

Reflect
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I wonder what time it is. Maybe around 5pm based on the weather. The air provides a light jacket yet icy trace as the sun hides behind the houses lining the shore. I close my eyes and transport myself to a sandy desert. *Scorching sand searing through the soles of my feet, and the wind doesn't provide any break from the heat. The sun is blazing, penetrating my skin with an unbearable warmth.* It's hard to convince myself that the temperature is rising while the sun conceals itself further. Gazing at the horizon provides no comfort, for the world only shows me the same dull blue in two different layers. The sky is filled with the black silhouettes of horseflies and seagulls; however the ocean is empty of any life at all. The sea responds to me with a gust of wind flurrying in front of my face, playing with my hair and finding an opening to reach my neck. A wave of shivers shoots down my spine, leaving me with an inescapable feeling of frigidness. *Cold. It's so cold.* The sand on the soles of my feet is no relief from the chills infused in my bones. It's not very soft either, every once in a while I step on a sharp rock that makes my toes curl. I guess it's expected since we aren't at some Caribbean island or even the West Coast. Still, the Jersey Shore holds a special place in my heart. The waves create a calming yet repetitive song that I could never dance to, and the air has a salty smell that stings my throat. I can't believe it's the last day before we leave.

The heavy footprints of rest of my family barely subsided in the sand anymore. They had all left about a half hour ago, after my mother started to complain about the horse flies biting her legs. My dad didn't seem to care very much, but he'll do whatever Mom wants to do. My grandma asked me to stay with her and talk, which excites me. Swear I have never met a more

talkative women than her in my life. No one is safe from her babbling, whether you are a complete stranger or closest family. You can *feel* the lung damage caused by smoking since age 16, the Bronx accent picked up from her childhood, and more if you listen close enough. Her voice is one of the favorite songs I hear, and it always has something good to say. So who am I to complain? I plant myself next to her, buried my feet ankle deep in the sand, and look up to her face to see how she would start her song. Her sports sunglasses tinted from red to yellow to blue mask any expression I could read from her eyes. She's wearing her bright cyan polo shirt, along with beige capris, and her bare feet are buried in the sand along with mine. Her lipstick is bright pink that matches her fingernails, and her shirt matches the bright blue eyeshadow she smeared on her eyes. *That eyeshadow pallet has lasted so long...*

“You can see I'm not very good at makeup,” she once exclaimed to me years ago as she created a wheezy laugh from the pit of her lungs.

“I still think it looks good!”

We both stood in her old, poorly lit bathroom. The mirror was stained with the residue of smoke that equally reeked throughout the whole house. This was when she first started to wear blue eyeshadow. I wanted so badly for her to know I thought she was beautiful.

Something else that stuck with her was not once solving her “earring problem”. This morning I helped her put in her gold hoops because she's never able to find the hole, and they complement the gold watch she now wears on her wrist. An aurelian reflection presents itself on her face as I examine her expression. Her age manifests on her features, unlike my 12 year old skin. I'd like to trace the crinkles of joy around her eyes, the lines of sadness around her mouth, and the wrinkles of anxiety on her forehead. As it gets darker, she takes off her sunglasses and reaches into her pocket to pull out a box of Marlboros, lighting a cigarette with a far steadier

hand than I expected. The fire from her lighter dances in gold flickers upon her eyes. The box looks brand new, but the gold accents look so much duller than usual. It makes sense because there's no light for the box to reflect, but it might be the only part I like about her smoking. I wear an unbothered expression under my disgust, wanting to rip the box out of her gentle hands and hurl it into the vast ocean. However, that didn't go over well for me the multiple times I've tried to get rid of them.

"Where are they?" she queried me 4 years ago, in a sound lacking any expression to conceal the growing anger I could feel like a pressure in the back of my head and a stab at the pit of my stomach.

