

Withered at One Hundred Sixty-eight Degrees Atonement, She Fought off Her Remedy

Author: Mallory Hartigan

Grade: 11

Teacher: Amanda Moyers

School: Central High School, St. Joseph, MO

It didn't take much to turn you or your world upside down. That's why I decided to write a story about you. Something about you and the way you interacted. Something about you and the way that you moved. Something about the absence of your smile. Whatever it was, it didn't matter. I would write about you and make you someone memorable to everyone, even if they didn't know you.

"What a stupid bitch."

Maddie set her fork down on the table, devoid of a dainty demeanor, as she began to angrily stir her cup of soda with her straw. "I tell you. If it's not one fucking thing, it's another." Even as she spoke, a scowl visibly stretched across her face, devouring her naturally playful expression. Her consumption of anger was almost a laughing matter. "Come on. Don't tell me you think that's right," she continued, her voice beginning to rise.

I set my napkin down in my lap even though I wasn't using it and placed my elbows down on the table to cradle my face in my hands. "It's weird, yeah." Maddie raised an eyebrow, almost declining my reply. "Okay, fine. Yes, it was really strange, even creepy, but I think we're both assuming it won't happen again." It was more a declaration of hope rather than a promise, but Maddie snatched it while she could.

"Really creepy, yeah. You're just being nice. You're silly, always defending someone." Her smile developed into a crooked smirk that spanned across the width of her face.

"How does that make me silly?" I asked with a laugh. "I just try to be nice."

"Yeah, until you've got a scary fellow circling your house and pleading to be let in."

"Doesn't happen to me a lot with men," I remarked, playfully mocking her.

"Regardless, it shouldn't happen. I shouldn't have a creepy 'love-struck' boy trying to peer into my windows when I won't answer the door." She tossed her napkin onto the table, signifying that she was finished. "Since when was I not entitled to my own privacy?"

I attached thirty dollars to the ticket, covering the entire cost. I had to be a generous tipper; it made me feel adequate.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I'm being nice," I responded, standing up and sliding my chair under the table. "Do you think you'll be safe at home?"

"I lock my doors," Maddie responded, grinning.

And so it was destiny...

To retrace my footsteps in order to make it back to you.

It didn't feel the same when I fucked Ashley during my freshman year, so I discarded her like she needed. But you, you were different. You were a piece of work to get over. You consumed my mind like some sickening cancer, and I was sure I was collapsing to a terminal illness as you wove in and out of my neurons. It was a daily practice. I shed my thoughts of you as best I could, partaking in other activities that would avert my eyes and my mind, but somehow you were always there. You'd etched your way through my veins and now you were dancing on my grave, a step so catchy that I almost wished to assist.

I'd buried myself thirty feet under and swallowed enough dirt in the process to burst, but I stomached it and stomached the loss of you. I shed the former image of myself and morphed into something drastic. I'd become outlandish, something strange and silly. I almost laughed as I unfogged the mirror in the morning with dreary fingertips, seeing my wilted eyelids and loss of enthusiasm. I knew what I was seeing wasn't me, but I had to let you know that could give you what you wanted. I could let you move on and find a different love that was more fulfilling. A love with a dick attached. I was sure that was what you wanted.

After looking into the mirror, I would silently gag to myself. I was two people at once, but I was willing to do whatever it took. After pulling my fingertips away from the hazy mirror, I would towel dry my hair in my underwear,

sitting on the bathroom counter as I ran my fingertips through my hair over and over. I wanted clean and smooth and shiny hair. I wanted a life.

I let my hair air-dry, stopped drying it on my own. I stopped caring about things like that. I couldn't make you love me...I couldn't make anyone love me. My spine started to slant dramatically and I was slowly languishing with the times. I started to think that smoke tasted appetizing. I started to think that ugly girls were pretty, but only because I was subjected enough to pretend. I started to think that long, dark hair was pretty even when it was trashy. I'd started to think that I could drink alcohol as if it was water to instigate a sexual escapade with the shy hope that it would make you jealous.

I'd even said a prayer to God, whatever god you wanted it to be, just as long as I could pretend some other false deity aside from you heard my tale of heartbreak.

You may call it desperation. I called it a sincere laceration to my internal organs. I didn't mean to accuse you of slicing me up and letting me decompose, because it was for the best. You knew it. I tried to know it too.

I had to make your word into law so that I could survive.

