

Pennsylvania Elegy

The bar was crowded and louder than Elle remembered. The radio was blasting over two different sports games on three different TVs, being watched by one or two stray patrons downing 3 dollar domestics. Conversation swelled and melted together until the inside of her skull buzzed. It all looked exactly like it used to, and somehow that made it worse. She didn't feel like she was stepping back in time, but more like she'd stepped into a different universe entirely—one she was never supposed to be a part of. She stuffed her shaking hands in the pockets of her coat and felt her resolve go limp.

There he was, sitting in the same booth they'd always sat in after shows: second from the back on the left. His hair was shorter and he'd grown a bit of a beard since then, but it was undeniably him. Elle felt a mix of elation and anxiety. So he'd really shown up, huh? The rational part of her had expected to sit and wait for a few minutes before finally deciding to bolt, assured that he no longer had time to entertain her stupid impulses. But there he was, against all rationality, and she'd better start heading his way before he noticed her staring dumbly from across the bar.

The living room had been filled with giant toddlers in Hawaiian shirts, defying the bitter October cold by sloshing fish bowls full of blood red jungle juice onto the dingy carpet. Someone had popped the kiddie pool by falling on it, and little plastic balls were strewn across the floor. It was like watching a Discovery Channel documentary about monkeys.

"Is this how you always feel?" Elle asked, trying not to look at the couple getting way too comfortable with each other on the couch opposite them.

"Pretty much, yeah," he sighed, resting his chin in his hand.

Sober, steady Charlie. Elle had reached out to him after a horrible breakup the previous summer and, although he'd been a mutual friend of both parties, Charlie had sat and listened to her for hours while she told him a long and awful story that she'd never told anyone else. She still hadn't. She couldn't remember a time after that when he wasn't there for her, and she'd felt like she owed him ever since. But of course, he never asked for anything. He never would.

"It's like being at the zoo."

He chuckled, "Yeah, it really is."

"And you still like us?"

"You have your moments."

She looked at Charlie, haloed by a limp string of multicolored fairy lights behind them. His expression had a private softness to it that made her ears burn, and his hair looked different than usual. More intentional. In spite of herself, she wondered what it might be like to touch it.

Just before Elle could lift her hand, Charlie cleared his throat, and his intense eyes retreated back to the cheap flower lei he was fraying between two fingers. A nervous habit. He could never sit still, and got anxious without something occupying his hands. When she'd met him during a workshop their first week in college, he'd made her an origami crane with the FAQ sheet. For some reason, remembering this made her feel guilty.

Elle stood up. "I'm gonna go check on Marissa."

“Oh, okay.”

She wove aimlessly through the thicket of sweaty bodies, and her pounding blood slowed with the growing distance between her and the boy on the couch. Without the fuzzy buffer of alcohol, she could feel everything. She didn't know how he did it.

They'd come with Marissa and Tess: Charlie to DD, and Elle to keep him company. Marissa was always getting sloppy by this point in the night, and Elle reckoned she'd find her on the floor under the pool table, but she and Tess were nowhere to be found. Maybe they'd finally stopped bullshitting each other and were making out in the bathroom. It's not like she'd really intended to find Marissa anyway.

Not quite ready to return, she resolved to just stand out on the porch until she got too cold, and then stood there some more so she could at least pretend she'd gone out to smoke when she had to face Charlie again.

The distance between them on either side of the table was both infinite and infinitesimal. His gaze was a weight that kept her head down as she inspected the woodgrain and played with a ring of condensation left by her water.

“I didn't think you'd come,” she said. Her voice sounded much smaller than she'd intended.

“Then why'd you show up?” His tone was measured and formal, and it hurt.

“Because there was a chance that you might.”

Charlie exhaled through his teeth, taking a sip of whatever was in front of him, and Elle raised an eyebrow. “Some IPA, I don't know. It was on special.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I didn't peg you for an IPA guy.”

“You don't know me,” Charlie said. And then, after a moment, added, “Anymore.”

“You're right,” she admitted, not quite meeting his eyes but aiming somewhere more innocuous, like his forehead.

Everything she'd thought about saying on the way there felt stuck somewhere between her throat and her tongue.

