising and falling as it should—right over her heart. A heart that has long lost its rhythm. I gently place two fingers against the side of her neck. I know I won't find anything, but I try regardless. I have long since forgotten the pure serenity of her beautiful heart that used to beat so strong. She no longer wakes me up, now too tired and hurt to do anything besides allow me to naturally wake.

I did meet her once; that first time she came to me, on the verge of tears still holding her head high, to wake me up. She lit up every room that she was brought into with a unique, warm light. A light of soft pink with tints of a golden sunrise. Everyone knew her. Everyone felt her somewhere deep inside themselves. She was always around; at the table of Grandpa and Grandma's weekly dinner date, held tightly between the arms of two best friends, tucked deep within a toddler's stuffed animal that they dragged with sticky fingers to every family event. She danced between the fingers of a mother braiding her daughter's hair and slept peacefully beside the dog curled in its best friend's lap. No one ever saw her, but they could feel her. With each beat of their own hearts, they felt hers respond in time. Warming every person that she came into contact with.

Unfortunately, no matter how much Love gave herself away to others, she still often got hurt. By the lies and broken promises thrown her way. By the best friends and parents who left. By Care, who always seemed to come and go. And by the people who traded her for others like Lust and Apathy. These are the reasons why I'm here. Love came to lay beside me, slumping to the ground where she finally allowed herself to break. And as she cried herself to sleep, I was pulled out of the blackness. Hauled out of the depths of despair to take on the pain for her.

I am Love, battered and broken, in a state of distress; Heartbreak.

I slowly remove my fingers from the side of her neck, allowing her to rest in peace until she is to be woken again. The feeling of her warm skin clings to my hand like a ghost as all of her memories come flooding through me. The rushing waters of remembrance crashing into me over a broken dam. This time, it was a boy. A very sweet boy who loved with all of his heart. But it was not this boy that Love was residing within, it was a girl. The quiet girl from his art class. The girl who dropped her eraser in front of him and they knocked heads as they tried to retrieve it, giggling slightly before they apologized to one another. The girl who smiled at his lousy jokes and awful pick-up lines. The girl that he took on a date to that adorable cafe that she hadn't yet had time to visit.

Where they each got a cup of coffee and shared a blueberry muffin—her favorite. After their second date, he walked her home and kissed her under the light of the porch. The first kiss of many to be shared between them, freckled across her cheeks, nose, and lips.

I'm not sure when Love came to welcome the girl, but it is crystal clear when she was no longer wanted. Clear as an icicle dripping beneath the tiles of a roof, the image of him holding another's hand reflected back into Love's own eyes. She tried and tried to convince the girl to hold on, to hope for the best, but the girl refused. That's when Love came to lay her head down beside mine.

I begin to feel all of the pain that Love would never allow herself to feel. All of the emotions are bubbling around inside me like a boiling pot of spoiled meat that's likely to overflow. I cover my face with my hands, warm tears rolling down my eyes steadily, soaking into my cold fingers. I don't know how to handle all of it at once. I think I'm hyperventilating, or maybe I'm screaming, I'm not sure. I am once again thrown into that place where I can feel everything yet nothing at all.

As I begin to fall deeper and deeper within myself, two frail hands clasp tenderly around my wrists, pulling them from my face. Before me, sitting cross-legged on the ground, is an old woman. Her silver hair is pulled tightly into a neat bun on the top of her head. Her gray glasses perched at the very edge of her pointed nose.

I watch as she brings slender fingers up to my too-warm cheeks to brush away the tears. "Now don't you worry your pretty little head about that darlin'," her voice comes out with an accent, a mix between something warm, comforting, and resolved. "There really is no reason to be feeling all that hurt".

"What do you mean?" I ask quietly.

"Well now dear, that boy didn't really mean any harm. I'm sure by tomorrow you'll be right back in his arms again, and he won't ever even think of lettin' you go".

