

The contents of the hearts of others have never been any mystery to me. I see past the fleeting superficial surface colors, the sunny yellow of calm, the icy blue of a victim, the red fire of the untouchable, to the broader subtler core. But while I see into others hearts as though they were made of glass, my own heart, seemingly, is shielded by walls of iron, so that even when I press my ear to its surface, I cannot hear what my heart is trying to tell me.

"Arya!" Black with bolts of red on the surface, but underneath lurked a vast ocean of white. I did not open my eyes.

"Where were you?" Mia's voice was tending more towards red now, and getting nearer.

I slit my eyes and squinted up at her from my position sitting against a wall in the courtyard. "Slept through my alarm," I replied.

"Would it kill you to apologize? You know I have detention now because you didn't pick me up, or *call* letting me know you were running late" Her words got faster and faster, blending together until I interrupted.

"Not when I know you're not mad at me, or mad at all, really." I was not normally this tactless, but Mia knew me, so she knew I knew her.

"On the contrary Arya, I am" The redness in her voice brightened until I interrupted again.

"Mia," I looked at her, "What happened with Jason?" The fire died from her eyes revealing her true emotions at last. And again, I was not normally this blunt, but Mia was the exception. Being my friend was probably hard when I see through pretenses as quickly as I do. But Mia and I had an understanding now after so many years of friendship. If she came to me I knew that she wanted to talk about what was really going on with her. If she avoided me, I knew she didn't want to talk about why she was upset, because she knew I would always know her true feelings better than she did herself. I can be a hard person to face sometimes, but Mia listens to me when she works up the courage to face the truth, and in return I get to be my true self around her, without my own usual pretences. Usually when someone comes to me for advice I have to dance around the subject, nudging and prodding and manipulating in the right direction. If I just come out and say what I know they are feeling, usually I scare them off, and they don't listen to me... Thankfully I don't have to go through that with Mia, which is fortunate, as we are best friends, and I find myself advising her a lot.

The bleakness seeped into her face as she slid down the wall next to me.

"We broke up," she stated, "and I think it's for good this time." Jason is her on again off again boyfriend. I kept my face carefully blank as I asked, "What's the problem? I thought you guys were getting along better recently."

She sighed. "We were. I was having lots of fun. I just couldn't get him to be serious. About anything. I mean, how can I have a "serious" relationship with somebody who doesn't even know the meaning of the word? It's not like we haven't tried. Do you

remember before we broke up last time, and we made that pact...?" I tuned out. I already knew what the problem was, and what I was going to say. But I also knew Mia needed to vent, question, and justify before she would be ready to hear my input. I let my mind wander to the quandary I had been struggling with before Mia had found me. That being my nearly sleepless night. For some reason hidden from me, sleep had been evading me recently. Some unnamed emotion that thrummed in my breast seemed to chase it away. I moved restlessly around my room, the light on until late into the night, or early into the morning I guess. This would also explain my sleeping through my alarm this morning. When I finally emerged from my room around the time first period started, feeling like a zombie, the only comment I got from my mother was a critical eye and an "I wish you wouldn't wear so much black." I had looked down at my self, vaguely puzzled. I hadn't remembered getting dressed. It was true though that I did wear almost all black clothing, and as my fashion victim of a mother would tell you, black is not my color. My hair and eyes are black, my skin paper white, except for the purple shadows under my eyes. Wearing black on my already gangly body makes me look bony and sallow, almost sickly.

"... it just hasn't worked. This isn't a mistake is it? Mia recalled me from my reverie, the constant stream of background words having petered out.

"Truth?" I checked. She nodded. "You gave off the impression of flippant fun-loving girl to get him to like you. He is trying to match that, without realizing that you were actually putting on an act. He doesn't know that you want him to be serious. You guys can work this out. He's crazy about you. Just tell him how you feel." I could tell she was forcing herself to listen without interrupting. The truth is hard to face.

That night was worse than the last. I couldn't settle. Filled with an uncomfortable energy, I paced, and fidgeted, not getting anything done, but at the same time feeling an overwhelming need to do *something*. Every time I closed my eyes for sleep, useless thoughts jangled around my brain like spare change, irritating background noise, which rendered sleep unattainable. Having given up on sleep I tried to do something productive with myself to pass the time, and yet any attempts to read, or write, or watch television, or even listen to music proved futile. My mind too full when I wanted to sleep, was too empty when I tried to do anything else. Trapped between the two worlds of waking and sleeping, my restlessness increased. Yes, the electricity that zinged in my veins and set my teeth on edge did not dissipate with time, but rather, intensified, until I found myself doing the only thing I could think of. Even as I jumped out my first story bedroom window with my sneakers, I knew it was a bad idea. But I needed to soothe the ache in my chest, and this seemed the only viable course of action. I needed to feel the burn of lung and muscle. I needed to move forward on my own steam.

