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Francesca Halikias

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IN SOME DISTANT UNIVERSE

by Francesca Halikias

Jules dyed her hair dark. It was so dark that as she walked back from class in the syrupy heat of May's end, her best friend walked right behind her and didn't recognize her. Jules could hear her voice, could hear her laughing with another girl and talking about normal college things like homework and boys and which bar they wanted to go to tomorrow night, but she didn't turn around.

Instead she hefted her backpack higher on her shoulder and tried to block her out. It wasn't that she didn't want to talk to her; it was that she knew she was going to ask about her hair. She was going to say things like, Why did you do it? Worse: It looks so good!

Jules thought she looked better with her old hair, though her mom would probably disagree. It used to be a dark copper, like a muddled penny, with streaky blonde bits poking out whenever she wore her hair in a bun. Now her hair reminded her of winter. It reminded her of the two lone ducks sitting on the frozen pond by her house everyday, of the black paint stain on her wooden desk when she accidentally spilled on it three years ago, of the clock in one of her classes whose minute hand always halted on the number two halfway through class.

She dyed it because she heard that stars always shine brighter when surrounded by darkness. She was trying to shine.

At the hospital that afternoon, she asked Gabriel to name what he remembered. She remembered a lot. The indent of his head on a dark blue pillow. His elbows on the edges of the grocery cart as he pushed it into the frozen food aisle, the words, "My girl," dancing out of his mouth when she found the ice cream they were looking for. His rain jacket on her body, water pelting them both like tiny slaps from a petulant child. A dusty orange streetlamp that seemed to glow brighter than usual on the night the ambulance took him back here, to this building with its white walls and eight floors and polka-dotted waiting room chairs. His memories were different than hers.

"I remember that word of the day you told me yesterday: *Mal du pays*. It's French for homesickness. I remember I'm supposed to have a history paper due today. I remember telling the nurse not to let you come back again; I don't want you to see me like this."

His face looked like the map of the primary colors she learned in elementary school: blue eyes, bursting red vessels and red cheeks, yellow bruises on the right side of his jaw. The first instinct she had was to touch each hue, to draw circles around them as she did when she was six years old in art class with a book of all the colors.

"Your hair," Gabriel said, and the memory cleared away.

"It's different," she said.

"It's black."

"How long do you have to stay here this time?"

"I don't know." He said it as if she asked him what the weather was going to be like tomorrow, or where he preferred to go to lunch. The white hospital gown crumpled when he shifted to lie down in the bed. His eyes didn't move from her hair.

The first time Jules had gotten drunk was the summer before junior year of high school, when she went to her first party and Brian from math class made her a drink—one she didn't refuse even though her only experience of alcohol was the half-glasses of wine her dad would pour for her on special occasions like birthdays and holidays and Easter. Always Easter.

The tequila in her drink went down her throat like sludge, but when there was no more liquid left in the cup, she remembered feeling as if she were underwater, her limbs swimming. As she had held Lily's hair back as her friend dived up, that feeling subsided and was replaced by a density that made her eyelids fall closed without her permission. After that, she knew she would never drink more than she could handle, it was ingrained in her from that first drunken night at sixteen.

It was not like that for Gabriel, who could not stop himself from differentiating between one drink and eight drinks, who would shake without that burning liquid down his throat, who would grip her wrist too tight if it was a particularly hard day and he didn't have anything else to soften him.

She wondered what it felt like to drop three stories in the air. Are you aware of your body being suspended, weightless, or does your brain not register the absence of solid ground until you hit something?

When the paramedics found where Gabriel hit something solid, he was curled in the fetal position, and was lucky no one was sitting in the driver's seat of the car he dented from the fall from the balcony of his apartment.

A broken wrist and rib, a slight concussion, and some bruises. That was the official examination of his injuries. The unofficial examination was one that would require her to let go of him. She sat on the edge of a metal chair one of the nurses brought her and held his hand.

When the doctor came into the room, she got up to leave. This was the process last time, in the spring of one year ago: the doctor came in and she went back out to where those polka-dotted chairs were and sat on her hands to stop them from shaking. It was worse last time. Last time, he almost didn't wake up.

Gabriel said, "It's okay, she can stay," and Jules slid back into the cool metal chair as if Gabriel had pushed her into it.

"Count backwards from ten," the doctor said. His nametag read, Dr. Atkinson, Cognitive Behavioral Specialist. His eyes were dark brown, and his graying hair was shaved close to his head.

"Repeat this sentence after me." Jules never heard the sentence, but watched Gabriel sound the words out.

"Copy what I do with my hands." The doctor turned the backs of his hands against each other and wove his fingers together.

Jules wanted to take Gabriel's hands and place them in the correct position when it was evident that he was struggling. Why couldn't he do it? She remembered his fingers sliding a David Bowie disc into his car radio last spring, a few weeks before the incident, petals from the magnolia tree by his apartment blowing on his windshield. A car had honked at them because they were at the stop sign for too long, but he refused to put his foot back on the gas until Jules had agreed to sing along to "Modern Love" with him.

