Like a Balloon

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She wasn’t very pretty, but there had always been something beautiful to me about her roundness. Something soft. I wanted to fall into her—to bury myself in her fullness and let it smother my thoughts and my fears. Sometimes weight makes things lighter, and I hated every day that stole more of her away from me. I hated watching her disappear. I wondered how long it would be possible for Rachel to maintain all of the warmth that her body and soul had retained from cups of hot chocolate and bowls of hot breakfast, now that she wasn’t taking any of it in anymore. I wondered if either of us could ever completely come back, even if we wanted to . . . wondered if the visibility was worth vanishing over . . . No.

I had to stop thinking like that.

I rubbed my wrist. I fiddled with the loose, silver ring around my thumb. I stared at the television’s despondent, black screen . . . maybe we could see what was on—Snap. Restaurant commercials. Snap. I pulled the rubber band that I kept around my wrist again; I could be such a forgetful idiot sometimes. Snap—mosquito. I pulled again, harder—son of a . . . bee sting. Good. Better. No more thinking about the television. No more thinking. No more . . . I let out a long, bored sigh.

I had been bored for months now. Six months. Six months of pinning thinspiration to cork boards I had strategically scattered throughout my bedroom. Six months of painting on and peeling off and painting on and peeling off polish from my nails. Six months of snapping reminders and punishments at myself. About a week in, I remember thinking that going to a movie might help distract us. But, when I suggested it, Rachel accused me of leading us directly into the lion’s den. She didn’t think that surrounding ourselves with the crunches of candies and the smell of butter was a very good diversion. I mean, obviously . . . I really can be quite stupid. Snap. So, instead, Rachel drove us to a boutique full of high priced clothing. We purposely tried on short skirts and silk shirts that were two sizes too small—walking out empty handed and motivated to remain empty-stomached. I didn’t suggest going out again after that. That’s when I learned that emptiness can, somehow, make a person feel both weak and strong at the same time.

But, that day, the accumulation of nothingness filled me up to the point of overflow—of sickness—and not the kind I had used once or twice to reverse an accidental binge. No, this brimming mass inside of me was different. I lifted my head from Rachel’s lap, propping myself up on my elbows for a moment. I shifted a few struggling bobby pins.
back into their places and shook a few broken strands of my blonde hair off the end of my sleeve. I stayed quiet, listening to Rachel sip at her third cup of unsweetened, green tea. Then, I heard the mug click onto the wooden table beside her, and the thought I had been chewing on slid into place with it. At once, I twisted my upper half to look up at Rachel.

“Women are supposed to have more fat than men.”

I paused. Rachel’s soul had always seemed impossibly older than she was. Some people thought she was distant but, really, she was deep. She nodded in response to what I had said, but her eyes remained focused on her book. My own eyes dropped down onto my thighs—I studied them, impressed with the way my jeans had grown so baggy around them. Shudder. Every degree was seven degrees colder than it used to be. Shudder. I hated being cold. Dull, heavy silence and another, more severe, shiver settled me back into the point I had been trying to make. I looked up at Rachel again.

“It’s true. It’s something to do with hormones. I read it somewhere.”

“Probably online . . . some clickbait article,” she suggested, frowning into her nearly empty mug. She pinched her face momentarily at the dregs but swallowed the remainder of the liquid like a sacrament nevertheless.

Frustrated, I set my head back onto her lap. Shudder.

Snap, snap.

Most days we counted, and Rachel counted her calories like Hail Marys.

Snap.

But today was an abstinence day . . . our fourth abstinence day this week.

Snap.

And we didn’t count on abstinence days. I didn’t even count my snaps.

. . .

I hated abstinence days, but Rachel didn’t. That was the nature of most of it though . . . I was abstaining; she was fasting. I was flipping through magazines; she was memorizing the articles and repeating lines like verses or prayers. With each motion, and with every day, Rachel seemed more devoted—more resolved. Not me though, not lately at least . . . but I had to admit, it was much easier to get through stretches of nothing than it was to withstand the temptations presented on normal restriction days. And all of that was better than making ourselves sick like we did in the beginning.

Snap.

I hated feeling sick.

Snap.

No, sickness means it’s working.

Snap, snap.

Snap. Snap. Snap.

“Do you want a cup of tea?” Rachel asked.

“Am I annoying you?”

“No.”

Snap.

“Well,” she said, “I’m getting more tea.”

