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I Set Myself on Fire Just to Watch the World Burn

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*I Set Myself on Fire
Just to Watch the World Burn*

Madison Gilmore

December 10th, 2020

For my mother, who taught me to be strong. And for Justin, who taught me that strength and vulnerability aren't mutually exclusive.

Midnight Girl

his skin was cool marble
suffused with lunar glow
blinds cast dark streaks
across his face
fractured bone ash china

burnt umber eyes
why did they coax me closer still?
over gossamer grooves
on the vestigial wings
of past happiness

our silhouettes reflected
some truth unknown to us
they embraced and melted
becoming one
kindred souls finally tethered

hesitation thickened static air
a veil of fine mist
between converging bodies
racing hearts now steadied and slowed
falling into pace with some distant drum

we had nearly been here before
eyeing the precipice
incapable of moving forward
sheltered from the rain
praying he would call me

his Midnight Girl
but now we lept
vowing to never look back
lest we turn into salt pillars
inevitably eroding to nothingness

he hovered over me
eyelashes flitting against my skin
delicate hummingbird pinions
lips dripping with honeyed words
parted once more

I can still hear his voice
how it sounded when he said It

Gold Joinery

you tried to break me,
didn't you?
my impenetrable walls
made you diffident,
made you claustrophobic.

you tried to break me,
didn't you?
your covetous palms
sought to splinter
the soundness that eluded you.

you, too, had been molded
out of clay.
but the kiln scorched you,
discolored and cracked you.
your heart hardened and grew ugly.

you hoped I would disintegrate,
dust you could sweep away.
you took a jagged sliver,
thinking it would conceal your clefts,
thinking I would fill in your chasms.

but your fractures run too deep.
that fragment of me
only made you more incomplete
with tree sap and gold leaf,
I tended to my wounds

I mended my spiderwebbed grooves.
resplendent streams of gold
crept up my every side.
you only emphasized my loveliness.
you only made me more complete.

you tried to break me,
didn't you?
but I restored what you stole.
I gilded myself.
I made myself whole.

Mechanical Life

flesh plucked from bone
bleeding pulp scraped away
hardware of humanity
ripped out by its tendons

a vessel to be filled
by their gadgetry
cogs, gears, pinions
body of steel beams and trusses

you were nothing more
than a trinket, a plaything,
a figurine for make-believe
devoid of life's flicker

a shiny wind-up toy
a key a clockwork motor
to be twisted, manipulated
resurrected to a mechanical life

they always tired of you
craved a newness in you
they could not program
they dismantled you

left you as window-dressed
scrap metal, spare parts
but *for once*,
you didn't have to reinvent yourself

for once, you were not torn apart
just to be reassembled
for once, *you* put yourself back together
into who you were before

before they manhandled you
you slipped back into your skin
traded in your corroding
skeleton for marrow

you filled the apertures of your skull
with soil and sunlight
until irises bloomed
in their emptiness

line taken from Dzvinia Orlowsky's "Folding a Stranger's Laundry" from her book *Bad Harvest*

I set myself on fire

I grew my hair out. Long. Split-ends grazed ankle bones with every footstep. I braided kindling into these tresses: twigs, dry grasses, hay. I cleansed my hair with gasoline. Softened it with lighter fluid. Smoothed it down with kerosene. And I waited. Waited for someone to ignite me. Set me on fire. For someone to burn and become fire with me.

He held a match between his lips. A white-hot petal bloomed from its tip. I thought the flames would consume us, swallow us whole as we kissed. But he let the wooden stem fall from his mouth and waited. Waited for flames to spring to fruition. Waited for me to catch fire. He warmed his hands at an arm's length, afraid I would burn him. Afraid I would engulf him. Suffocate him. I set myself on fire for him. Just to warm his palms.