It had been the first really sunny day since the previous fall, and uncharacteristically warm for mid-March, so she and Charlie had lounged on the hill in the student green until the sun began to sink in the sky and the conversations of people around them gradually died out. The grass was starting to get dewy and uncomfortable, and she could hear the ambient sounds of crickets waking up. She considered leaving, but he'd driven twenty minutes out just so she wouldn't be alone. He was always too kind for his own good, and she wondered idly what it might be like if he were selfish for once.

“Thanks for hanging out,” she said. “Sorry it's not more exciting.”

“You don't have to entertain me,” he said, leaning back on his hands.

Elle hummed and looked at the distant light posts in the parking lot across from them. Their metallic arms looked like giant industrial boughs, drooping under the weight of their glowing fruit.

Charlie followed her gaze and pointed to the post nearest to the street. “That one there is Orion’s Belt.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes, feeling his stare return. She could always tell when he was looking at her; his stare made her feel painfully vulnerable down to her very essence, like she was psychically naked, which was somehow definitely worse than being physically naked.

They sat like that for a while, looking out at the fake stars, thinking their separate thoughts.

And then he said it: “I’m in love with you.”

“Oh.”

She felt like she might pitch herself down the hill, rolling head over heels until her body slumped over the spray painted boundary lines of the lacrosse field.

A few minutes of silence stretched on for what felt like hours, and the loud swell of bar conversation did little to cut through the tension. Elle pushed a potato wedge around its tinfoil prison and felt stupid for ordering them. What’d she expected, really? For him to pull her in for a hug and tell her he’d missed her? He had every reason to hate her. For her to call him here all this time later just because she missed him and couldn’t handle knowing that he might hate her was... well, it wasn’t really out of character for her.

“I shouldn’t have done this.” The corners of her eyes were starting to sting.

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Charlie sighed. She stole a look at his hand, steady around the pint glass.

Her mouth opened, but she couldn’t find anything to say. She was actually kind of relieved to see him so upset with her.

“You shouldn’t have, but you did.” He leaned forward on his elbows. “So what was the grand plan, Elle? What did you come here to say?” The way he said her name made her throat tighten.

Her voice was barely a whisper. “You cut your hair.”

“Jesus Christ!” He slapped his palm on the table. “Yes, I cut my fucking hair. And you disappeared from my life only to drag me back to fucking Tansy’s to see if you could break my heart *again over fucking potato wedges.*”

“I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry,” She sucked in a desperate breath. “You have every right to be mad at me. It’s just—you *listened* to me. You were the only person I trusted in the whole world, Charlie! I just wanted you to be there for me. I never asked for—” she stopped.

“For what? For me to fall in love with you?”

The radio lapsed into silence as they stared at each other.

“I feel awful about how I left things. I just felt like I needed to see you again.”

His face softened for a brief second before contorting. He used to tell her she was wonderfully strange, but in the harsh light, he just looked repulsed.

“And I felt like I never wanted to see you again.”

Elle felt the bottom falling out from under her.

Before she could think, she grabbed her coat from their booth and ran for the door, the orange fluorescent light of the bar sizzling out in the biting evening air. The serrated wind

stripped the scarf from around her shoulders as she tried to focus her eyes on the garish modern art installation across the street: Two giant metal flowers clawed up from the pavement in a tangle of pepto pink and kelly green. The city had erected many pieces like it their freshman year in an attempt to bring a hip, college-town vibe to the historic city, but when they receded into the night, they looked more like crooked ghouls steadying themselves on the neighboring mailbox.

Elle's chest felt hollow and abraded, like her heart was a pumice stone. She shivered as she put on her coat, yanking her arms through the sleeves and petulantly seizing her runaway scarf. The tiny bar behind her felt forbidden and miles away; although he hadn't asked her to leave, he certainly hadn't tried to make her stay. And so here she was, running away again. Putting distance between herself and the boy in the bar.

For these last few years, Elle had wondered whether she was a part of their memories after she left, or if they'd worked quickly to scrub her out of their collective past, for Charlie's sake. Now she knew: she'd soured every moment by leaving, and the pieces were scattered around her like ashes in the snow, obsolete and indistinguishable.

Maybe she'd retreat before he could leave the bar, disappearing for a final time and rendering the night nothing more than a bad dream, a drunken story. It's not like he'd chase her—he didn't do that anymore. Hell, he'd hardly wanted to come meet her when she'd called him. He sounded bewildered and tired through the phone, and she was sure he'd only come because he felt sorry for her.