I lifted myself up again, releasing her from the couch’s corner, and then flopped back
down onto the flat, hard seat she had just vacated—deciding absolutely that soft and round is always better than flat and hard.

“Tea helps,” she said from the kitchen. I caught glimpses of her red sweater through the kitchen’s archway as she scurried from the cupboards to the stove and back again.

“No, it doesn’t.”

“It fills you up.”

“It makes my throat feel dry.”

She stopped her fussing in the kitchen and leaned against the archway with an amused brow raised up at me, “It makes your throat feel dry?”

“Yes.”

“It’s literally water.”

“Grass water.”

“The leaves don’t negate the water... they just add flavor to it.”

“Dirt, or twigs, or rocks might add flavor too, but I’m not going to drink rock water either.”

She smiled at me before she walked back into the kitchen. I saw the smile even though my eyes were fixed upward. Rachel had started creating her own Sistine Chapel about three years ago, deciding that she and I deserved memorialization just as much as white Jesus ever did—the Bible having never mentioned either him or us. The figures Rachel chose to include were far sillier and less solemn than Michelangelo’s, and the fun colors and cartoonish style of the drawings distracted from any of the seriousness that might have accidentally slipped in.

The first creation she had ever painted up there was in the back, left corner of the room. It was a red, deflating balloon. Though it had been drawn well, it always seemed sort of sad to me. Now the balloon had all sorts of odd sketches and paintings to keep it company, though. The newest one, I just discovered, was of a blue candle holding one of those miniature, handheld fans up to his own lit wick—his eyes closed... bracing himself. Thinking it was quite clever, I felt a grin spread over my face, “Don’t do it, Ocean Breeze Passion No. 5,” I thought to myself, “You still have so much to live for.” Realizing I couldn’t save him, however, I allowed my eyes to continue on—scanning over other, more familiar pictures as I listened to the clinks and clanks coming from the kitchen.

“Rachel?” I called.

“Yes?”

“I miss you.”

Rachel emerged from the kitchen, her lips perked upward in an exasperated-like way, holding two full mugs. Knowing one was for me, I sighed out a laugh. I propped myself up again to allow her access to her seat.

“We’re in the same room, how can you miss me?” she asked.

I gave her a moment to settle back into her place before returning readily to the warmth and willingness of her lap.

“I just do,” I answered, wrapping my arms around her waist for a moment and snuggling my face into her gentle stomach.

“You’re ridiculous,” she said, with much more fondness than annoyance in her tone.

I pulled my arms back into my own lap, allowing my eyes to trace some of the stitching on her blue jeans a while. Then, I looked up, so I could watch her find where she had left off in her book. I loved her face. Even at its most unflattering angle, I loved
it. I watched her eyes get narrow . . . I waited. Her mouth was tight . . . I waited. Her face was so concentrated, so hard with focus . . . and then she found it, and everything softened. She might have finally been able to read and relax then, but, as she attempted to groove her way into a more comfortable position, she let a wandering glance fall a bit too low and caught me staring. She drew in a quick, huffy breath—

“What?”

“Nothing,” I answered, still smiling. “I just think it’s nice that you brought me tea.”

“Tea helps,” she insisted.

I thought about saying something more, but it looked as though she was pretty serious about getting back to her book, so I looked away from her and started poking and pulling at a hang-nail instead.

“Are you going to drink it?” she asked, eyes scanning a line in her book.

“No.”

—

“But it was very nice of you to bring it,” I added. “And you won’t have to go all the way back to the kitchen when you’re ready for your fifth cup now.”

“It’s going to be old and cold by then, and I won’t get to burn any calories going to the kettle either,” she answered coolly. “You should just drink the tea. Tea—”

I put my hands over my face and groaned into them loudly.

She didn’t respond or finish her sentence, but I thought I caught her smiling through the gaps between my fingers. I left my hands where they were for a moment, just feeling how hot my breath was against my palms. Then, I pulled my hands down my face and over my breasts before, tentatively, resting them on the center of my stomach. It grumbled ungratefully and complained at me. Snap. Snap. snap. SNAP.

“Ouch!” I couldn’t help but cry out.

