Friday writes

My best write: The Ride

5 other writes for portfolio: Chinatown, Wildfire, A Goodbye reflection, Grow up, And the winner is…,

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The Ride

I’m standing under the lamppost in the outer most part of town, waiting for a bus that is over an hour late and I realize will never come. I have an interview in the city early in the morning and I need to get there tonight. The ride is a few hours away, and I don’t have a car or anyone to drive me. If the bus won’t come I have to find some way of getting there, this opportunity is too big to pass up. Its nearing midnight as I stand with my windbreaker on and the rain starts to pelt down like tiny bullets into my jacket. The wind picks up as I shiver and shove my hands into my pockets. Then, like a beacon I spot a car heading in my direction- the way towards the city. I instinctively push my thumb out to the side to beg the driver to pick me up. As the car approaches I see that it’s a dusty grey pickup truck, the kind that looks so old you still wonder how its driving. A black tarp covers the lumpy bed of the truck, I’m both curious to look underneath and wanting to stay as far away from it as possible. The truck stops beside me, and the window covered with a film of grime slowly rolls down.

A man slides his head towards the passenger side and asks me what a pretty little thing like myself is doing here at this time. I’m filled with regret. My insides feel like they are about to burst out of me. Why did I do this? Hitchhiking is dangerous, but I have to get to the city by morning. The man is odd looking and gives me chills. He appears to be middle aged but closer to retirement. His crooked teeth glisten with yellow reflection and his skin is so pale it’s nearly translucent. The baseball cap he wears over greying hair looks as run down and old as the truck he is driving, but what sent shivers down my spine is his one lazy eye that looks glazed over. I explain that I need to get to the city, but that my bus never came. He kindly offers to give me a ride since he is going in that direction, but the moment I sit down in the seat next to him I regret my choice. Analyzing my surroundings on the passenger side, there are old and decaying cups of coffee in the cup holders to my left and burnt cigarette fumes fill the air despite the pine tree- shaped air freshener that had probably been bobbing back and forth like it is now, for years. The first few seconds of the ride feel uncomfortable with the droning silence. I hesitantly ask him what he does for a living, he says with a grunt that he hunts and has been since he was old enough to walk. He, in turn, asks me where I’m from. My explanation of growing up since I was little in the small town where he had picked me up from seemed insufficient to him. Beginning to ask more and more questions about me, it felt more like an interrogation than a conversation. I keep telling myself I just need to last the night. He asks me where my blouse is from and says I should take it off. I fall silent and am trying to keep from screaming out loud. I feel his lazy eye gaze over me and look me up and down. The rattling of the truck on the dirty road distracts me a small bit, but I’m frozen in my seat from anxiety. Ignoring his question, I ask how close we are to the city. He says that we still have a long way to go.

The drive continues with bouts of silence and questions answered. With each passing turn I hope that the winding road will turn into the familiar and comforting lights of the city. Taking deep breaths, I try to calm my heartrate, but it beats like a drum in my rib cage. I’m aware of every move he makes, as to make sure he doesn’t lay a finger on me. Each turn of the wheel or adjusting his cap sends a jolt of apprehension into my body, never knowing if that movement will be the time he tries to take hold of me. My mind wanders to every worst-case scenario, and I begin again to wonder what is in the bed of the truck sitting just behind us. My next question I pose to him asks what is underneath the tarp. For the first time this evening he doesn’t say a word. I feel the tension grow and know I have made the wrong decision- clearly, I’ve stepped out of bounds. He takes a turn off the main road on a dirt path that leads up the hill. I tell him this isn’t the way to the city. He is still silent. I feel fear tightening up my throat as he accelerates the truck as if someone’s grip on my neck is squeezing harder and harder. *I need to get out.* I tell him to stop and pull over. He ignores me and drives faster. Shouting one more time, I nearly break into tears. After clicking the red button on my seatbelt, I open the door and bail out of the truck.

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Chinatown

When I was around 7 years old, most weekends I would be spending time with my grandparents. If I was lucky I would get to go downtown to Chinatown with them. Some parts about this visit I loved; like seeing the little shops where I could buy cheaply made plastic figurines that I would spend my allowance on and getting to have a yummy lunch with my *ma-ma* and *yeh-yeh.* I loved the grand restaurants with silky white tablecloths, and the best tea that wasn’t too bland, but not too bitter either. Some parts I didn’t like so much though, like wandering through the shops of bulk foods that looked like they were from another planet. Black orbs that were hard and smelled of salt- *no thanks*. Crunchy and shriveled bits of seafood? Or maybe it was mushroom? I could never tell. All I knew is that I wanted to stay as far away as possible from the smell of dried fish and marinated meats. We would walk around the shops and continue towards the park that if I was extra lucky- I’d get to go play on.

Growing up my *ma-ma* and *yeh-yeh* spoke *some* Cantonese with me. I knew a few common phrases like asking to go to the washroom, or ordering some dishes or water at a restaurant, but for most of the time the words that came from the mouths of my grandparents sounded like complete gibberish to me. Following close behind my *ma-ma*, we ventured through aisles of brightly colored fabrics and dresses, with me pointing out the prettiest patterns. Being seven years old I always liked flowery patterns or sometimes something sparkly, it was our little tradition and I cherish every bit of it.