"In the sand..." I answered. I couldn't even look in her eyes. I didn't want to see the wrinkles deepen between her brows when she found out I buried her pack of cigarettes in the sand while she was sleeping. It's not like I meant to displease her. I just wanted to save her. Of course, it was very naïve of me at 8 years old to think I could singlehandedly end my grandma's nicotine addiction by hiding one pack, but I was gambling on the chance that she would pick me over her Marlboros. I spent the next half hour using a plastic shovel to dig them out of the sand, while she gazed down at me with her photochromic glasses. It was probably for the better that I couldn't look her in the eyes anyways. She could see every guilty expression I made; I saw nothing but blank space with the body of an old woman.

We are on the beach tonight talking about anything imaginable. My song only feels like the harmony to her melody since she has experienced an infinite amount of things I could only dream of, but nonetheless she seems interested in what I had to say. My grandma talks like every woman in the world has been her friend at some point, always calling them her "girlfriends" in the accent I love so dearly. I find myself telling her who my best friends are, staring down at my

shins like there was something interesting to look at. I name off about 6 girls, and she responds by telling me to always have at least one friend. Something like, “You need one friend to tell everything to, someone to always be there for you, and mostly someone to lift you up.” Her eyes shine a brightness in the dark that I could barely explain, and they make her message seem like it was one of the most important things I would ever hear from her. None of the girls I just told her about do these things, but I tell her they do because I rather not see a disappointed look on her face. Maybe she’s been reading through my lies the whole time, given her inspirational quote of a response, but I choose to ignore it.

She unfolds endless stories about her childhood, and a lot of them reminded me of myself, even down to small details. She told me one story about how she would walk pigeon-toed just like I do, and her mom would yell at her from her Bronx apartment window to fix her feet. Even when she showed me a picture of her from when she was 12, her eyes held the same almond shape as mine, a hint greener than her brown wavy hair that was barely restrained under her cap. Reflecting my favorite person in the world gave me such an indescribable joy. The tide comes in and out, and the icy water gets closer and closer to our feet, I’m gradually taking steps back to avoid the chill, yet my grandma doesn’t move. She lets the water hit her ankles as though she is numb to it. *Isn’t she cold?* As our conversation comes to a close, we slowly walk away from the ocean. It is dark, deep, and infinite, like a luring void with a lullaby of waves doubling over each other, ready to swallow anyone who gets too close. As I take one last look out at it, I notice my footprints still trail behind me from the point where once I stood. My eyes shift a little to the right, but there is no trace of my grandma ever standing next to me. Her footprints have been devoured, taken away from the sand without warning.

Less than a month later I am sitting in the pew with my family sitting next to me. In front of me sits a turquoise urn with gold accents decorating the sides. “I picked that out for her. It was the most beautiful one, so naturally it was the only one that fit,” my grandpa explains to me as he points his shaky hand up at the ceramic. It reminds me of the ocean, of her Marlboro boxes, of the sky, of her watch, of her eyeshadow, of her earrings, of the many colors in her eyes. I’ve never seen something more perfect for her. Whether I looked into her eyes or her sunglasses that one night, I saw nothing but a reflection of myself. We were the same height at the time, and her eyes were so glassy that they resembled mirrors. I look down at the memorial cards they handed out to everyone, and there was a picture of a woman I didn’t know. This woman looks lifeless, her eyes are matte, her wrinkles are poorly smoothed, and her smile was forced. It’s a skeleton of who she really was. Did anyone actually remember her like this? The tears I tried so desperately hard to hide taste salty as they fall into my mouth, and my throat stings like it’s suffocating on words that will never be spoken aloud. My songs never sound nearly as beautiful as hers. As we walk out of the reception, I squint my eyes at the brightness coming from the cloudy sky although I never looked up from the wet pavement. This weather is so cliché for a funeral, and I’m probably the only one with eyes sensitive enough to be squinting on a day with no sunlight. People flood out of the church and surround me, and I almost find myself looking for her when I smell someone smoking by the side of the building. To my disappointment, this man is just another stranger. I could not talk to him about my dance recitals or my soccer games, why my favorite color is yellow, how art is my favorite subject although I never finished my projects. He would not respond to me about the countless adventures he went on at my age, how he played softball but was never amazing at it, mess with my hair while telling me that “people pay money for this”, sing me happy birthday on the phone every year because we were 6 hours apart. My

friend has left me only with her stories, the voicemail message that responds when no one picks up, and my reflection to remember her by.