That day I knew I wasn't the best example as I strolled down the hall with my pants unintentionally hanging off of my waist, sagging down past the curve of my ass and exposing my patterned boxers. People asked me if I was having a problem maintaining my weight. I told them to shut up. People told me that I was having a problem sustaining my weight. I told them to shut up. I wasn't going to hear about how I was falling apart from another person who hasn't experienced the internal decay that I was. I wasn't going to blame you for my body's deterioration.

The next day I stepped on the scale and realized I had lost eleven pounds in five days.

A womanizer comforted me the day before with his useless loop of words when I really just needed someone to hug me as I bawled until my eyes were bloodshot and felt like someone had rubbed sandpaper across my corneas. That day, though, I crumbled to the ground on my knees in my own collective little heap and cried into the linoleum floor at someone else's house during their family dinner which I had declined because I was being too polite and because the appetite had been sucked right out of me. I was a senseless mess and not the same girl that you had dated. I didn't know who or what to be, what I should become or what you wanted me to transform into. This was harder than you thought, though it was easy for you. A fucking walk in the park. A breeze. A fucking cakewalk for you, while I cried on someone else's bathroom floor with drool pooling around my lips and my eyes becoming a catastrophic adversity.

While you were out swooning over other people, I was out pretending to like girls. We all knew it was a hoax. My friends knew but didn't say a word. Maddie indicated that I was engaging in something irrational. They wanted this spell of heartbreak to be over, so they played along and watched as I interacted with someone who I could never love...someone that I could never even like. I didn't think that it was a good idea, but I decided to mock your path because if it was easy for you to move on so quickly, I wanted to make it seem like it was a fucking cakewalk for me too.

They knew differently.

My breathing was heavy and sultry in the midst of the night as she climbed on top of me, and I could feel her slender body swaying gently because she was astoundingly intoxicated. She did her best to regain a small sense of balance and dove down onto me, her fingertips searching and scanning over my limbs and my body's terrain. I knew this was something she had never done before. I knew that she wasn't as impaired as I was and that she was conscious of what she was doing, though I hardly was. The only reason I let it happen was because I was so heavily intoxicated that I thought it might be a good idea. They say that the first thing alcohol impairs is judgment. No fucking kidding.

I felt her fingertips dig into me, the satisfactory feel of my skin slicing, and I was at her disposal. I hardly recalled my hands tangling into her hair, and it was better that way. I barely recalled my eyes brimming with tears that spilled across my face and smudged my eyeliner into a pasty mess. This wasn't something that I wanted to remember, not something I was proud of. I was so inebriated that I couldn't see straight. I was so fucking uncomfortable. It wasn't you expressing your love for me.

But then I told myself, your love had expired. It was gone, so that made this act okay. That made it okay to degrade myself with a tasteless girl in the back of Mitch's car. That made it okay, but I still didn't want it to happen as much as I tricked myself into thinking.

That night I lost consciousness and didn't remember what I had done when the morning rolled around. That was the only way I could be with someone else: be unconscious and let them exploit me while I had blacked out. Now I knew what every typical high school teenager did on the weekends.

That wasn't love.

I had lost love.

"You'll just go into the room, assemble your instrument and introduce yourself."

"As what?"

"As what? Well, who are you? Say who you are and what piece you are performing."

"Just the first two movements?"

"That's what you did at districts, so that will work here."

"Okay. That's fine. I can do that, yeah."

"You'll do excellent. You did well at Districts, and I'm confident you'll do fine here."

"Thank you."

"Here, we're leaving soon; you need to get dressed in something decent." It was a command rather than a suggestion, and tension was rising as it always did on Christmas Eve. I didn't want to get dressed fancily because church was supposed to be about pretended faith, not attire to impress the dead deities, but I shuffled up to my room late like I had every year and quickly dressed in slacks and a button up shirt. I slid on my sneakers and glided down the stairs as a silent assailant, avoiding tossing together family's presents at the last minute. My mother and father arranged them in the trunk of the van in preparation to leave. My night was sealed by the endless tradition of Christmas Eve with the extended family.

