

## Self-Portrait

*“If you really loved your friends and family so much, you would have never moved to Pittsburgh.”*

My significant other spit the quote at me in an abrupt “meaningless” fight in late November—It had been a “mistake.” The words haunted me long past their transition to silence. And they had haunted me in the worst way—I was not upset that they were said, I was upset that they might be true.

The Guilt of leaving home six months prior—leaving everything I had known when no one else had the option because of weak finances—had only been the onset. I had absorbed my friends’ stares over the short summer break, and I translated them as if they had said, “You think you’re better. You think you’re smarter.”

That’s why, November 30, my last Monday of my first semester of grad school, I pulled my white bed sheet over my head in surrender to the crawling, vermin-like light that snuck in between my window blinds. The Guilt intensified because, I thought, maybe my presence at home might have been able to prevent the grief my friends and I now felt.

My good friend Rob was dead, and I could not make the funeral.

“You’ll be home in a few weeks anyway,” My mom chirped. I could imagine her sitting in her chair by the fireplace clutching her wallet tightly—her credit card settling in for the night, not having to put in extra labor for my desire to return.

I started the day consciously placing one foot in front of the other, blinking, and breathing. With the demeanor of a reluctant zombie I attended my only class, which was my only obligation—but I could not concentrate. I looked at my mobile and never spoke. 3618774551. That was his phone number. There was his name in my phone. I wanted to call it. Do I delete it? The thought process occurred every few minutes, always beginning with my numb, red fingers shakily sliding up and down the touchscreen.

I left school as quickly and as quietly as I could. I walked home and studied all the people who did not acknowledge they were currently alive.

The site of my empty apartment resuscitated my reluctance. I welcomed another obligation: the Guilt was encouraging me to send flowers and cards—a euphemism for upsetting the ones you care about with your absence.

When I called the florist, he said, “What do you want the card to say?”

I stammered. “Uhh. Um. Can you just put, ‘I wish I were there.’”

“So, maybe like, ‘I wish I were there. My thoughts and prayers are with you,’” he said with a strong Southern accent.

I flinched at the word “prayers,” but I agreed. I did not have enough energy to write a perfect sympathy card, nor did I have enough coldness to say I wouldn’t pray. I hung up and again sat alone with the Guilt.

The next task: call the guy I dated in high school, Cody. For some reason we went out for three years, and for some reason we still spoke on a weekly basis. Rob had been Cody’s best friend; Rob had been our mediator; Rob had turned out to be there when no one else could.

Cody answered sounding completely normal and fine.

“Hey, how are you,” I said softly.

“I’m good.”

Shit, I thought. He doesn’t know. I’ll have to tell him. Shit.

“Except that my best friend killed himself.”

There it was. His tone changed to one of raw disappointment.

“Yeah, I know...”

The sounds of blood raged in my eardrum.

“I can see it, Chelsey. I can see him doing it. He came home drunk. He turned on the television and muted it. He put on that death-metal shit I used to listen to. Gracie and him were fighting on the phone. He threw the phone down and sat on the couch, gulped Taaka. He looked down—and this is what no one remembered, Chelsey. —No one remembered he had that tattoo on his arm—that tattoo of a noose. He saw it. And you know how Rob is. He’s funny. It was a joke to him. He took his belt off to try. It was a joke to him...”

He explained it like a sinister instruction booklet, as if he had witnessed it step-by-step and then maybe cringed in fear of the climax. I blinked.

“Are you going to be OK,” I said.

“Chelse, you know me. I can handle this. I haven’t even cried... I just hate that our friends are drinking themselves into the ground.”

“I wish I was there.”

He knew what I meant.

“There was nothing that you could do, Chelse. Yes, it’s possible that if you had stayed here, Rob might have been doing something else that night. Or he might have just done it another night. But none of us knew he felt that way. It happened and it can’t be changed.”

“But I should be there,” I said it like a 5-year-old beginning a fit. My eyes welled up, my face reddened, and my grip tightened. I was fighting and losing.

Then I got my wish. Two weeks later, I was home for Christmas break. My tight-knit group, minus one, gathered at a bar downtown. I could not tell if the vacuum occupying our personal corner was the Guilt or the void left from the one we missed and loved.

There were only five of us now, and it was the first time we had all been together in three years. The need to grow up had affected us all, had taken us down a “mature” path of assuming that our significance to others measured lower as time went on and as fewer words were exchanged. We had *assumed* that silence from our friends meant happiness—but we had all been silent, and we had all been unhappy.

Leaning against the jukebox, I watched the wave of college students herd to the bar after leaving a nearby Third Eye Blind concert. Jutting their shoulders into the spaces between barstools, more beers were ordered. My friends pretended as if I had always been there and so did our environment.

I told them about the Guilt, which I was now ready to challenge.

“I’ll come back some day,” I said at the end.

“Don’t come back,” my friend said. “Give us all a reason to be inspired. We need that from you the most.”

I could not detect resentment. I tried again.

“I’ll write a book about this place some day,” I said.

“You always say that,” my friend laughed. “What could you possibly have to say?”

When I returned to Pittsburgh, the Guilt held up the white sheet and surrendered.

This is what I had to say.