"Your mind is still affected by the leftover drugs in your system, but they'll wear off," Dr. Atkinson said. "How did you fall?"

"I don't know."

"Was there anyone else on the balcony with you? Roommates? Friends?"

"No." Gabriel stopped trying to lock his fingers and instead held Jules's hand again.

A second panned, maybe two, before Dr. Atkinson said, "We just want to help you. Did you jump or fall?"

Jules remembered the story Gabriel told her about cliff diving with his friends in St. Mary's Glacier, Colorado, the summer before he left for college. He told her the only reason he hesitated for a second before jumping in the water below was because it would be time spent taking his eyes off the brilliant sunset before him.

"You have to try it some time," he said. The restaurant they were at for their first date was loud, and twice the Spanish music blasting from the speakers was punctured with glasses breaking from the table next to them that housed six kids under the age of ten. Outside, dead leaves fell from the tree branches and skittered along the foggy windows.

"I'm afraid of heights," Jules said. "I could never do that."

He studied her for a moment, his sandy hair peeking out from under his red baseball cap. She had never seen him without it. "I don't think you're afraid of heights."

"What is it that you know about me that I don't?"

"I think you're afraid of falling, because you don't have control if you fall. But if you jump, you take the control back."

When I jumped from that cliff, I knew exactly which spot in the water I was going to land in. It was exhilarating."

He leaned towards her across the table and looked at her like she was that same body of water. She knew that whatever spot his eyes picked to land on would lodge his presence in a place where she could never get rid of him, even if this was the only date they would ever have.

"It's not about control. It's about not breaking all of your bones if you hit the water wrong," she said.

He was almost twenty and she was eighteen. She met him on the staircase going up to one of her fall semester classes. The first thought Jules had when she saw him was that he carried himself like one of the many papers that would always blow from her arms on the windy days that came after the rain. Any time she bent down to grab one, the wind would push it farther away from her outstretched hand, like a game.

"I fell," Gabriel said to Dr. Atkinson. "I wasn't trying to kill myself, if that's what you were implying."

"Then your fall was lucky. You only broke two bones. You could've broken several. You could've broken your skull. Do you realize that?"

"I'm done with these questions," he said, and Jules felt the empty spot where he had taken his hand out of hers. "I'm tired. You should go."

She put vodka in her water bottle once. It was the week after he had gotten out of the hospital last time. The blue bottle was perched on her desk in her freshman year English class, and she would take sips of it and pretend to be him. Is this what he needed to feel alive? This drunk, dizzy, nauseating feeling, lips smacking against dry gums, tongue constantly bitter?

She wanted to tell him that she knew. He could lean on her because she knew. But when she got home from class she missed the toilet and threw up in the sink.

The next day, when she came into that hospital room again, smoothing down the nametag sticker on her shirt, he smiled at her. "You're here," he said.

She took his hand again.

"You came back," he said.

Her arm itched as the medical object attached to his finger brushed against her skin, but for him she ignored it sticking into her palm.

"Of course I did," she said. It was easy to forget about the philosophy class she was missing. The last one of the semester.

Everything was easy to forget except for him.

For nine hours she lied in the tiny bed with him and memorized all the freckles on his neck. Sometimes it was hard to remember she was barely twenty, and that the woman at the front desk who gave her the nametag asked her if her parents were with her or not. She wouldn't be surprised if she looked in a mirror and saw the face of an old woman. She touched her cheeks to make sure they weren't sagging. Her fingers came back wet instead.

There were two moments in Jules's life where she had a definitive before period, and a resolute after. One was when she was eleven years old, and had just found out in her science class that one day the sun would become a giant red star before it irreversibly exploded, and the earth would be reduced to nothing but ash and smoke, and even if it never happened in her lifetime, it would in someone else's, and there was nothing she could do about it because it was nature.

The second was a year ago when Gabriel was dead for twelve seconds. And then he was alive again; his heart shocked back to life on the floor of his bathroom.

Jules had asked her teacher during lunch what would happen if the sun blew up too early.

"It can't," her teacher had said. "It won't happen until it's used up all of its energy, which won't be for a very long time."

"Don't worry," she added when she saw Jules's face.

"Will the other stars explode too?"

Her teacher, Ms. Kate, was new, and had a long blonde braid that ran down her left shoulder. She paused before answering, her blue eyes squinting behind her glasses.

"Eventually," she said, "but they shine the brightest when they're at the end of their lives. It's like their 'last hurrah' moment."

"Does it hurt them to explode?"

"No. It's all just light."

It was raining. Big fat teardrops fell from the sky on the night Gabriel came back from the hospital last spring. He had spent a week in the hospital and then two weeks in an in-patient program for alcohol and substance abuse recovery.

Jules told herself she wouldn't take a second with him for granted again. It didn't matter if he held her wrist too hard sometimes, or if one time he threw a book at the wall when they got into an argument. He was sick; she saw the way he folded into himself after she had picked the book back up and placed it on his bed. He didn't mean to do it.