In front of her, a car rolled by, and she wished with a violent yearning to be inside of it.

It had been April back then, and the moody Pennsylvania weather was sending down freezing bullets that splattered on Charlie's windshield, fracturing the red light they were stopped at into fireworks. He was absently tapping the beat to a quiet song on the steering wheel, shimmering under the percussion of the rain. She watched the shadows it cast slide across his face as they started moving, in a dance with his freckles. The dash clock read 3:12. They may as well have been the only people alive.

"Thanks for coming with me tonight," he said.

"Thanks for staying up with me," she replied.

They'd left his friend's place hours ago, opting to just sit in the car and listen to music. She'd been feeling bad again, since her ex had come back to the city from his internship. Despite the progress she had made, it had been a month of looking over her shoulder, and Charlie was happy to let her relax in his passenger seat, where she felt safe.

"Never a problem, baby bird."

She blushed at the nickname as he pulled into the parking lot. She dreaded the cold walk to the lobby, the retreat of his headlights, the silence that followed. The car was warm, and she was tired. 3 a.m. had an ephemeral quality to it, like the fleeting thoughts before sleep. The air prickled with Charlie's proximity, and the heat of his body was like a gravity well, pulling every cell in towards him. It occurred to her then that she felt very lonely, and she could feel him looking right at her. And so for once, Elle decided to look right back.

And then she kissed him.

And he kissed her back.

They kissed until she felt both his hands start shaking and his breath start beating like hummingbird wings against her cheek; and all at once she realized that 3 a.m. was real, and their kiss wouldn't dissolve like a dream when she closed her eyes. Suddenly, he felt so fragile under her hands, like his neck was the delicate flute of a champagne glass. As she pulled back, the taste of the kiss was replaced with the taste of her own heartbeat, metallic and woozy. She'd crossed the event horizon.

Charlie was staring at her, wide-eyed and breathing deliberately, like he was trying to discipline his lungs before they ran away with everything in his head.

She realized she was shaking, too.

Ultimately she didn't run, because she had nowhere else to go. So she just stood there while the crosswalk sign ticked and the street glittered green, then yellow, then red in the ice crystals stuck between cracks in the asphalt. Every winter, erosion pushed each side further apart. All this time had passed, and she still wasn't sure what she wanted. She still wouldn't just let Charlie out of her terrible grasp. Shaking, she huddled beside the doorway—the brick edifice stuck out just far enough to divert some of the bitter wind—and searched her coat pockets, producing a half-empty pack of Newports. Her hands nearly went numb trying to light one in the cold. It took three tries before one caught.

Leaning back to blow out smoke, she realized she couldn't see a single star.

On one irretrievable evening, the pair had looked at an early summer sky overwhelmed with stars. Elle had never seen that many stars in the city—it was like they all showed up to watch her say goodbye. The crush of little lights made her feel small, like a cornered animal. She picked at her nail polish and pulled the giant blanket Charlie had brought tighter around her shoulders, feeling like she forgot her lines.

It was a proper Midwestern light show, with the stars hanging above the illuminated Taco Bell and Valero signs across the street. Charlie had parked his Chevy Malibu in the main lot across from the building where they'd spent most of their time those few years, writing stories and making movies about them. She'd really tried to stick it out, to walk down the cobbled sidewalks like nothing had ever happened—to reclaim Arden hall and the whole damn campus. But it was too much. And no matter how many nights she spent trying to think herself out of it, she knew in order to leave the bad behind, she was going to have to leave the good, too. No matter how good it was.

As she groped for something, *anything*, to say, Charlie began to shiver. Lightly, quietly, in secret. She turned to ask if he'd like to get in on this blanket action, but realized in horror that he was crying.

Fuck. What could she do that wouldn't make everything worse? She'd wished a thousand times for a chance to make him care less, to stop him from wanting anything to do with her. But she'd hardly given him a choice, and so he loved her. And now she was leaving. And really, it was all she *could* do. At least after she hurt him this time, she could never do it again. But she

knew what he wanted, and that she couldn't give it to him. Which meant she couldn't have any of him at all anymore, because he deserved so much more than to diminish under her hands.

