

## Sometimes to Love is do to Nothing

It was April 4th, 2024, a Thursday. Instead of attempting to focus in my American Literature class, I found myself wedged into the back seat of my father's truck, backpacks and pillows piled into my lap and around my feet. As if the sheer volume of things atop me wasn't overwhelming enough, loud rap and country music spewed out of the speakers, making my head ache and my stomach churn. Beside me, my brother took up the rest of the back seat, as he animatedly talked with our sister, Amy, in the passenger seat. Yesterday, she had surprised him at his school for a sweet, military sibling reunion, like one you would find in a wholesome YouTube compilation. She had been gone for over a year, living on an Air Force base in South Korea, and he was thrilled by the attention she gave him, filling her in on every moment she'd missed; meanwhile, I felt like another piece of cargo stuffed into the vehicle.

We drove for three hours and 46 minutes, transitioning from the Sierra Nevada foothills, across the flat agriculture of the Central Valley, through the rolling wine country, into the rugged redwoods, until we met with the rest of the family on the Mendocino Coast. Our surprise vacation had taken us to a captivating mint-green Airbnb on the Fort Bragg cliffside. The house was called *Stella De Mare*, a name that sounded far more romantic than I felt. It sat on five acres of private coastline, a bright, sprawling structure that stood out within the field. Inside, the aesthetic was airy and coastal, white walls with sharp accents of teal that mirrored the ocean outside, but the beauty of it all felt hollow. With ten people and two dogs, the airy design felt crowded. My aunt and uncle occupied the main suite, my father the second bedroom, my Grammy and Papa claimed one king-sized bed in the common-space upstairs, Amy and our cousin Liv took the other, and finally, my brother and our cousin Jake were graced with a blow-up mattress in the living room. Then there was me. My "room" was a small leather chaise tucked into a corner of the upstairs loft, right near the staircase, and peering down into the dining room. The leather was sleek and cold, a stark contrast to the wrath of the family below.

To my family, it was a sanctuary of relaxation and celebration. To my sister, it was the "welcome home" of her dreams. A trip to her favorite place in the world, going to her favorite spots and shops, doing her favorite activities with her favorite people, four days just for her. Despite the fact that it was so obviously a vacation celebrating her, everyone claimed the trip was in fact for me, for I would be turning 16 the very next day.

I never made a big deal out of my birthday; it was never my favorite holiday. But to be cast aside, forever the odd one out in my family. Everyone had someone, and all of a sudden, I was more alone than ever.

I spent the trip anchored to my chaise, retreating into books that I was gifted on the second night of the trip, my birthday. They weren't just stories; they were my oxygen. I used the spines of those books to build a fortress, drowning out the cacophony of barking dogs, the thud of bustling feet, the constant, buzzing plans for trips to Glass Beach, the ice cream shop Cowlick's, and the Old Haul Road for walking the trails, and something deeper within me I would avoid at all costs.

By Saturday evening, the serenity of the house felt like a cage. My senses filled with the sound of the hot tub jets humming on the deck, the clinking of silverware as dinner prep began, the smell of Amy's favorites drifting from the stove, and the sweat the heater drew from my skin. I couldn't sit on that leather anymore, squeaking and slick against it, the activity of my family and the mess of my mind pushing me over the edge. My chest felt like it was filled with wet sand, the weight of a secret I hadn't told a soul.

Tuesday was a ghost that followed me from room to room. I thought of the classroom corners I'd hidden in just days before, the way I had flinched at every vibrating notification on my phone, the scent of peppermint gum, and the exhaustion of navigating my school campus like a prey animal. I had ended a relationship that had broken me, and the miracle of being alive on Saturday was one I wasn't yet sure how to process.

I slipped down the stairs, bypassed the kitchen, and stepped out onto the porch. The air hit me like a slap, bracing, salty, and honest. As soon as my feet hit the dirt, I didn't just walk; I ran. I broke into a sprint through the acres of tall, golden grass. I wanted to outrun the mint-colored house and the ghost of Tuesday, of being held down and of unheard words. The grass hissed against my jeans, and the wind whipped my hair into a tangled mess. I ran until I reached the jagged edge where the earth gave way to the roar of the Pacific. Mist sprayed my face as I tested the loose gravel with the toe of my shoes. I looked down, it wasn't terrifyingly high, but high enough that a fall would surely do a lot of damage. I watched the rocks, the waves crashing against them. An eagle flew from a boulder off into the distance. Breathless, the rocks crunching under my sneakers, I collapsed into a crisscrossed sit. Below, the ocean was a bruised purple, the waves churning against the basalt rocks with a rhythmic, violent thud. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, as close to heaven as I felt I'd ever get.

Behind me, I heard footsteps approaching. To my surprise, my sister, the princess herself, appeared and sat beside me as tears brimmed in my eyes, saying nothing and looking out across the water.

The nightmares of the past few nights felt like they were being bleached by the salt air, but the aching was still there. That Tuesday was vivid in my mind. My boyfriend at the time had gone too far. Our relationship had always been toxic, an ouroboros of love. But this time, he'd broken something inside of me. If my younger brother hadn't been in the other room, I doubt I'd still be breathing. I'd broken up with him over text the next day, hiding in classrooms and desperately avoiding him. I hadn't told anyone. Just cut and dry. It all replayed in my head, fueling the tears dripping off my chin. The pain of the breakup, the envy I had for my sister, all of the emotional and mental burdens that had been building up in my chest, poured out then. I cried silently, watching the sunset. All the while, my sister sat through it with me. She didn't ask questions, didn't say empty words, didn't touch me without permission, as she knew I didn't like, but wouldn't understand why I wouldn't be able to handle it then.

We sat there for a long time as the sun dipped toward the horizon. Amy's presence was a shield, as she stood guard over the grief she didn't even have the details for. By doing

nothing, she gave me permission to feel everything. Her silence was a conversation, one that said *I am here, and you are not alone.*

I took a deep breath, wiping my eyes with the hem of my tee-shirt, and stood. The cliff bed looked less inviting now. Twice that week, I'd walked the edge, once as a 15-year-old and once as a 16-year-old, and twice I'd stepped back. I went to my sister and initiated a hug, thanking her for the gift she'd given me. In her doing nothing, a weight had come off my chest as if I'd told her everything. I felt light and free. My jealousy was gone, and I felt safe and at home in the arms of the woman who'd practically raised me, before she left to start her own life. This small act of love on her part saved my life and reminded me of my own love for her.