But what I’ll never forget is how isolated I felt, being surrounded in my hometown with a language I didn’t understand. All the signs around me were uselessly in characters that I could barely recognize, let alone put together to make sentences. I remember feeling lost in a place that I should be familiar with, and it wasn’t years later until I took those experiences with me. I had never imagined what it was like to be a minority in a new place. Unfamiliar things surrounded me from everywhere I looked, and the only people I could speak to were my grandparents. That experience was on a much smaller scale than it would be for someone of a foreign country to be in culture shock, but it helped me see things from the other perspective. I enjoyed seeing a different walk of life on the weekends, but I was always so happy to come home afterwards to familiarity.

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Wildfire

Smoke filled the air outside as I hastily packed my backpack. The forest fires that had been brewing for some time now had come too close to our house, and we were being forced to leave our home behind. Scanning my room, I take a few t-shirts and my favourite notebook and pencil, deciding what to take and what to leave behind. After stuffing by bag and forcing the stubborn zipper shut, I go to collect my little sister. I find her crying as she can’t fit her favourite stuffed animal inside her shimmering pink duffle bag. I offered to carry it for her as I lead her down the stairs to the car. My parents are there filling the car with fragments of my childhood, I see my red blanket that I slept with every night as a baby, and a few dusty albums that hold photos of my late grandmother. I suddenly remember one of my first toys as a child that’s sitting in my closet. A small stuffed teddy bear holding a satin blue heart – I’m wishing that I grabbed that on my way out too. My sister, still in tears, crawls into the backseat of the Chevy as my mother follows her to console.

I take one final look at my home. The windows are grimy and have a thin layer of dirty film over each portal that looks inside. The once soft blue paint chips around each baseboard, and I gaze upon the backyard with our creaky, rusty swing set that had been there before I was born. Each of the rooms within the sagging house held memories, both good and bad. I could vaguely see the old wares of the kitchen with a few items still laying strewn about on the countertop. My sister’s first steps happened there. I looked up to my room where I had resided in since I was born. Still in there were all my old school projects, soccer trophies, books, and belongings. It was where I had sleepovers with my best friends. Where I hid from my parents when an argument was arising. Where I did my unwanted homework. Where I played hours of video games. This house was the culmination of my whole life, and I was just hoping that when we return everything will still be intact.

Many days later when we were allowed to come home and the fire had subsided enough to return, I went with just my father while my mother and sister were still at my aunt’s house where we had been staying. As the pickup rumbled to a stop a small ways up our driveway, and as we walked around the curve up to the house I saw the line of ashes a few hundred feet away from our backyard. A close call, but our house was safe. As my father and I renter, I find myself running up the stairs to my bedroom and finding that stuffed bear holding a blue heart. Hugging it tight, I feel tears of joy and relief start to fill my eyes.

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A goodbye reflection

*1 month* *ago,*

*The constant shuffling around the busy airport felt distracting, as my mind tried to wrap around the fact that one of the most important people in my life was about to leave. His luggage sits next to us, awaiting its journey to his future but filled with his belongings from the past. Unable to go past the gates, I look up at him for the last time in a long time. A tight embrace. His arms wrapping around me as I feel a few stray tears falling onto his grey sweater I got him last Christmas. His arms slip away as I say goodbye, knowing things won’t be the same next time I see him.*

Walking down a small trail that we used to call ours, I feel nostalgic about our time we shared together. 17 months we laughed, talked, kissed, it disappeared in a flash. I had known about his impending leave for some time, and every day that that flight drew nearer I would begin to miss him already even more. The trail is scattered with runners, cyclists, and other leisurely walkers like myself. I turn into a small thick of trees, where I know a bench waits for us-*- just me now*. Overlooking a small lake, the scent of the pine trees fills the air. The sky is grey like concrete and filled with clouds looking to dump rain on the city. *Typical Vancouver.* The pebbles underneath my feet scatter as I come to the bench and sit. I can’t help but remember this pit stop we’d make every time we came here together, and how he would always point out a little carving next to the metal plate stating its memorium.

“*Look it’s a little heart! Was it there before?”*

*“It’s always been there! You can just never remember it, smart one.”*

I had mourned our time together from when we found out he would be leaving town. Every hour we spent together, in the back of my mind I would know the end was coming. The damper outlook I put on our relationship made it harder and harder to spend time together, to be happier around each other. The water a few metres to my left rippled profusely as a duck landed and sat itself in the stream. Somewhere nearby I heard children yelling and running towards the lake, as if they were drawn to the ducks like a magnet. Where had the time gone, it felt like just yesterday we were as smiling and carefree as those kids. As I sat and reflected on the last couple months of our relationship, I became more and more frustrated with myself. Why did I have to waste time that we had together?