So in the end, she just listened to him cry quietly, doing him the service of pretending she didn't notice. She was sure he knew that she did.

Later that night he drove her home, and she got out of his car for the last time.

Two cigarettes and a pair of chapped lips later, Charlie emerged in a blink of warmth from the bar, which washed over Elle like a heartbeat, making her remember the cold all over again. He looked up and stopped short, startled by her presence and swaying slightly on his feet.

"You're still here," it wasn't a question.

Elle looked down, ashing the cigarette and biting her lip. "I don't even know why I came." Somewhere far off, a car honked.

Charlie cleared his throat. "Yeah. Me either," he whispered, playing with the zipper on his coat—one she'd never seen him wear.

Of course she'd never seen it. *She* disappeared, not him; he was allowed to change. Elle took a moment to really look at him, and realized he was doing the same. His eyes looked wide and serious; the first time she'd called his eyes brown he had corrected her, telling her that, actually, they were hazel. After a moment, she slumped down, pulling her knees to her chest.

"So, you drink now."

Charlie chuckled humorlessly and sat down heavy on the pavement, moved by the momentum of the alcohol in his blood and the unreality of the moment. She could feel the heat of his body electrifying the air between them, and heard him breathing in the pregnant silence.

She realized in the blue-red blink of the open sign that, actually, his eyes *were* hazel. It'd been so long since she'd looked at him, but she knew she would never forget his face. And so she let herself really see it without turning away, and it clicked right back into place. Every feature. The hollowed-out space inside grew warm and soft and full. Elle felt sick.

"I've thought a lot about it, and I didn't do everything right. I know that, really. But no matter how much I think about it, about what you did—even if I understood it, I mean..." he looked straight ahead, out across the street to the marquee over the theater. He exhaled slowly. "...Elle, I don't think I forgive you."

She crushed her cigarette out on a strip of mortar behind her, watching the ashes fall like bright orange snow. "Oh," she whispered. Elle looked at her hands, lost now with nothing to keep them busy. She swallowed down something sharp. "I understand."

She was finally getting what she had wanted for all that time, and it hurt worse than anything she could have imagined.

"Whatever you're thinking," Charlie said, his definitely hazel eyes burning red into her cheeks, "you can just say it. There's no point in not saying it now."

Elle bit her lip and blinked furiously. He was right. Everything that happened before was the story, the main plot, the credits. This was the epilogue, and none of it could change anything that was already done. She lit another cigarette and looked over at him, watching his chest rise and fall, still sturdy and familiar under an alien coat. She wanted to go home.

"I guess I wanted to know that you were okay," Elle felt the cold pavement through her jeans, and wished she could sink to the center of the earth. "It's selfish, but I couldn't handle how

I treated you, and I needed to know that you were fine now, even if it took a while. Even if you hated me.”

Charlie exhaled, the vapor of his breath mingling with her cigarette smoke. “When you left, even though you knew, and you didn’t even *say* anything... I felt like the way I loved you didn’t matter.”

The old, familiar softness in his voice was barely perceptible underneath his words, only revealing itself for a moment as his declaration floated off on a cloud of steam.

“It’s so funny,” she said, not smiling. “This is exactly what I was so scared of. I couldn’t handle the idea of losing you, and I didn’t want to do anything that would risk...any of it, anything. You were so wonderful to me, and I couldn’t give anything to you. I wasn’t ready to be what you wanted me to be, and—” The end of her sentence hiccupped and she wiped at her nose. “—and I felt like the way I loved you wasn’t good enough. Because I did love you, Charlie. I need you to know that.”

A car alarm echoed through the empty streets. The neon buzzed. Elle watched her fourth cigarette slowly turn to a pillar of ash.

“Why did you kiss me?”

Elle hugged her knees closer, trying to get as small as possible. “I just didn’t want you to go.”

Charlie hummed in response.

She remembered all those nights that he let her cry in his passenger seat, idling in the parking lot of her apartment while she vomited her deepest secrets all over his sweater. But now he was silent. She could hear people laughing inside. Elle squeezed her eyes shut and imagined it was two years ago, and the people laughing were their friends, and they were waiting for her to come back because she just left to get some air. And she started to really cry. Charlie shifted uncomfortably, pretending not to notice.

And she could swear the space between them echoed.