

## Storming

I sit in the airport terminal, with my boots propped on my bag. I absently brush my bangs out of my face; the black strands startle me. My knees are tight, close together. A sketch pad bounces against my bare thigh as I wiggle my foot back and forth. The page holds half the face of a smiling child. Her mother pulled her away before I could finish. I try from memory, but she slips out of my head.

I sigh, check my watch. I have to read it three or four times before I figure out what time it is. Thirty-two minutes until my plane leaves. I wish he were here, playing his imaginary guitar. I'd watch the storm roil under the high ceilings, blacking out the obscenely bright lights.

I glance out the windows, watch the planes graze their way across the runway like gentle dinosaurs feeding. The sun glints off the bright metal of their backs, and I frown. My shaking foot stills. I didn't notice the zipper on my boot jingling until it stopped.

It isn't storming – no sweet drops of rain against the glass. I should be happy – my flight will be on time – but I need the skies to open up, the thunder to scream. I need the tears, tears, tears of the sky. I need the storm to be my biggest fan right now, to know I'm doing this right.

It was raining last night; the lightning was slashing sideways, breaking off into dozens of other tributaries of electricity, and he and I were sitting in my garage, avoiding saying goodbye.

I said, "I hope it rains like this on the night of my wedding." And then I breathed deeply, inhaling in the incense of cloves and thunderstorms. "It'd be wrong to waste this on a funeral or something."

"Aren't days like this supposed to be sad?" His fingers moved, as if he held a guitar between his hands, the source of the lightning music.

"That's a misconception."

We sat on the back of my car, peering out into the wall of water. I smoked, he played.

He chuckled suddenly. "In high school, when it rained too hard, teachers couldn't lecture because it was so loud. Remember?"

"Yeah. Not like we ever paid attention, though, right?"

His head shook. I marveled at his dark hair, full of Elmer's glue and hair gel. "We had more important things to think about than fractions and Shakespeare." He said softly. "I was so in love with you."

"Was!" I gaped jokingly. "I think you still are."

The rainfall slammed down, like grenades. We fell silent, our laughter lost. Is God listening now? Is he crying?

"What are you going to do?" His voice was strong and wet and impossible to not feel in my bones.

The suitcase on which I rested my feet seemed to have transferred its weight into the sigh I heaved in response. "I'm not sure." It was the most honest thing I'd said in years. "Maybe I'll follow the storm."

"Nah, don't do that." He stood up, stretched and grinned. His lip ring caught the lightning, reflecting it into those blue eyes. His guitar fingers stilled. The rain seemed to have stilled too. "It'll follow you."

The garbled voice of a flight attendant calls a number, and I blink and his face fades out from the forefront of my mind, like a bad movie effect. I check my boarding pass before standing and sling my bag onto my shoulder, smooth my skirt, take a deep breath. I walk to the gate. My future waits in another part of the world, a world that isn't mine. I have a layover in France, but I'll reach Spain soon enough.

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The clouds look like factory smoke. It's whiter than any other kind, puffing. Happy clouds in a clear sky. Where I grew up, there was a wind farm right next to a factory farm, and I'd sit on the fence across the highway and watch the windmills blow the smoke away. I lean against the cool glass of the airplane window. The sky smoothes by. Propellers suck the clouds and spit them out as wisps of smallness.

A little girl sits beside me. She can't be older than eight. Her mother is across the aisle, engaged in conversation with some young guy with a French accent. There's a flirty tone in her voice, and I feel sorry for the kid. I know what it feels like to be the baggage. She tugs at the sleeve of my jacket. Her smile is soft. "Why do you look like that?"

My eyebrows lift. "Like what, hun?"

"Your make-up. You look like a vampire."

I grin, shrug, and shift around, resting my elbow on the armrest and my chin in my hand. A purple finger taps against my cheek. "Sometimes, people like to look different. Haven't you ever dressed up to feel pretty?"

She nods, wide-eyed. "Yes, but not like you..."

Next thing I know, we're rummaging through my bag. My mascara and red lipstick are discovered quickly, and after a bit more digging, my compact follows. She giggles, and her mother doesn't seem to care that a stranger is making up her daughter. But she's such a pretty girl and, with the bright red lipstick and dark mascara framing her grey eyes, she's a miniature Snow White.

She grins. I swipe a spot of lipstick off her front tooth. She pushes her tongue across her teeth, sucks lightly to make sure it's off, and I smile at the instinctive motion. "We look like sisters now. Look!" She holds the compact up - half her face, half mine.

“Yeah, we do.” But, we don’t at all. Her skin is china; mine is sand. Those bright eyes hold dreams that her negligent mother hasn’t squelched yet.

Her frown is unexpected. “Why are you sad?”

The compact snaps shut, and I slide it back into my purse. “I’m not. I’m just nervous. I’m starting a whole new life today.”

She nods, eyebrows furrowed thoughtfully. “What happened to your old one?”

The statement makes me smile. I can only remember thinking the same thing a few hours ago. I shrug. “It’s still there, if I want it. It’s just trapped in a boring little town.”

She giggles. “Well, where are you going now?” She leans in toward him, those eyes wide again, and I can smell her breath: chocolate milk and peanut butter. “What are you going to do?”

I gently push her back into her seat when the airplane lurches with turbulence. “I’ve got a job in Barcelona. I’m going to be learning and working.”

She clicks her tongue. “That sounds awful.” She gestures toward her mother. “I’m going to see my daddy. He lives in, um...” She opens her notebook, then grins at me. “Toulouse! But, he’ll be in Paris when we get there, on a business trip, so he’s going to meet us. I’m going to live with him for a while. I don’t know French, but Mom says I’ll learn.”

