

both, all at once, everything

It's like falling off a cliff. My mind shoots into the highest frequency, I am warped by my incessantly weak being, flailing pathetically.

I am pathetically, no I mean pathetic, god you're so stupid.

A pushing from my chest ushers every one of my senses from calm embodied maintenance into some sort of pervasive party of awful sensation.

Immoral. Idiot.

Not just some run-of-the-mill-drink-when-your-parents-aren't-looking sweet sixteen situation, but a five-floor London club, each floor a different kind of pounding.

Did you really think that was okay?

We'll call the floor that triggered the metallic taste in my mouth "aluminium" and market it as a cage dancing spot.

Why would they care about that?

This broken metaphor isn't important right now.

The realities of my “Critical Issues: Consent” seminar swirl into a cacophonous background of horrifying assault case studies, September seat sweat and *that* Tory basement smell. My vision becomes obscured by splotchy black islands. Amidst the ringing frequencies, a single thought offers the only logical solution: it was your fault

you are a bad person.

This thought on my cliff edge is neither unique nor interesting, so much so it seems a shame to write about it. Really, truly, I want to write about how much I learned, how I felt truly independent for the first time in my life, how I gained freedom from who I used to be, how the euro-trip-dance-on-the-beach and-scream-Ed-Sheeran-lyrics-type-clichés sprinkle my memories, how moments of beautiful lostness cascade through my day dreams in stats class, how the tears at war memorials welled in my eyes, the two-pound wine, the sta—

May 7?

This is your formal warning, *I'm sure I'm a bad person.*

I spent six months of 2017 on a sort of cloud, far away from myself and living in a converted boathouse on the shores of the Thames River, working as an overpaid babysitter or otherwise named: outdoor instructor. There was such glimmering fullness there, my life seemed unapologetically abundant. If I was indulgently writing about those shimmery days, I'd tell you I boarded a £30

Ryanair flight every other weekend to what I could have sworn were alternate dimensions. The sunbeams shining on the parliament buildings of Budapest refracted into kaleidoscopes of hope. The salty air of 100 people's +40 Italian summer sweat in the Sistine chapel, experiencing time travel communally as we stared at that one and only mystical ceiling. The ache in my hips from a long day of walking Prague told me that something about this day, this time, was so visceral and important that I felt it in all my body. I took day trips to London on the Paddington morning commuter, even got mistaken for a local once. I taught children how to paddle with my sloop and boogie and built birthday party pirate rafts to conquer the Thames Crocodilo (a failed WWII mutant creature that hunts kayaks on the Thames, obviously). I would tell you how I spent my "work" days watching Millies, Tillies and Lilys' scrunch their faces into freckled question marks at the first sound of my western Canadian cadence. I would tell you I was humbled by the glowing streams of human faces in front of me, all fleeting, all eternal.

Tell them the truth.

Once I cleaned tacky stains off urinals after the Spring Jubilee while bumpin' bangers with Char. "I'm WEEEEEEAK and what's WRONG with THAT" she screamed into the pound store electric green toilet brush. Cutting through the previously assumed privacy a distant "YEAhhhhAAAAEAeaEAA" from cruise director, kick-ass manager and kings cup extraordinaire himself, our Freddie. We rush out and see him dangling at the top of the climbing wall, his whole rotation group incessantly gleeful at the sight of a grown man squawking 20 metres in the air. Char and I let out involuntary and bellowing cackles, matching blue shirts swaying, enveloped in the hazy ridiculousness that now fill

our Tuesdays. There is much fun to be had on a cloud.

The truth. Alright! Alright

It's 4:43pm on Sunday, May 6, 2017, and I am tying bowlines in the climbing tower, feeling stressed about the logistics of the Welsh road trip awaiting me in approximately 14 hours. Char calls me her "type A crazy wife" because of the hours I spend worrying about weekend trip logistics. I smile at the thought of her words and get lost in our moments of midnight peanut butter thieving, and pseudo-sisterly hugs basking in the refrigerator light. He sneaks up behind me, careful not to snap a woodchip and thrice taps the edge of the lazily placed aventura red climbing helmet, I jump and let the pea cord loose.