Her words sounded too good to be true. Because they're not true. She couldn't possibly be right. I saw the boy with his arm around her, smiling and laughing like he used to with Love. But when the woman speaks again, I finally realize who she is, "Now you dry those tears and you tell that beautiful young girl to talk to him again. You two will have him back soon, that I am sure of." Denial. The woman's name is Denial.

I know I shouldn't listen to her. Her promises ring out with emptiness. They are untrue at best, lies at their very worst. And yet, they are so comforting. Those hollow promises encase me in imagined warmth, wrapping their gnarled fingers around my shoulders to hold me close. As I sit with them, holding them close to my heart, they begin to feel real. They are no longer empty, but instead fill me with hope. Denial pulls me into her arms as well, cradling my head against my chest as she hums softly, more to herself than to me as satisfaction seems to fill her veins. But I don't mind, because I feel warm and safe in her arms. It's as if that spoiled meat stew has been reduced to a simmer and was forgotten as we placed an old lid atop the pot.

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I wake up with my head still pressed close against the old lady's chest. I didn't even notice I had fallen asleep. As I come to my senses, I slowly remember everything that happened the night before, all in excruciating detail. I don't like this feeling. Rather than feeling better, happier, I feel trapped within her mangled fingers. I feel as though a hand is pressed firmly over my mouth, holding it closed so tightly that I almost can't breathe, can't think, can't scream for help.

I thought she would be able to make me feel better, but she did not. Denial has me trapped within her arms, held captive by her lies. I feel as though they are going to swallow me whole. I realize now that this is not what I wanted. I do not want to be trapped in a web of lies forever. I don't believe them, I *can't* believe it.

I want to scream.

So I do.

I scream until my voice breaks. I hope the sound makes her eardrums shatter. Denial's hands release their grip around my shoulders to cover her ears. I take the opportunity to shove her hard to the ground. I am shaking, my whole body is warm, and I can't stop yelling and screaming. I want to throw things. I want to break things, but there is nothing here. Just an endless expanse of white. I can't breathe. I feel the earth crumbling around me. Each one of my screams tearing up a fresh layer of the earth, only to reveal more white beneath.

I can feel every flake of that stupid color. I can feel the utter lack of warmth and care within the boring notches of the ground. It makes me feel something I don't understand. Something fiery and short-tempered. Something *angry*.

Two rough hands yank me backwards to throw me to the ground, leaving Denial completely forgotten in the colorless pool of my frustration. I turn my gaze to the man who has pushed me down, now standing above me, glaring at me. He is a short, surly man with a long scruffy beard, muscles, and odd tattoos peeking out from under the sleeves of his leather jacket. As the man crouches beside me, his face still flush with scorn, I realize who I'm looking at; Anger.

Grabbing my chin tightly, he forces me to look at him, "What is your problem? Why are you so damn loud?"

I pull my face out of his grasp and slap his hand away, "I hadn't realized that my screaming would find a way to offend you. Are you incapable of ignoring things that bother you, or do you just have an insatiable need to shove your big nose in other people's business?"

My words seem to impress him and his face softens into a devilish smile, "Oh I think I'm gonna like you." He's in my head and it's too late for me to go back now. He already has me wrapped around his meaty little finger and I hate it. Anger keeps a smug smile on his face. He is the one who dragged me under, forced my knees to break while knocking me to the ground. He watched as the world crumbled around me and *he enjoyed it*. The more upset I get, the more it seems to fuel his ego. Feeding off of me like a starved rat left to die in an empty sewer; just when the old rat had finally given up all hope, a fresh dead animal was thrown at his feet.

Anger has me right where he wants me.

Before I can say another word, he shows me a boy. *The boy with his arm wrapped around that other girl. She throws her head back in a laugh so full it makes me sick. If I look close enough, I can see Happiness sitting on her shoulder and laughing with her. My world is a fiery pit, and I want everything to burn. I want his hands to burn where he touches her, leaving a line of smoke and ashes in his wake, burning through her before he can even think of saving her. I want his brain to char, for him to know that it is his fault. It is all his fault. Our girl is crying because of him. His new girlfriend is nothing but ash on the wind because of him. I hope he comes to realize this, and I hope it haunts him. I want his heart to be so clouded by smog that he will never see Love again. I want him to feel Anger. I want him to feel regret for what he did.*

Maybe Anger is right; he is going to like me, and I'm really starting to like him. "I hate him," I tell Anger, my eyes not leaving him.