He loves me when his hands are cold. When nimble fingers are numbed by winter's breath. When he is lost and lonely and needs to be thawed. In the summer, in the morning, the sun will draw him in. He will wander many miles from me. He will bathe in her light. Swaddle himself in her warmth. And I will wait. Smoldering. Burning for him. When she sinks below the tree line, disappears behind the earth's edge, he will shiver. He will follow my orange glow. My plumes of smoke. My ardent heat. He will come find me then. He always comes back when his hands get cold. I set myself on fire for him. Just to warm his palms.

The Way the Cookie Crumbles

When did we become one of those couples? When did we become the dining dead? The couples that sit in silence, staring at their cold and congealing dinners. A silence broken only by the ambient sounds of a busy restaurant. A throat clearing. A dropped fork. Overheard bits and pieces of other patrons' private conversations.

We used to sit on the same side of the booth, our sides pressed together like magnets perpetually drawn into one another. Becoming one. We couldn't stand to be a table length apart. We surreptitiously surveyed those not lucky enough to be us. Peering over our menus, we invented their backstories. Put on exaggerated voices and became caricatures of them. Now we are one of those couples. Perhaps we just got too good at pretending.

Hunched over my plate, chopsticks poised and ready, I can't bring myself to consume anything. I lift my eyes to look at the stranger sitting across from me. I no longer see the man I married. The man I wanted to grow old and gray with. We have both grown older. Silvery strands of hair have settled and taken root like a first frost. But this has been a solitary process. We have aged and grayed alone.

I'm pulled from my thoughts by an eruption of tittering on my left. Laughter. It has become a foreign language to me. A dialect my tongue and vocal cords are no longer capable of producing. But I used to be fluent. We both were.

"I think I've finally mastered chopsticks," I say, feigning playfulness. Trying desperately to pretend we're still the people we used to be. John tears his eyes from his plate. I pick up a clump of noodles and deliberately drop them onto my lap. Trying hopelessly to make the man I fell in love with reappear before my eyes like some sort of pathetic magic trick.

"Oops! Maybe not!" I force a chuckle.

John isn't amused. His stoicism remains impenetrable as he mutters, "Such a waste." I'm not sure if he's talking about the noodles or me.

Years ago, John would've found my behavior endearing. On our first date, we ate sushi with our hands after John spent the better part of an hour trying to teach me how to use the wooden utensils. Many of our dates were spent with John trying to teach me some new skill and me failing miserably at acquiring said skill as John stifled his laughter. But over time, John grew tired of this. The quirks and clumsiness John had once found so charming, became the source of his embarrassment. My novelty had worn off. The freshness of my idiosyncrasies had spoiled.

I try to stay light-hearted. "They're salvageable." Maybe there is something to salvage. I gather the lukewarm noodles in one hand and plop them into my mouth, audibly slurping up the ribbon-like strips that dangle from my lips. "See?" I smile, my cheeks stuffed.

John's motionless exterior crumbles for a moment as disgust flickers across his face. He drops his chopsticks onto his half-eaten dinner and signals for the waitress to bring the check.

"So, that's it?" The noodles begin to squirm and writhe in my stomach like unearthed worms.

"That's it," John snaps. "I'm not going to sit here and watch you make a fool out of me."

“I’m making a fool out of you? How am I—” I’m interrupted by the waitress placing the check and two fortune cookies between us.

I snag one of the fortune cookies. Careful not to crush the delicate treat, I slowly tear open the package. I break it into two clean halves and slide the sliver of paper out. I don’t think I can stomach the cookie but the fortune may be easier to swallow. It reads *Love can last a lifetime if you want it to* in nearly microscopic script.

“Look at this.” I present the fortune to John, hoping it will stir something inside of him. Hoping he will recognize this is our fortune. *Our love can last a lifetime if we want it to.*

He squints at the scrap of paper for a second before prying it from my fingertips and crumpling it. “These things are so stupid, don’t you think?” He flicks the fortune onto the floor.

“I like them,” I mumble.