As she got into Gabriel's car, he kissed her. "Modern Love" was playing again. The rain fell harder, and Gabriel took off his jacket and gave it to her as they ran two blocks to the door of his building. She had never seen him look more alive than when his shirt was soaked with the rain. It dripped onto the carpet of his bedroom, but he didn't care.

"Don't do that to me again," she whispered that night to the outline of his sleeping body next to hers. She traced letters down his back—an "I" and "L" and "O"—until it made the words she tried to say out loud but couldn't. Loving him felt like trying to hold on to the last few pages of a book, where the only two options were to read until the end or put it aside for good.

The rooftop of Gabriel's apartment had a tiny garden growing that an elderly woman had planted three years ago when Gabriel moved in—he told Jules this on the way back to his place after their date in the Spanish restaurant.

Sometimes he'd see her pulling up carrots and picking tomatoes, and she'd always offer him some. He always said no. His building had six floors, and Jules had ever seen all full of college students and recently graduated young adults. She had to be the only one over fifty that Jules had ever seen in Gabriel's building, with a round nose and hair that should have been gray but was dyed red. Her name was Mrs. MacCarthy, and on the muggiest days of last summer, Jules had offered to help her with the garden, never minding that she would always leave with her shirt damp with sweat and her fingernails soiled with dirt.

Mrs. MacCarthy's husband had died several years earlier, but she still kept his name and his ring—an emerald-cut diamond on a gold band—on her finger.

"How did he die?" Jules asked one afternoon while they sat on the couches on the roof; Jules was waiting for Gabriel to come back from his summer job at a sandwich place a few blocks over.

"Early Alzheimer's," Mrs. MacCarthy offered her a tomato, the juice of the ripe one in her other hand dribbling down her fist.

"I'm sorry," Jules said.

"Don't be. His mind was already somewhere else. It didn't feel right to just have his body, anyway."

"Did he remember you...before he—?"

Mrs. MacCarthy told Jules that she chose to believe that when you die, memories of your whole life flash through your brain for the few seconds you have left until you're dead for good, even if you couldn't remember all those moments when you were alive.

She said, "I think he did. And if he didn't, when I get to where he is I'll make him remember," and laughed and bit into her tomato.

And so again at the hospital a few days later, with the sunshine glaring through the window, Jules asked Gabriel, "What do you remember?" because she understood she couldn't save him. All she could do was hold on to the memories he told her about, reliving them until those seconds of their relationship were over.

When Jules got that final phone call four months later, her hair was back to brown, the box dye having faded and leaving the leftover strands the color of the earth. A halfway color between her old hair and dyed hair.

It was his mother on the phone. She had only met her a handful of times, but she always wore her hair in two long braids and talked too much about wanting to leave the Midwest for Arizona. Jules knew, as if this knowledge was planted in her like a tiny seed that now sprouted up from her body, that one day she would hear Gabriel's name and "dead" in the same sentence. She knew it ever since the first time his heart stopped and started again, that it was all borrowed time from there.

Jules didn't go to the funeral because that wasn't his body in the casket. Those pale hands placed atop his stomach weren't his; they were drumming on a steering wheel somewhere else. Where was his baseball cap? Those weren't his cold, bloated lips; they couldn't be because they weren't moving, weren't smiling, weren't pushing air in and out. Where were the imprints from those silent words she traced on his back? This wasn't him. He had gone somewhere else, a place she just couldn't follow yet.

And so in the moments that followed when she thought about Gabriel, she didn't think about the bad. She thought about the water. She thought about that Spanish restaurant, and about him jumping and knowing exactly where he was going to land. And she told herself he didn't die, the alcohol didn't take him, the invisible sickness didn't take him because he was still here. He just jumped off that cliff into another world.

She thought about the sun exploding, and what thoughts the humans of the future would have in those final moments, and what thoughts Mrs. MacCarthy's husband had in a mind that was halfway between this world and the next. In the next seven billion years before the sun erupted, humans might be so advanced that they will have invented spaceships to take them to a different planet, a different universe altogether, long before the oceans dried up and the trees suffocated in this world. And somewhere, in some distant place that her brain couldn't comprehend yet, those humans will find Gabriel, his baseball cap on his head and his fingers tapping out a rhythm that says, I've been waiting.

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Francesca Halikias

Francesca Halikias is a combined degree student at DePaul University completing her undergraduate degree in English and will be pursuing her Master's in Writing and Publishing full time through DePaul in the fall. She currently lives in Chicago, IL and loves to write, bake, and pet every dog.



THE GREEN LINE

“Ava looks away, feeling herself flush. She hates the smell of smoke, but she’s also seen this scenario unfold way too many times before on the green line. The hulking, sullen transit cops who would squelch onto the train car right before the doors would close, yelling at passengers to have tickets out.”

—Melissa Feinman

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