"Good, why?" he replies with a conniving smirk, leaning in.

"You know why," he is really beginning to get on my nerves.

"I want to hear you say it. Why do you hate him?"

"Because he cheated on her," I'm yelling again but I couldn't care less, "He left her for some random girl. A random girl that he told her not to worry about before dumping her and leaving! So excuse me for being mad at him. For being mad at her. It's not my fault that they both think it was okay to hurt that girl the way they did."

"Mmm," he hums, as if he is drinking up my anger, drop by drop. He slides his hand over my waist, eyes glowing. "Say it again. Say you're mad at them. Tell me that you hate them," his tongue is dripping honey, drunk on the flavor of my fury.

"I hate them. I hate them both so much. I hate them. I hate them!" I bury my face in my hands, feeling a pang of guilt rush through me suddenly like a stab to the gut. A wound that sends me to my knees and opens the floodgates.

"Hey, hey! What are you doing? Why are you crying? Stop that right now," Anger yells while trying to pull my hands away from my face, wiping the tears from my cheeks but I don't care. I think he's scratching at my face, digging his muddy little paws through my pores, but I can't feel it. I think even if he slapped me right now, I wouldn't have it in me to care. I am lost; my mind has completely gone somewhere else. I still want to scream, I still want to break something, now I may even want to punch Anger in the face; but more than any of that, I realize I don't hate that boy. And I certainly don't hate the new girl, I don't even know her.

I think I'm the one that I hate.

I don't know what's wrong. I'm not sad, but I am no longer angry either. Staring aimlessly at the white ground before me, I don't really feel much of anything. I just want him back. I want her to have him back.

The yelling and scratching stopped a while ago, I guess I didn't even notice Anger leave. There is a shadow standing over me, one that is too small to be Anger. The woman standing over me reminds me a little of Denial. Although she seems to be at least thirty years younger, she holds herself with the same certainty that Denial did.

She is a short girl with wide hips and an apathetic face. Her short black hair is bone-straight and perfectly frames her face. Her fingers are interlaced in front of her body, holding steady.

She stands there watching me, surveying, but does not say a word. I don't know who this woman is, yet I feel a strong pull to tell her how I'm feeling. Even though she has not asked, I tell her, "I want him back. Please, I will do anything to have him back." Surely she can help me. If I can just figure out what we did wrong then he'll come back to us. My girl can fix it and he will want her back. I know he will.

Her voice is cold when she replies, "I can't do that."

"What do you mean? No, there has to be a way. Just tell me what we did wrong. We can fix it. We can fix it and then he will come back to us."

"You didn't do anything wrong," her voice is again unmoving, static.

"No, no," I shake my head rapidly, placing my face in the palms of my hands, "No we must have done something wrong. We were always doing things wrong. Maybe if she had talked to him less? She did tend to ramble, so maybe that was it. This time no more rambling, no more talking at all. She'll only listen, always, then he'd like her again and would want to come back to her. And maybe I— I don't know. Maybe she could plan more dates with him in the way that he wants. Yeah...yeah, we'll do things his way. Then Love can come back and everything will go back to normal, back to the way it should be. Please just tell me what to do," I say, desperation dripping from my words.

I am begging her, on my knees, to save me. To bring him back to us. I need him. We need him. She provides me no solace, no reprieve from the pain. Just a simple dismissal of my cries by the shake of her head. I don't understand, I thought she was here to help me. I thought we could make a deal. She stares at me with no expression on her face, no explanation within reach. I feel paralyzed.

"Please. There has to be something you can do. I'll do anything," I whisper, the tears beginning to flow. "I'll truly do anything. I just want him back."