“Of course *you* like them,” he sneers. John stands, stuffing the remaining fortune cookie into his back pocket. I hear it splinter into sugar-coated shards as he does. It will be nothing but saccharine dust by the time he gets to it. He’ll probably throw it out as soon as we get home.

As we slip back into our jackets, I hear laughter once more. I turn in the direction of the source. It’s a young couple sitting on the same side of a booth. They peer at us, concealing the lower halves of their faces with their menus. They’re probably dreaming up our history right now:

They were college sweethearts. Got married as soon as they graduated. Too young. Agreed not to have children. Regretted that decision. Fought about that decision. And now they sit across from one another silently burning with resentment. For the opportunities they missed or passed up. For the compromises they made. For the people they have become.

And they’re right. About all of it.

Chosen

“So, what do we do now?”

I can feel him looking at me. Boring holes into my forehead with the intensity of his gaze. I can't meet his eyes. I don't know if I'll ever be able to again.

Staring down at the comforter, I trace its pattern with my fingertips. The intricate design seems to take on the form of her face. As if she is laying down between us. She might as well be. I move my hands swiftly across the section of bedspread that separates us, trying to erase her, to smooth out the ripples that sculpt the contour of her nose. The hollows of her cheekbones. The curve of her mouth. But it's no use. She's still there, leering up at me.

He had first described her as merely a friend. He cautiously manufactured every aspect of their relationship. Every aspect of who she was. Who she is. He had omitted details he believed to be minuscule but turned out to be monumental. Inch by inch his fabrication unraveled along its seams like an old knit sweater until it was nothing more than a heap of frayed yarn between us.

I wanted to believe that she existed only in his past; that she was just some spectre that drifted in and out of his world as a reminder of what once was. But she has endured through time and distance and circumstance. He can't stay away from her. Can't stand to be without her. She draws him in like the warmth of an open flame attracts cold fingers and palms.

So what do I do? I could leave him. Try to hate him for what he did. For what he wants. Her. But who else could ever love me this much? I know he loves me. He loves the crookedness of my smile and mind. The loudness of my voice and laugh. The wildness of my hair and look in my eyes. More than anything, he loves the way I love him: unafraid of losing myself in him and sacrificial. No one else could ever love him this much. *She* could never love him this much. And for this reason, he will choose me. Because he knows that, unlike her, I have chosen him.

While he may dream of laying beside her, I am the one who settles into the space between his outstretched arms. He may imagine what it would feel like to kiss her again, but it is against my lips that he tenderly presses his own. He may picture the soft beauty of her face and body, but it is my skin that he caresses.

“So, what do we do now?” He gently repeats this question.

I move closer to him, pressing my face into the warmth of his chest. For a moment, the comforter is flattened and smoothed and she disappears. As if she was never there. But as I pull away from him, I see her face again. Perhaps she will always be there. Between us. But for now, for this moment, we have chosen each other.

“Nothing,” I whisper. “Nothing at all.” And nothing will have to be good enough... for now.



Madison Gilmore is twenty-one years old. She grew up in Seekonk, Massachusetts. Madison is a senior psychology major at Providence College. Her main aspiration in life is to become a family and marriage therapist and start her own practice. She is an animal-lover and is the current owner of three dogs and four cats. Creative writing has always been one of Madison's passions, but she has had little opportunity to indulge it. She hopes to continue writing in the future.

"Madison Gilmore is an extremely gifted writer, and this talent shines through in her pieces. She has a way with words, which allows each work to flow beautifully. Ms. Gilmore touches on extremely vulnerable yet relatable topics, and has the ability to paint a painful situation as a beautiful lesson."

— Maeve Conway

"Gilmore's pieces truly demonstrate the epitome of beauty. Each word is delicately placed with intention while also seeming so effortless. Gilmore's talent for storytelling is immensely clear as she moves the readers through her elegant and sophisticated works. "

— Kate Laliberte