"Jesus fuck Freddie."

"Well, I couldn't let my best instructor have some peace at the end of her treacherous day, could I?"

This is a joke. I spent my day doing odd jobs in the office and going into town with him for Costa. I scoff and before I could prepare my clever retort:

"I was thinking we could have a spring-do tonight, first a beer run, then wieners for dinner and a back garden bellend fest, you in?"

"Only if you don't bitch it first" I toss his way. This is a fun game he made up; we would compete to be up latest at the party.

“Please, I always—”

“Hoot with the owls” I finish. Fiery recognition covers his face. I nod in agreement to the proposed debauchery of the evening.

As he is walking away from me, casual as ever, he releases “you skied the pea cord babes, beers on you.”

“Favourite instructors don’t do beer runs, baby cakes” I chirp back.

Sundays were our Fridays, part of the whole outdoorsy babysitter gig, and I was ecstatic. In all my time across the pond, in all the German metal clubs, and upscale Monaco cocktail bars I’ve been to I never encountered a more electric party than the boathouse on a Sunday night. We had this dinky set of lights, they flashed red and blue. We would wait for it to get dark and turn them on to create our own universe, illuminating the glowing moments, the ones meant to hold onto, and let the others slip from view.

6:57pm, the boys (all 17, yes SEVENTEEN, I currently live with) stampede out of the back garden while I am chatting with Char about Welsh peaks. We yell after them, in return sounds of dismissal and Ty sing-songs “grab ya togs ladies.”

We shoot each other enticed glances, roll our eyes, feel our souls hold hands and run after them, blindly trusting whatever adventure awaits. A tarp. Bubbles. The hose. A Kayak? A rope? Orange plastic boats are flung along the slippery plane, giggling adult men playing like 12-year-old boys, launching each other into the murky backwater. I watch, I laugh, I shake my head no when he raises his

eyebrows my direction. I like to say that I've always been adventure-adjacent, high frequencies in my head aren't new you see. I'm not granted the chance to don a kayak before being thrown in the river. Everything is soaked t-shirts, rambunctious giggles, salty skin and clementine skies.

We head to the garden, the night parades on as any other party. I even give—

Get to it.

11:00pm, red and blue moments surround us, dancing erupts as we migrate to the humid living room. We let ourselves lose track of time when the Moana soundtrack comes on.

“MY LOVE, MY LIFE YOU MUST COME DANCE WITH ME” Ty screams from on top of our generations old, and at this moment, particularly sticky, dining room table. We have this bit we do where we pretend, we're in love, we're not. The game is fun when you both know the rules.

“MY LOVE I SHAN'T IT'S FORBIDDEN” I exclaim, stumbling to impersonate an '05 Kiera Knightly period piece.

Do it. Tell them who you are.

But it's all important, every moment of this great, beautiful middle is important.

Do it.

I pretend to waltz with Ty. Fred watches me, and to be fair the room usually does

when we would put on this particularly cheesy performance, but he seems closer this time. Across the room I watch him look down to change the song, his eyes flick back to me with a sense of haste I swear I'd never seen before.

"It's Brightside time babes!" Freddie wails.

I leap off the table into a sea of screaming lyrics. The boys rip their shirts off and swing them in circles when the chorus hits. It was like being invited into Dionysus. It was intoxicating, striking, destabilizing.

I felt the wind from the open window kiss my arms as we screech familiar words, somehow both beautifully present and blissfully unaware of myself, on the edge of what I was.

Somehow lying on the floor, somehow holding his hand.

**It was only a kiss; it was only a kiss. **

"Can't bitch it now."

If you do this you know you're a slut, right?

We hear the last melodies of a moment in time, his eyes on mine, I could have sworn I saw adoration. I could have sworn I saw kindness.

"We can't" I mouth, as a sort of response.

You're bad enough too, it's not like anyone would choose you. Would you rather

be alone?

Eyes, breaths, lips. A still of his eyes on mine that becomes a memory the moment it occurred.

He kissed me.

“why?”

“I wanted to know what it would feel like.”