Her face softens mildly as she finally looks at me, truly *looks* at me, "You can beg and plead all you want, but there is nothing I can do to fix this. What's done is done." I watch her walk right past me, hands still clasped in front of her as she avoids eye contact. I watch her move until she is completely out of sight, swallowed by the sea of white around me.

I am alone.

The weight of disaster crushes me, pushing down on my lungs and attempting to thwart my will to survive. No one is here to save me, absolutely no one. It is quiet around me but there is a storm raging in my mind, one I cannot understand. Thunder booms and lightning cracks but I feel nothing. Waves crash heavily against me, but the only water that remains on me is a single tear rolling down my cheek. The pain caught somewhere between the fabric of time, leaving me frozen and numb. Everything is so loud around me, scraping holes through my eardrums, yet there is no sound here. There are only miles of white floating space that is just as unsettling as the current look of my mind.

“It’s all your fault...you are the problem,” a weak voice sniffles. I’m not sure where it is coming from, but it continues to carry through the space where it rattles around in my brain. “You deserve to be upset. Look at you. You’ve scared everyone away. You are a complete mess. No wonder that boy didn’t want to stick around, she can’t even handle her own emotions. You deserve to stay there in a puddle of your own tears.”

“Stop it,” I scream, the sound tearing out of my throat. The screech of it echoes through the emptiness, carrying itself on the wind until it is nothing but a speck of dust. I spin around slowly trying to locate the source of the voice, but there is no one else here. I truly am all alone.

“Oh come on, don’t you recognize me?” the voice taunts. My mouth is open, my throat dry. *The voice is coming from me.* It is my voice that is speaking to me, degrading me. It is my voice tearing me apart from within my own mind.

“Please stop,” I whisper.

“Unfortunately, I can’t do that. You’re doing this to yourself. It’s out of my control.”

I begin to shake, the tears streaming further down my face now. I’m clawing at the sides of my head, trying desperately to tear the voice out from within me, “Leave me alone. Please. Stop. Stop!” I’m incoherent, yelling out words in hopes that the voice inside me will listen.

“Wow. You really are pathetic, aren’t you?”

“Stop it.”

“Stop what? Is the truth too much for you to handle? Your pathetic little mind can’t take it?”

I begin to yell again, screaming the word “stop” over and over and over and it won’t stop and I’m spiraling over and over and the world is spinning and it’s too loud saying things to me over and over and over and over and I want to scream but I can’t breathe at all and it just keeps hurting me over and over and over and over and over and over and over again.

Then, suddenly, with one final scream, everything goes silent. The quiet hangs around me like dust on an old fan. The voice has ceased and my throat is raw and tastes faintly of iron. I’m so very tired. I just want to go to bed and sleep forever. I think that would be nice; no more people, no more pain, and no more love.

No more Love.

I glance back to where her frail body had been and I can see her again. I had gotten so lost in myself that I forgot she was here. I forgot that she was even obtainable. I forgot that I didn’t have to be alone.

Love lies near me, beautiful as ever. I admire her face as I let her light flood over me, coating me in lasting warmth. Sometimes I wish I could be her, that I could lie with Happiness and Contentment forever, basking in the glory of our well-executed risks.

Unfortunately, that’s simply not possible.

I realize with a heavy heart, that this is who I am. I am not meant to last. I am expendable, temporary, a place-holder for pain. I am only here to ensure that Love does not have to ever feel that hurt. To make sure that she is always and forever shining her beautiful light.

I take everything that is thrown at her and allow it to crash into me with my head held high. I have taken it all this time. I have weathered the whole storm that we were meant to pass through, patched up all the scuffs and scrapes from the journey, and carefully concealed all of the bruises caused by the stones that were thrown my way. That simply means that my job is done, I've been rendered futile and unwanted.

So now I must lay my head back down where I began, curled up quietly beside Love as she awaits her turn to be awoken once again. A single tear rolls down my cheek as I close my eyes and finally allow myself to be resubmerged into the darkness.