

A Fool's Game

Audrey Tumberg

It's a fool's game, the idea of quitting what you once revolved around. The more you try not to let that addiction occupy space within you, the more accustomed you become to spotting it in places outside of you—in real places with real things that didn't mean much until now. It'll find its way to the familiar space of your body where it once lived so comfortably. It'll find its way back to you regardless of how many blue-inked lines are tallied on the sticky note stuck to the fridge titled "Days Without."

It's a fool's game, kicking an addiction.

Third Thursday of the month, February. Eight A.M., sharp. Corner of Kittson and 2nd. There you are. Not in the flesh, but in the crummy cracks of pavement littered with wet, inflammable Marlboro Reds. Not my own, I gave that habit up a month ago (barely). It's been thirty days since I've touched those things. It's been forty-five days since I've touched you. I tally the days of both on my fridge every morning on my way out the door. Staring at the soggy cigarettes on the broken cement, I swear I saw your eyes in the leftover rolls of brown tobacco. Not the color, but instead something more detailed. In the folds of tobacco, I saw the wrinkles that line the edges of your eyes when you turn the corners of your lips up into a smile, an image I remember too vividly. In an attempt to shake you from my gaze, I turn myself outside in, finding my-

self focusing on my own skin. I feel an expired nicotine patch on my right arm, peeling at the edges, itching to detach itself. I smell my knock-off tobacco fragrance, a recommendation from you that I ran with, still way too strong for my personality. This isn't working.

The streetlights are a shining blur, their projections of light bouncing off the reflective nature of the street signs. I'm burning up, regretting the last couple rounds of Irish whiskey. Ordering it felt like an out of body experience, I don't even drink hard liquor. A swift gust of cool night air brushes my flushed cheeks, it feels like a miracle sent to me. Maybe I'll take up religion again while I'm collecting out-of-body experiences. The air smells clean, as clean as it can get in a city where taxis run like a river. I lean against the corner and slide to the ground, the jagged bricks catching my sweater on the way down. I close my eyes, the neon signs from inside the bar project themselves onto the inside of my eyelids. The worn bar door next to me opens, bringing a whiff of alcohol with it, and ushering an angel out of the bar. At least that's what I saw when I caught my first glimpse of you; you're something someone could easily get addicted to. I look up at you while you light up a cheap smoke.

"You smoke?"

"Hell no, that shit will kill you."

You extend your hand anyways, cigarette dangling between your index and middle finger. If an angel reaches out her hand and offers you something, how can you say no?

Desperate to rid your ghost from my nerves, I follow my shoes. They meld and blur, one in front of the other. Black leather loafers, bought in an attempt to explore a new aesthetic that my boxy figure just doesn't work with. I've been too prone to spontaneous shopping sprees lately. I've spent hundreds of dollars on my self-soothing, just for it to fly away once I get five feet outside the store. The right one is always prone to untying, still I never find myself double-knotting. There you are between my shuffling feet. Of course, you've made a home in a place that I can't run away from. Stooping down to get a closer look at you, I see your name etched into the fabric grain from the times your hands delicately grazed the laces. The curves and sharp lines that make up your name are barely coherent, but apparent enough for the searching addict's eye. A familiar itch starts. I feel it in my teeth, in my jaw, down to my palm and

through my fingers. It feels like static, sharp and stinging; it feels like water, natural and cooling. For a split second, I think about going back and picking up a couple of those wet Marlboro Reds, just to fuck around and see if one will light. For a split second I think about calling you, just to have a taste of your voice through the broken connection. Frantically shuffling through my pockets, full of wasted lottery tickets, lint, and silver wrappers, I pull out a stick of nicotine gum. With no care for the seams, I unwrap it and pop it in my mouth. It tastes like shit. They always do. I'm not sure how, but a piece of gum seems to know how to add insult to injury. My temple shifts slightly as my jaw moves. My temple used to be a temple for your lips, someplace sacred that held something holy.

Sun streaming gently through the sheer linen curtains; they hardly have a purpose. Daylight illuminates the room regardless of their presence. Soft gingham sheets, blue and white, lavender laundry detergent. Ash tray on each nightstand, an equal number of remnants in both. I wake up before you every morning like clockwork. I'm alone for two or so hours, I don't mind. Sunday morning New York Times crossword, answers etched in all caps, black pen. Shifty eyes moving back and forth: from you to the paper, from the paper to you. Long auburn hair flowing through my hands like water. Pale skin, warm to the touch. Sleepy eyes cracking open, wide smiles, no teeth. Soft good mornings whispered as if they were a secret. Intentful kisses tracing upwards—hand, shoulder, neck, mouth.

"That shit will kill you," I remind myself. To allow my eyes to view something other than fragments of you, I pick up the latest issue of the local newspaper. I see them every day on my daily commute, in a blue metal box on the corner that is in a constant state of oxidation from the rain it experiences. I've never had an interest in local news, but I feel like I could begin to be an enthusiast at this moment; eager for anything that can serve as a distraction from the mess I am right now. Throwing the folds of the paper open, I find that every line consists of descriptions of you. You occupy the entirety of the publication; you even fill the negative space between the columns of the irrelevantly obscure advertisement section. In a panic, I throw the paper down onto the street. Out of anger and disgust, I kick the edition into the sewer. Anger directed not at you, but at the ghost author of that paper. They didn't do you justice. I

could describe you better, with an eye for all your miniscule details, with the sense of softness you embody.

Fourth of July, the deadly heat of the sun dissipates with the cool drizzle of evening rain. Cars parked in lines atop a ginormous hill, the entering ones following in suit of a created parking lot type organization. Three-hour-long firework show. Perched on the beat-up car roof. Popping colors replace stars. Layers of blankets beneath us. Rain soaking through them. Wet legs. Closeness is warmth, fusion is natural. You suggest we peel out an hour early, beat the bottleneck of traffic that comes with the end of the show. I'm never one to disagree with words from your mouth. Stale car heat. Window cracked, threads of smoke escaping. A handful of cars in front of ours. Red brake lights illuminating your face, illuminating mine. White-hot tears rolling down my cheeks, emotional at the pure sight of you. Your cold hands cup my face like they were meant to serve that purpose only. My eyes fixated on you like they were meant to serve that purpose only.

On edge, my eyes dart to the train station. I catch the nine A.M. route every weekday. The train station seems dirtier every day. It seems like decomposition is in its nature. It's only eight forty-five, surprisingly, so I make my way to the array of benches by the station. I plop down, the wooden panels of the benches creak with my slightest movement. The vocality of the splinters makes me aware of how uneasy my body language is. Bouncing legs, shaky hands, head on a swivel. I always get this way when my addiction permeates my thoughts. I allow my eyes to wander, to try and ground myself. Unknowingly, I take a drag of you in my peripheral. There you are, lighting up. There you are, in the flesh, real and jarring, looking as addictive as ever.

I haven't smoked in thirty days. I haven't seen you for forty-five. I'm coughing up at the sheer sight of your realness like I've never smoked a pack; the type of fit that can only be soothed by intentionally holding you close to my mouth, feeling you on my fingertips, and bringing you in between my lips. I hold my gaze in your direction. Fixated, frozen. You quickly turn your head my way and cheekily catch me in the act. Tennis eye contact. Relief. Flash of white teeth. Flicker of smile lines. Guilt. Smoke curling around your face. Cigarette placed between your index and middle fingers, the same ones that I'm wrapped around. Arm

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extending in my direction. An all-knowing stance.
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