The water in my eyes turned the illustrations on Rachel’s ceiling into one, big, abstract piece. And the well-timed dizzy spell that accompanied the moment made me feel like I was gazing through the twisting eye of a kaleidoscope. The sensation was both awesome and scary. My head was pounding again, and it seemed like my other senses became sharper and sharper the longer I abstained from taste . . . Like, maybe I was just being dramatic, but, as the colors above me were spinning and swirling, I became convinced that I could smell the stash of comic books and tarot cards Rachel had hidden in a stack behind the bookshelf. And, gradually, their odor started to infect every particle of oxygen in the room. I forced my eyes to focus in on the Jones County Fair mug Rachel had set out for me on the coffee table just in front of us until each of the letter’s lines and edges became clear again, thinking: maybe the weed water would help . . .

Wait.

I shot myself straight up again and leaned over, reaching for the bag I had left on the floor all the way on the other side of the couch. I reached and failed. Reached, and failed. Reached, and failed. Finally, I managed to hook one of the bag’s straps with my pointer finger and to pull it near enough for me to fumble around inside of it. No. No. No . . . Yes. I pulled out a small, round bottle and spun it around, admiring the picture on the front before—

“Don’t! Don’t do that!”

“What?”
“Don’t open that.”

“Why?”

“It’s Apples and Cinnamon!”

“. . . we like apples and cinnamon.”

“We like eating apples and cinnamon.”

That was too much for me. I searched her face with an incredulous, tired glare. Finally, I spoke, “You can’t eat lotion, Rachel. And you can’t get fat just from smelling it . . . I can check the back of this lotion bottle for a calorie count if you’re interested, but I’m pretty sure you can have unlimited sniffs for zero calories. Who knows . . . you might even burn more calories through the effort of inhaling than you’ll take in by—”

“The smell is going to make us hungry!”

“We. Are. Already. Hungry!” I said, popping the bottle’s cap open defiantly.

“Don’t,” she said. And she said it with such finality that I didn’t. I pushed the cap of the bottle back into its place and shoved it back into my bag. She didn’t gloat about me having given in to her demands; I mean, her face kind of did, but she just returned to her book in silence. Silence. Silence.

Snap.

. . .

Snap, snap.

. . .

Snap, snap, snap, snap, snap—

“Stop!”

“Why are you yelling at me?”

“I’m not,” she said calmly, but with an obvious effort.

—I’m sorry,” she said, “I’m just irritable.”

“Because you’re hungry.”

“Obviously,” she said in her snarkiest, brattiest tone.

“Then eat!”

“You eat!”

. . .

We both stubbornly and deliberately sank back into silence . . . silence . . . silence. The tension, however, dissolved on its own rather quickly. It always did with us, and within just a few moments we had returned to mutually enjoying one another’s company . . . silently . . . silently. I tried to count the seconds between hunger pangs instead of snapping the band for a while, but then I remembered that one of the benefits of abstinence days was that we didn’t have to count anything . . . that’s what Rachel said anyway. So, I tried to think about clothes, about candid photographs, about boys—Rachel’s teacup and the fully formed version of my earlier thoughts simultaneously clicked into place again.

I bolted upward and spun my whole body around to face Rachel, folding my legs underneath me. Rachel set her book down where my head had been and looked at me expectantly. That thing that had been bulging and pulsing inside of me all day finally had a name, a purpose even.
“Women are supposed to have big breasts and big hips, and guys are supposed to be
attracted to them because it means we’ll be good at the whole baby thing.”

She nodded, waiting for me to continue.

“And men don’t need big boobs or hips because they don’t need them to feed or birth
babies.”

She nodded again.

I paused. I needed all of my energy to trap a rising, burning storm in the
back of my throat . . . to try to sound casual.

“I stopped getting my period three months ago.”

Rachel didn’t react. I blinked out two fat, round tears.

“It’s not like I liked getting it or anything, but at least I knew I was healthy before.
Maybe I wasn’t sexy, but at least I worked. I was functional. And, you know what else?
I think that I like looking and feeling like a woman . . . or at least looking and feeling
like myself. Like, I like being short—even if guys like long legs. And even if guys like the
super sporty girls with no fat anywhere, I like the little dip I have,” I pulled my shirt up
a bit and pointed at my natural waistline, “right here.” I tried to survey Rachel’s face
for some kind of understanding, hesitation, or anything at all, but I couldn’t read her, so I
just continued—excited by the sound of my own voice, “And I like when my thighs do
the bloopy thing.”

Something.

She raised her eyebrows and a small smile appeared, “The bloopy thing?”

