

## Love from Seattle

My patients who lecture me about love always say they'll never forget their first, but what am I to do if I have two? I never entertained this idea until I saw you on a variety show playing at Paju last winter. It was cold and the clouds wept, so I sat at my usual spot, a single booth in the far right corner of the restaurant, eating stew and reading through David Myers's *Psychology* textbook. I was preparing for my exam on "Chapter 8: Memory." The tofu was smooth and the flavor coated my tastebuds with every bite. I was ravished, eating so fast that the red broth splattered on the white textbook pages every time my spoon hit the bowl or I slurped. I hadn't eaten that day, and I certainly hadn't thought of pulling myself away from my meal until I heard your voice. It was different, deeper, aged, but I recognized it in an instant. I thought I had forgotten you after three years but there you were, right in front of my eyes, in all your pixelated glory.

You seemed taller than the last time we spoke. Maybe five centimeters more than you were in high school, but still shorter than Yujin. We must have looked like a lop-sided hydra back in high school, the three of us always attached at the hip. I never thought that would change, nor did I think my love for the two of you would shift. When I saw you, it hit me: the emotions I never knew I felt. They had been present in our youth, but my feelings were concealed by the boy gone far too soon.

I see him now as I'm looking at the sky.

I often wonder what life would be like if we hadn't all gone our separate ways. Would Yujin have been happy? Would I have stayed? Would you two have pushed off your own dreams to join me in mine? Would we have all attended the same university? Would he have kept his

secret? Would the three of us have continued in our oblivion? I reckon I would have liked to live eternally in oblivion if it meant we could always stay together.

I miss walking beside you both. I miss the way you looked at me when I spoke. I miss the way I would catch him staring at you and a blush would crawl up his neck, dyeing his ears pink. I didn't think anything of it back then, I figured he was probably thinking of some naughty joke you would have told him during second period. I know better now. I never noticed how you felt about me. I didn't put the pieces together until my flight departed from Incheon. Yujin certainly wouldn't have mentioned it had he caught on. Your older brother always teased that you had a crush, but I wouldn't believe it. I was too naïve, too in love with a boy in love with you.

I think you and I both knew, even before whatever happened in the locker room that you still keep hidden; before that picture was hung up in the halls; before Yujin transferred schools and jumped from that building, that he loved me like a friend, and you much more than that. It's all so clear to me now. I had known all along but was far too afraid to say it. I kept quiet through every assembly, every mass, every school dance for four years. Every doubt, every coincidence, every subtle sign that he was in love with you and not me, I just pushed it all down until he died. I think I was scared to hurt either one of you. Or maybe just scared to let go. I was always afraid of growing up, moving on.

I'm not sure you know this, but I still keep in touch with your family. I wanted to forget you for so long. I tried to erase my memories of home. I threw away my leather-bound diary from freshman year, the one that held your family's home phone number. I wanted to call, but I just couldn't remember what followed 816. Strange enough, about a week after I saw you on that show, your father told my father, and my father told me, that you still think of me. He said he spoke to you after your first live show and you said you wished I had been there. That was back

in December, but I'm still holding on, even if it burns and blisters me. I hate to admit that I tried not to think about you. You're so lovely to think about. But for a while, when I thought about you, I would think about him. I find pieces of him everywhere; in the clouds and in halves of clementines and in the dandelions growing in the cracks of sidewalks. That was painful before, salt in my wounds. I'm trying to heal them, to make peace with his ghost.

I started going to therapy. I don't really know how to feel about it. We haven't delved into the whole "my first boyfriend killed himself on the night of my eighteenth birthday" thing yet. So far she knows about my parents' divorce and my move from Seoul to Seattle, but she doesn't know the reason I left. Nobody knows that but me.

Sessions are long. Dr. Castillo and I have a lot to unpack. She's a lovely lady. Grew up overseas but found a home in Seattle like me. I don't know why I can't really open up to her. For the most part, I just sit on her linen sofa and watch dew drip from the bleeding hearts outside the office window. We talk about you sometimes. About our childhood. Remember the night we skipped primary school graduation for that Seo Taiji concert? Our fathers grounded us for the entire summer but it was worth it, you found your dream that night. I don't know why but I started to cry when I told her that story. Somehow I think talking about you is harder than talking about him. Life scares me more than death.

Scheduling appointments was a bit hard with my internship and classes. I only see her every other Sunday from noon to one. That's how long my lunch break lasts at the nursing home. When I'm not at school, I'm there, and for that brief hour bi-monthly I'm at Dr. Castillo's office on 15th and Pike. I try to keep busy. It helps with the loneliness. Do you feel it, too? It probably hit you a bit harder, but you've always been tougher than me. Always stronger, more put-together, lovelier in every way. I'm certain you're busier, too. It must be hard being an idol. I

can't hate you for getting everything you wanted, I just always thought that he would be a part of it.

Are you getting enough rest? You never used to. Too active, too ambitious, too alive to sleep. Nights spent on your roof, gazing at the stars, drinking soju straight from the bottle, and talking until dawn, will always be fond. We shared first kisses and failures and fantasies on that roof. You always wanted the world. Tie your rope tight around the globe, Minji, and pull with the strength of two instead of one. Yujin will pull with you.

I'm sorry to dig up corpses that have long been buried.

I'm sorry for everything really.

I should have talked with you after he was gone, but I didn't know what to say. Apart from my grandfather, I hadn't lost anyone I had loved so much. I never wanted to think about losing him. Or you. We were all so young, so immature. I know what I did was childish, running away, but please be forgiving. We *were* only children then.

I'm not trying to make excuses. I shouldn't have left when you needed me most. I needed you, too. But I was too selfish to mend a broken heart. I told myself that I had to feel the grief alone, that I couldn't lean on you. I'd end up dragging you down with me and you might've crushed under the weight of my emotions. You had places to go: a future so bright you could see the glimmer light years away. I couldn't hold you back from that.

If you take only one thing away from what I'm writing, please let it be that there is always space for you in my life. And I'm sorry that I didn't realize all of this sooner, it's taken my wounds far too long to close. I'm sorry that I missed graduation and that I never called. I'm sorry I wasn't at your first concert. I'll start an international fan club to make up for it. My shining star. You are meant to be seen. The light of my life and everything in between. I am so

sorry for the hurt I've caused. His shadow has been keeping my sentiment in the dark. And I know this letter is late. I don't expect you to respond. Nonetheless, I hope you do. I am still so full of hope. Even after they blew our cloud away. Even when the sky cries every day. Even when you are no longer in my life. I hope that everything will be okay.

I'll leave my landline in case you want to call. I need to tell you things that can't be written.

Love from Seattle,

Akira