My chest feels tight, and I hate her mother more. The girl is too young to even know she’s being abandoned. I stroke her hair back. “It will be.” I assure her. “Your dad will be very excited to have you around.”

The corners of her eyes and mouth smooth out, serenity settling in her eyes. “What’s that?” She points at my sketchpad, and the next thing I know I’m sketching her, dramatic make-up and all. I’m glad I have my colored pencils because she’s too bright to be black-and-white. After I’ve taken her to the bathroom to wipe off the make-up and she’s fallen asleep against my shoulder, I see the rain.

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She won’t get off the plane without holding my hand, and I’m okay with that. Her mother has latched onto the Frenchman and doesn’t notice her daughter. So, I collect our bags, and hold her hand tight as we step off the plane. I wish I could say it’s only for her benefit, but I could use a friend right now, someone to hug. I wish he was here, the optimist.

In high school, he thought I was lonely. He’d follow me around, offer me CDs he thought I’d like, suggest books I should read. While he was usually right, I found him so annoying that I never accepted. It wasn’t until we were stuck sharing a table in our senior-year art class that we became friends. He was terrible, but it didn’t bother him.

We changed each other. I’m a student of art now; I’m off to Spain to apprentice myself to an artist. He knows he deserves better than mediocre. He’s left behind four bands now; he knows what he’s looking for with his music.

“Daddy!” She breaks my thoughts, and her hand slips from mine. In a moment, she’s past security, and is swept up in the arms of a tall man in a two-piece suit. She doesn’t look back, doesn’t wave, and that’s okay. I turn back toward the terminal, where I’ll be waiting for my plane.

“Gwen!” I look over my shoulder. He’s there, hands stuffed in his pockets. His hair’s wet, flat on his head, not shot into a Mohawk, and I’m not surprised to see him. I don’t think before I start walking.

I’m in his arms, and he’s hugging me close. “What are you doing here?”

My hands smooth against the shoulders of his jacket. There are drops of water on the black leather. “I came to make sure you do what you want.” His voice is quiet, and I hate him for knowing me so well. “Everyone needs support now and then. Besides, I’ve never been to France.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Me neither.”

He smiles, wags his boarding pass at me. “I’ll go with you if you want me to.”

“I know you will.” We had this conversation long ago, when I first told him about this offer.

He rubs his thumb against my cheek. I bat him away. “You don’t want me to go?”

“No.”

“Then I won’t. Consider this me seeing you off.”

I hug him again. I feel like I’m saying goodbye to a lover. “You’re the only family I’ve got, you know.”

“I know.” His arms are strong, tight around my back. “When you decide where you’re going, let me know. I’ll meet you there.”

“Deal.” I push him away, blink rapidly to avoid crying. “I’ll send you a postcard, okay? Keep you up-to-date.”

He licks his lips, runs his fingers through his hair, and it curls into a spiky wet mess. He flicks the water off his hand. “I’m always around, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.” I push his shoulder. “Get out of here, dude. You need to go buy a ticket back to the States.”

He shakes his head slowly. “I think I’m going to hang out here for a while. See how good my French is.”

He has no place to stay and no plans for what he’ll do here, and we both know that. There’s no use scolding him; he won’t change his mind. “I’d offer you my umbrella, but it’s in one of my checked bags. You gonna be okay walking around in the rain?”

“Yeah. A little rain never hurt me.” He grins. “Don’t worry, Gwen. I’ll be fine. So will you.”

They’re words I need to hear so I can walk away. “I should head back to the terminal.”

“I know.”

“I love you, dude.”

“I know that too.” He laughs. I punch his arm. “You’re going on an adventure.”

“Yeah, in a way.”

“You better make the most of it.”

I stick my tongue out. “I always do.” It’s a lie. We both know it.

I don’t like dragging things out. We hug again. He presses his lips to my cheek; they’re chapped. “I love you too.”

We smile at each other, and I turn around, adjust my bag on my shoulder and start walking. I know he doesn’t watch me go. We’re not that sentimental. He has this funny way of knowing exactly when we’ll see each other again, so I’m sure he’s not as nervous as I am.

Two hours later, I board my plane with no idea what I’m going to do. I feel almost as if my best friend hadn’t just flown seven hours to see me off in Paris. I feel like nothing’s changed at all. There’s a frightening feel of nothing ahead of me, like everything I’ve planned seems to have vanished, and I’m heading into a city that has nothing for me.

But, I’m too proud to care about that fear as I step off the plane. I’m too proud to be terrified as I gather my luggage and dig into my pocket for the address I’m supposed to give a taxi driver. I’m too proud to admit that this isn’t where I should be at all.

I roll my suitcases out into the Barcelona summertime. I stare up at the sky: clear and blue, like a dome of chlorinated water. I take a deep breath, hail a cab in what little Spanish I know. The driver, a stocky man with dark skin and slick hair, helps me throw my suitcases into the trunk and holds the door open for me to slide into the backseat. He asks me where I’m going. I look down at the address. The paper is creased from how many times I’ve folded it, opened it, stared at it, memorized it, folded it again. He asks again, with a curious “*Senorita?*” added on the end.

I hand him the address. I smile at him in the rearview mirror and say, “As far from there as you can take me.”

His brow furrows, but he pulls out onto the road. Barcelona’s a big city, and when I leave the taxi, I’ll owe him a lot. That’s okay though. As we drive along, and I stare up at the buildings, the clouds roll in. A few minutes later, the drops start to ping off the windshield. I close my eyes, lean back, think of clove cigarettes and imaginary guitars.