“Yes!” I inched closer to her and raised my hands up between our faces, one hand
about five inches apart from the other. “You know, when a girl goes from standing to
sitting and her thighs go,” and I increased the distance between my hands by about two
inches, “bloop.”

I watched Rachel’s face, absolutely sure that I had made an impact with this last
point, positive that she would agree with me and maybe even share something similar.
But her face, while it did look entertained, showed little evidence of any upcoming
participation. I waited, allowing her another moment to take it all in. I was sure that
everything would sink in if I gave her just a little more time to consider it, and I imagined
us eating sandwiches, salads, or maybe even pasta again . . . after six months. But, even
after at least a full moment had passed, all that happened was that Rachel shifted her
eyes from me to my full mug of tea and then back to me again. I waited . . . waited . . .
waited.

“Well,” I concluded lamely, “I like the bloopy thing.”

She stayed quiet, the same gentle, patient expression on her face as before. I knew
that look. She didn’t think what I was saying was stupid; she just didn’t have anything
to say. Rachel was like that. She was just quiet. But I knew if she really, truly understood
my point that she would want to contribute something; she would want to talk about
the discovery I had just made. I liked my womanhood the way it naturally was. I liked
womanhood. I liked Rachel, and I liked myself too. I tried, again, to tell her—

“I feel like we’re already what women are supposed to be, right now. Women are
supposed to be curvy and men are supposed to be flat . . . I mean, am I right?”

“Sure,” she offered, nodding kindly.

“Well, then . . . ” I absentmindedly touched the elastic around my wrist, “why do
dwomen have to try so hard to look like boys in order to get attention from men?”
Her face did change this time—compassion. Compassion? That’s not what I wanted to see. No, that wasn’t the right response at all. I had made a game-changing observation. I had shared a revelation. Compassion? It pissed me off. Why didn’t my question mean anything to her? Why didn’t it change anything? I couldn’t have been clearer this time. I was sure of that. She patted my knee. Patronizing, aggravating . . . She turned away from me and picked up her teacup, taking a few hungry gulps of the brown trash. Irritating, snotty . . . Rachel still wasn’t saying anything, and, now, she was just staring at the reflection of the ceiling in her cup.

“I know I’m right,” I said finally, slumping into the couch in a defeated sort of way.

“Oh, you definitely are,” she said, and her tone was completely genuine.

“What?”

“Oh, for sure.”

I pulled myself up again, searching her face excitedly. But there wasn’t anything new in her expression at all. I didn’t get it. Had she had thoughts like mine weeks or even months ago? I didn’t understand, not at all. I waited for her to explain everything to me, but she just set her tea back down and picked up her book. I felt my heart crack somewhere between the flipping pages.

“But then . . . why are we . . . why aren’t we . . . ”

“Because,” she started, putting her book down again roughly, a finger keeping her place this time, “it doesn’t matter if you’re right.” I opened my mouth to argue, “Even though you are,” she assured me. I shut my mouth again. “Thing is . . . well, it doesn’t really matter how much you love yourself or how much guys should love you . . . what matters is if someone else actually does love you. I mean, unless you’re okay getting a bunch of cats and living alone forever with your ‘bloopy’ thighs.”

I stared, completely shook. We looked directly at one another for a full moment—Rachel’s gaze convincing me that she was the smarter of the two of us. So, at last, I let out another giant groan and fell backward onto the long couch, tucking my feet aggressively under her leg—snapping the elastic on my wrist furiously. I relaxed bit by bit as Rachel’s legs warmed my feet, and we settled into silence again. The rebellious, uncomfortable fit that had been rolling about in my stomach all day became stiff and still. I looked up from my worn, red wrist and watched Rachel finish her fourth cup of tea.

Snap.

Finally, I reached for the mug she had set out for me earlier. I dipped the tip of my thumb into the liquid. It had gone cold, just as Rachel said it would. The tea’s dark color and the scent of the fruity herbs Rachel had used to prepare my cup of tea allowed it to masquerade around like a juice or a Kool-Aid. I grasped onto that thought, hoping it would help me do what I needed to do. I looked from the liquid in the mug to my thinning thighs and back again, and then I determinedly drank every last drop of the stupid, garbage, leaf water.

Olivia is a junior English major with a minor in theoretical and applied ethics. She will be applying to graduate school within the next year to further her education in either literature or philosophy. In her spare time, she enjoys keeping up with politics, reading biographies of inspiring women, and binge-watching Netflix.