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Grow up

An easy target. That’s what he was to everyone. Within each temporary friend group he would find at school, they all reduced him to the same thing. He was smaller, grew up with many sisters, and always ended up being the butt of the joke. Through group chats he was mocked for a simple joke, and in person what he wore was made fun of. Each “friend” turned out to treat him the same way, he was okay to be around at school, but never got invited to birthdays or parties. Even the girls he got along with found new ways to point and laugh. An endless cycle of teasing and bullying plagued him throughout many years at middle school and high school, and he always felt he never fit in.

Many nights he found himself drowning in self-loathing and figuring out why no one seemed to really like him. Questioning everything from how he stood, to the pitch of his voice, to his facial expressions. The stigma that surrounded self-consciousness in boys was one he thought he would never bring up, but so desperately wanted to escape from. Whenever his parents picked up that he was having trouble getting along at school, they would offer the empty and useless advice of “just be yourself!” But what if “himself” just wasn’t likeable, if they all really did hate him? He was adjusted to the teasing and jokes, but just because you’re used to getting a paper cut doesn’t make it hurt any less.

During lunch at school one day, he was with a usual crowd of loud teenage boys when one of them took a simple joke too far. He could feel the angry, hot tears begin to fill his eyes but refused to cry in front of all of them. Silently after the joke had passed, he slid into the washroom as others carried on with their day and forgot about him, as usual. Standing inside the bathroom stall his rage began to bubble inside of him. The burning desire to be free from torment wasn’t going away until it had been fulfilled. The following day when everyone sat outside at lunch, someone made another homophobic comment towards him. He had had enough.

He began his speech angrily, but slowly grew quieter as he realized the many eyes laid on him. He told them how every joke felt like another punch on an already bruised arm, and how he had questioned for so long who he was, how he could change himself to fit in, and what was wrong with him. He wanted to stop this continuation of a difficult chapter of his social life, and he had finally expressed what he had been worrying about for months on end. As he finished his talk, the imminent consequences filled his mind. *What if they hate me even more now? I shouldn’t have said anything, I don’t want to be even more of an outcast…*

Surprise came to his face when the ringleader of the jokes apologized. Explaining on behalf of all the group that they thought it was just joking around. A heartfelt apology? Was this a dream? He thanked them all for understanding and they all promised to go easy on the teasing. For a long time he had wondered if the group he was with were real friends or simply just someone to hang out with so he wouldn’t be alone. But to his surprise the consequences were incredible. He texted many of them outside of the subject of homework, he learned more about all of them. It seemed crazy to him that an act of vulnerability- exactly what he thought they would make fun of him for- brought him closer to friends he didn’t know he had. He got invited to more gatherings and made closer connections. He began to really feel like he was a part of the group. For so long he was afraid to take the risk of expressing his sentiments, but now he was only wishing he had done it sooner.

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And the winner is…

For months I’d agonized over this day. The feeling of dread before every rehearsal, the anxiety I felt in the days leading up to the competition. I felt unprepared, nervous, and alone. The atmosphere before an international ballet competition is very unique in the way that everyone is friendly on the outside, but secretly hoping you fall out of your pirouettes onstage. My warm up ritual before stepping onstage is the same as always; some stretching, doing a full barre, and listening to my music while going through my solo one last time. The moment comes as the announcer calls my number to the stage. *I’m going to throw up. What if I just didn’t go on?* Pushing away from myself, I enter the stage as Nikiri, from the ballet “The Talisman.” She’s much more daring than I am, unafraid and even a little flirty. I barely remember anything from when I was onstage- just the things I had made mistakes on. Normally I’m unhappy with my performance, but as soon as I stepped off I burst into tears, recalling everything I did wrong that I knew I could have done better. Friends surrounded me and told me that I was beautiful onstage, but I felt that they were just saying that. I knew my teacher wouldn’t be happy with me.

At the awards ceremony, all 200 of the other competitors gathered onstage as we awaited the announcement of the winners over the past week of performances and classes. The atmosphere was exciting as we all tried to keep quiet but couldn’t help talking to the friend next to us. I had been expected by nearly everyone to place in the top three. I knew I was going to be disappointed. Third place was given to a girl a few years older than me and I knew she danced with flawless precision- *I won’t win, I’ve done all this for nothing.* Second place, more applause. First place, not me. *It’s ok, you can’t win them all.* Other categories were announced, and other prize winners stepped forward to accept their trophies and certificates. When everyone thought the awards had finished and all the categories were accounted for, there was still one trophy sitting on the table. The announcer explained the last award of the evening- the entire jury chose one dancer that they believed held the most promise in the future. And they announced my number.

I almost forgot what to do, *walk forward oh my god. What’s happening???* I accept the award from the head jury member, a famous and important figure in the dance world. I want to pinch myself, this couldn’t be real. When everyone had left the stage, I slowly came to a realization. I didn’t win this year, but maybe I just wasn’t ready yet. If they really thought I had promise, I needed to be working harder every single day to get there. So, I did. This experience gave me the confidence I never had in myself before, and I wasn’t going to take it for granted. When I left the stage this time I cried again, but this time it was tears of joy. My best friend hugged me and, in that moment, I felt only pure happiness. That, was the proudest moment of my life.