

Girls Again

Another midnight of another May of another year. Emily and I are cutting through the slush soaked quad. We're walking so close to each other that if some freshman were to glance out her dorm window, they might mistake the pair of us for one drunk idiot, stumbling through the dark, laughing at his own clumsy inelegance.

A misstep threatens to baptize both of our shoes in an especially deep puddle. Emily shrieks, and her laugh ricochets off the brick walls encasing the quad, scattering the fog of our breath. I laugh too, a little quieter, just sloshed enough to not totally care if anyone hears.

I meant to ask her out properly today. But I got drunk instead. In the back of my mind, the words sat neatly folded, a tiny, simple invitation that might finally bridge that gap of expectation that had grown between us over the past five months.

By the time the campus lights faded, I started drinking, and the rehearsed sentence had melted with the snow like it had every other night I'd spent with her. It was just easier like this.

Emily shouts for me to follow her, pulling me out of my head, and we tumble through the library's front doors. The dim automatic lights blink on. It's empty. The campus masses have fled to revel in the first night of the long weekend, and even the most devoted scholars have abandoned the books for the time being, leaving the building a cathedral of quiet.

That is until the pair of us swept through the doors. Two wayward saints, sending raucous hymns up into the vaulted silence. And I might feel bad about sullyng this sacred peace if I was any less drunk, or any more religious.

I turn to see Emily's eyes heavy with the reminder of what we came here for. How easily I forget our treacherous pilgrimage, the cold that only a minute ago bit through my thin jeans and low cut top, has mostly dissipated, lingering only on the tips of my fingers, gone when Emily tugs at my hand.

We stumble to the back part of the building, where the stacks of books lean together like old friends, maybe lovers. In a secluded alcove between the biographies and the picture books, Emily sits back on what I only vaguely recognize is a study desk, and we, two drunken saints, knelt at the improvised altar to confess.

She tastes like wine and it's sad and nostalgic and familiar.

Something rustles beneath us, mixing with the sound of Emily's breath in my ear and I go to move it away but my eyes snag on the crumpled copy of *The Secret Garden*.

My mouth stills against Emily's shoulder. Emily's hand, still warm on my back, senses my preoccupation and stills. She follows my gaze to the book. Neither of us speak.

It's as if the book had exhaled a memory. I could hear my younger self laugh in the recesses of the library: the sound of a girl who had once run naked around the backyard, splashing carelessly in mud puddles, who thought God made the world just for her.

I must really be drunk because in perfect, terribly clarity Emily sits in front of me, but it's Emily 10 years ago. And I recognize her because she's my friend. In a gentle, breath-by-breath unspooling, her face breaks out in a smile, the wide, unguarded kind you can only find on a child who has just discovered snow. She sees me too.

I smile back and we criss-cross our little legs on the carpet. Backs against the wall, we read aloud the very passages we once memorized in school. Voices soft, our words wind through the quiet aisles like vines reclaiming stone.

I read the final sentence and look back over at Emily sitting next to me. She's the same beautiful girl I've been stumbling around with for nearly 20 years now. But for a moment there we were kids together again. I can't look at her.

My head hurts, and I'm suddenly too hot and too cold at the same time. The fever of my childhood first crush, and the chill of my adult guilty conscience. It's quiet between Emily and me as we walk out of the library back into the night. It's warmed up considerably as the morning creeps nearer. I tell Emily goodnight and turn to walk home. I would be kinder if I wasn't so confused.

The sound of her small voice reading to me is still bouncing around my head, but it's all mixed up with the sounds of her breath in my ear. And as I remember us intertwined on the desk, I can't shake that image of us criss cross applesauce on the floor. We are still those same girls, right?

I'm nearly home as I realize that it'll be summer soon, and I still haven't asked Emily for coffee. I've been telling myself I would for 5 months now.

Soon it will be too warm for coffee, and surely we are too old to get ice cream. I still think I might do it.

I left the library the same woman that walked in, except for that I feel changed in every conceivable way. And I know I'll come back again, looking for the girls we were in there. And I won't have to be drunk to find her.