It was traditional bullshit. The deafening drone of Catholic Church punctuated my eardrums and lacerated the illusion of holiday excitement. I counted the crevices worn into the wooden pew as I waited for communion to progress, signifying the halfway point of the service. As everyone began to drain out of the aisles and advance toward the priest distributing the Eucharist, I followed in their wake with my hands placed appropriately to receive the stale piece of holy bread. The line began to filter out, and I moved closer toward the front. The priest looked me directly in the eye, holding the Eucharist in front of my face with his fingertips. In his powerful Catholic voice he recited a statement of jargon, and I responded, "Amen," as I had been taught, placing it into my mouth and passing on the red wine. I walked back to the pew, demonstrating the sign of the cross. It was tradition to kneel down and pray until everyone had received communion. Year after year I declined to participate, but this year I knelt down with my eyes closed, my senses completely dying to the organ resonating between the church walls and the people rustling in the aisles.

I knelt and prayed.

I told myself God must be real to have blessed me with someone like you. God must be real to have placed someone of such beauty in my life.

I told myself that I was truly grateful to love such an astounding person.

My senses died for the entirety of the night as I told myself how blessed I was. I didn't need the screeching organ or crying babies in the background to realize the impact you had on my life. I always knew and cherished it. I didn't need anything else for Christmas time. I didn't need the pretended unit of family; I didn't need the thoughtless gifts and clothes that would never fit me. I didn't need a lavish dinner or dessert to make me feel full.

I had love. I needed nothing else.

But then I realized that God nonsense was all bullshit.

I sat outside the trumpet room and listened to a girl play the solo I played my freshman year. She skipped the Pastoral movement along with the counter-melody and instead barraged her listeners with squeaks and clangs in her formal high heels and pleated skirt. I waited for the conclusion of the suite, heard moderate applause, and the door swung open for her to exit with her trumpet in hand, face drained and pale. Silly me, I wouldn't do much better.

I sat in that chair for hours.

People came and went. Marisa played her solo, and I could feel my body immersed in the intensity and passion applicable to the song, the Andante section transpiring magnificently. I knew that I would never play my solo so professionally or beautifully.

It didn't matter. I had nothing to prove.

In the vast veil of nighttime I sucked the humidity in through my deteriorating windpipe with a cigarette between my fingertips, emitting a dull cloud of smoke that twisted through the air as a distraught dancer. Summer was blossoming and the excitement was beginning to burrow into my skin, but I had gone about this the wrong way. I was entirely too contemplative and my over-analytical mind was being ground into a disgusting sauce of nonsensical ideals. Sometimes I had trouble gripping reality.

I could hear crickets purring off in the woods as I flicked the ash from the tip of my cigarette, watching curls of smoke twirl from the cavern of my mouth as I exhaled. I believed this to be contentment as my time was depicted symbolically through the cigarette burning away even though I was conscious of how I was needlessly poisoning myself. I was determined to make something other than you into my suicide, regardless of how potent. I needed something else to help me wither away.

"Let's share more nights like these," Sara said, her voice projecting in a more delicate manner across nighttime's expanse. "I feel like I've been missing out on so much."

I wanted to nod in approval but wasn't sure if I would really mean it. I was missing out on a lot in the midst of my heartbreak.

"Being around friends makes me realize my appreciation for everything," she explained, feigning her signature laugh that always produced a smile. I wanted to tell her that I understood, so I did. I really did understand. I just didn't understand it in the manner that I once had. Things never meant as much as they used to. I let the cigarette fall from my fingertips onto the concrete and slid my shoe over it, deposing of its remains. I was wasting enough time and lung capacity to regret it later.

"It feels like I haven't seen you in so long," Sara continued. "I always used to think of you as Stephanie's friend, but now it's more how it should be. I think of you more as my friend now. I think our friendship has evolved a bit."

"Yeah, I understand what you mean," I told her, my voice resonating satisfactorily. "Since I strayed from her, our friendship gets to flourish."

She prided me with one of her quirky smiles. It was typical, real, and it was signature. It was something that I was becoming accustomed to. It felt like I had been deprived of general human kindness because I was so wrapped up in assuming I was permanently subjugated without hope of revival. I needed to fucking snap out of it.

I was regurgitating everything I knew.

I was falling apart and disregarding my own ideals and morals. I was becoming the girl that I had never wanted to be. I was transforming into something that I despised, something that you could never love.

I wanted it to feel pleasing.

I wanted to be someone else other than the girl that you had fallen in love with. I needed something, anything, to move me along and to heal me, even if it meant deteriorating in the process.

This was the first thing that I had done for myself in a long time.

For once, this was for me, not for you.