I used to run all the time when I was younger. I loved the cleanness, the disconnect between body and mind, and the happy, natural exhaustion which followed. Yet as I got older, I got busier. And when I wasn't busy, I never seemed to have enough energy for running. Thus it had been a long time since I had last been running, and although I soon found my preferred stride, I had lost the easy control with which I used to control my breathing, and I soon found myself gasping in half-lungful's of breath.

The rain-slicked streets had held a strange beauty for me that night, so much at odds with my racing heart, my gasping breath. The air filled with the fresh smell of rain carried a musky edge of rotting leaves. The soft glow of the streetlights made the wet pavement glimmer subtly, even as the mist that swirled through the air obscured the clear-cut surfaces of daylight, mirroring the confusion within...

And yet the familiarity and the repetitiveness of the movement eventually soothed my taught nerves.

One, two, three, four, I counted the steps, and soon settled my breathing into the rhythm. In for two counts, out for two counts. One, two, three, four, in time with the steady slap of my feet on the pavement. One, two, across my blank mind, an idea sparked, three, four. One, no, not an idea, two, this was something I had always known, three, four. But I could not pause the counting long enough to consciously grasp this truth floating through my brain. One, two, even so, I felt something akin to hope, three, four. One, two, three, four.

This wonderful feeling however could not last. The restless energy that pushed me forward was not unlimited, and once it ran out, I had run myself out. When I could run no further, I sat down on the curb of an unfamiliar street. Some fifteen minutes later, when my pulse had returned to normal, I hauled myself up off the sidewalk.

And yet somehow, I was not ready to go home yet. My mouth was filled with the bitter taste of truth. Because the truth was, this meandering journey, this all-encompassing expenditure of energy had been completely pointless. What had I wanted to achieve in any case?

I dragged myself to the nearest twenty-four hour convenience store, glad of the five-dollar bill I had found in my track pants pocket, leftover from some long forgotten lunch. In a laughably pathetic attempt to give this whole episode some meaning, I padded under the fluorescent lights to the back of the store, and picked out a carton of milk. Feeling a prickle of shame, I dumped the milk on the counter, and waited for the teller to ring me in. After several seconds of staring blankly out the window, with no mention of a price, I glanced at the girl behind the counter. Shoulder length brown hair, she looked to be in her early twenties. Her startlingly blue eyes were fixed intently on my face.

"Hey," she said, "are you alright?"

For some reason this simple statement made me want to cry. But I didn't. Instead, I laughed. A high-pitched out of control sound that I was completely shocked to hear come out of my mouth. I saw Janet's -her nametag informed me- eyes widen, and I wondered what I must look like. My already sallow appearance enhanced by fluorescent lighting and a sheen of sweat that made my hair stick to my face. Another giggle burst from my throat, and not for the first time that night, I wondered what was wrong with me.

Janet blew out a sigh. "All right, *I'm* on break. And *you* are going to drink some terrible coffee with me, and tell me why, at three in the morning, you decided you needed milk so badly you ran down here to get it." Her voice as it had been before was lilac, concerned, clear through, with no underlying emotions.

"I couldn't sleep," I found myself telling her as she poured coffee into two Styrofoam cups.

"Mmm," she said, and this time her voice was tinged with steel gray. "When I can't sleep I read a good book, or listen to music."

“Yes, well, I didn’t feel like reading or listening to music tonight.” I had let some dark green tones enter my voice.

“And why,” she said in a very orange voice, “did you not feel so inclined?”

It was my turn to sigh. “I don’t know... I *don’t* know. That’s my problem. I don’t have problems. I solve other people’s problems.” A barely let the pink color my tone. I took a sip of the coffee she handed me, and grimaced.

“Told you.” She said. “And why would helping out with other people’s troubles not entitle you to having your own?” Again her voice was orange, firm, and direct.

“Too many problems that way,” my tone matching hers perfectly, “Too many secrets. People come to me for advice; I hold their secrets for them.”

“Then,” she said, her tone softening to the watery yellow of a spring day, “you need to let go of some of their secrets to make room for your own.”

And inside me, I felt something changing. Every one of her words seemed to have removed my barriers, one by one, until finally, my heart lay bare, for all to see.

“You know what?” My voice changing abruptly to royal blue, “I am angry. I feel used. I feel unappreciated. And I am not going to help out people who don’t help me out when I need it.”

Janet nodded, soberly, and we sat there, each of us absorbed in her own thought’s, draining the dregs of the horrible gas station coffee.

As I walked home a while later, milk carton under one arm, I couldn’t keep a secret smile from my face.

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