We collide.

Burnt orange acrylics clicking against laptop keys snap me back, the dark splotches separate like clouds for just a moment, enough space for the incoming words to eclipse through my mind

“toxic workplace...young women at risk...”

I collide with the bottom of the canyon, the clifftop insurmountably far away from where I fell. Hot, stinging liquid comes quickly. I’ve seen this sexual assault presentation seven times. What is happening?

every glimmer, gone now, his now.

I cling to the belay rope and begin my climb back up the cliff. Crying in the

corner basement stall after running. Screaming frequencies tormenting my body until my breath can't keep up. Painful, awful sobs. Reaching for air, crawling towards reason, failing.

you still did it.

I was 18.

You wanted it didn't you?

I-I...

You were dumb enough to want it, pathetic enough, weak enough, desperate enough, bad enough.

I am a bad person.

Now reader, I could take you through the hours of that day, and so so many more wasted days that followed, all progressing into high frequency falls; how it felt he took the whole gap year from me, every shiny beautiful thing didn't belong to me anymore, it was his.

It is his. That's not true.

You see adventures aren't always sky-high lazy river floats on cumulonimbus inner tubes. They can bend you, drop you, change you.

Adventures stay with you. Those months I spent discovering myself sneak into

my choices more often than I ever thought they would. Most times they inspire my ever-beating courage, others times, they fan strong winds on cliff edges. All moments of the now and then and the gonna-be and the was, are mangled up with the rest my Eberhardtian sun-drenched elsewhere.

I talked to my therapist about Freddie for the first time on a dreary October morning, the clouds laid so flat on top of each other like grey pancakes. I made sure to place importance on the fact I knew he was my boss and went for it anyway, so really, I am to blame.

Exactly.

She told me that she knew I was a person who tried to hold herself to a high standard, but Fred had authority over me. I cut her off with a story about two-pound wine and stars.

It went bad because you are bad.

I stumbled into my then-boyfriend's on-campus dorm during the annual depressive deep freeze, already at a dangerously high frequency. I broke down in his arms, the exploding realization he wouldn't love me when I told him the awful things I had done there. But I had to tell him, he had the right to know how immoral I am.

Scum.

He asked me if I was still the woman that made those choices. I said I didn't know. Nothing of authority or grooming out of his boyish mouth.

he hasn't come to his senses, you are disgusting.

I tell myself a story about the night I gave Ty some love advice about Char. He looked me right in the eyes, with soft tears refracting red and blue and let out "all I want to do is make her happy." He would later break Char's heart into a thousand jagged pieces that I would place back together. But he gets to live in my head as who he was at that exact moment, 18 with a diamond earring and his hand in mine, pondering how earth-shatteringly terrifying love is. I think about how I will also be remembered in fleeting moments of time.

Sleeping with the boss to get taken off toilet duty, surely.

My therapist is good at her job and eventually loops around my insecurity in my relationship to Fred. I deny this, my gap year was a perfect, amazing, life changing experience that I am so thankful I did. I cannot wait to travel again. I'm a girl who's gonna travel again. That's part of my personality that no one can take from me and I'm sure I'll take a semester abroad. The only part of my gap year that was bad was because I was enough of a slut to mess it up.

If it was my fault, then he didn't take it from me.

These jumbled thought patterns push me off the cliff intermittently over the next while. I radically decide they are the truth.

Char calls to catch up on a sweltering July day. The kind of ones where you can see the heat, its waves penetrating your skin and pushing out any water you had the chance to hoard. I am working at my old camp and taking a seat on my favourite break-time picnic bench I helped paint orange when I was thirteen. She spills out an anticipated update.

“Yeah, he came to visit for like the last week or so and we hung out and I told him all about your life and your wonderful boyfriend and let me tell ya babe he did not love it.”

I brace for impact.

“He rolled his eyes when I mentioned your boyfriend, he almost seemed jealous.” There’s a sharp twinge in my chest, the shing of a knife that’s about to cut flesh. “Did he say anything else about me?” I meekly mutter.

“No, changed the subject.” she concludes. Some more water tries to leave my eyes, more fire than liquid.

She goes on talking about her life, but I immaturely tune it out. He’s jealous? He had every chance in the world to have me?

I think about how on my last night in England he told the bartender to make a drink so strong I’d miss my flight to Canada. I think about how he often ordered my drinks. I think about how often he’d choose the same cleaning task as me, and ask if I thought about him that morning, if I touched myself. I think about how we were at work. I think about how “bitchin’ it” was about getting me

alone. I think about how on my last day he pretended he wouldn't be there to say goodbye and I spent the morning crying about it. I think about how he showed up anyway on his motorcycle and bearhugged me, lifting me off the ground, twirling me around.

That fucker. I suddenly realized it was never me, never mine, he did this, like a game of fucked up chess where none of the rules make sense. The clouds clear, and I hate him for it. I was barely an adult and had nowhere else to go. Fuck him. Fuck all of it.

I don't tell stories of clementine skies for quite some time. Life rages on, I change majors, I get an A in my sexual assault and the law class. Me and then-boyfriend break up. I get over it. I make new memories.

But you don't believe that do you.

Every time I burned down his actions with fuck yous and case studies, moments of his picture-perfect gaze, his infectious laugh, his addictive attention...they relentlessly stick. Like a little snake that would sit in my chest, unimpressed by my so-called therapeutic processing, ready to slither its way into my frontal lobe consciousness, ready to pounce whenever I ran out of energy. In moments of soft pain, I would fall off the cliff yet again, playing over and over again the moments where I should have just told him no, I should of—

It happened because you are a bad person. It was your fault because you deserved it.

Fall 2020. Eight months into the pandemic that pushed humankind off the cliff, and two months after I texted an old friend from England. Me and him were always fabulous pals with quick-witted minds. We facetime for beautiful distractions regularly. He is staying up until 4am to talk with me, I am giddy with a simple old crush.

He deserves to know.

But he never knew. He wasn't there that night, he gets to remember me in the shiny forevers, with the rose-coloured glasses I bestow onto him.

Do it.

My therapy brain kicks in: we know what we do, I say to myself, this is not my fault, this is not my fault, I am a good person. I am a good person.

Do it.

I tell him. I tell him what Freddie did, I tell him what I wish I did.

You are a bad person.

I tell him I might be a bad person.

He pauses, looks down and says "I wish I knew."

I launch into a well-planned defense, “I know it’s not fair you didn’t, it’s just no one talked about it and it was nice you didn’t know and me and you could just laugh and hang out and it was really comforting, I’m sor—”

“I wish I knew so I could have helped you. You had nowhere to go” he interrupts.

This means so much, I feel like a force field is pulling me through the screen, I am engulfed in him, in his safety, in what he’s healed. Finally, finally. I thought he would save me from my cliff, that maybe just maybe all along all this awful stuff happened to me on what should have been a perfect trip so I could reunite with him, and we could heal together, and somehow the universe would balance and be cosmically fair.

He then asks, lax and innocent “why did you sleep with him though? Surely you didn’t have to.”

I am engulfed in me now; I feel the scratchy velvet on my thighs

We hang up, and I sob.

I write down in my journal the next day: “healing doesn’t come from others”

It’s not that I haven’t gotten over what happened, but healing works in complicated cycles. Most days I barely think of England at all, I have present moments of wonderful, wonderful things, I am daydreaming of adventure, I find joy in my isolation. I have never liked myself more. I am healing myself.

I would love to supply you an ending of a pretty tied ribbon, but adventures come up in mucky memories, scattered and overwhelming. In daydreams I imagine finding that younger version of me, forgiving her, making her take some Advil before bed.

The times I've boarded a plane again I feel it slither up my spine, whispering its siren call of shame. I let myself feel it. I look down at the cliff, I breathe with it.

I speak of clementine clouds with careful softness and send Char the Facebook memories whenever they come up. I remember the chapels and gelato and fearlessness. I am inspired by a world in which there are more crunchy and complicated adventures ahead. I do not let go but live with. It was beautifully both, it happened all at once, and my god, it was everything.

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