

Rowan

by Alexandra Sakkis

“Let’s close the blinds,” Rowan muttered as she fumbled her way toward the hotel’s curtains. Night had painted her and Arthur’s faces. Arthur furrowed his brow as she snapped the blinds closed. She didn’t even peek outside. She could not peek outside. Even though her mom wasn’t from the city, she didn’t want to risk the street lights giving her a glimpse of the country. He didn’t understand.

She spun on her heels. An electric warmth danced against the surface of her skin. She had been drinking that night. “I’m just so glad they liked me,” Rowan said as she joined Arthur on the bed.

Her presentation had gone well. Stem cell research was always a tricky topic to talk about. Most with less than a bachelor’s degree thought stem cell research killed unborn children. While everyone at the conference seemed to understand her research, the possibility of controversy scared her. Other doctoral candidates from her lab had assured her that her presentation made sense, but nonetheless, the idea of presenting this research in front of other experts had frightened her beyond all doubt.

“Of course they liked you.” Arthur said as he started to rub her shoulders. But she could feel the tension bubbling in his as he rubbed.

She ignored it. She just wanted to finish celebrating. Her eyes wandered to the blinds.

She pulled away from his touch and turned to face him. Her legs folded underneath her body. “Thanks for all the help.” She brushed her hair aside and cocked her head. There was a magnetic pull between their lips. She wanted to kiss him--but some stupid part of her resisted it. Her mind raced with anxieties. Arthur worried about someone he would meet tomorrow. A physical person. She worried about seeing the countryside. A constant reminder of someone who was no longer around.

She reached for her phone.

12:12 am.

“I’m setting the alarm for--”

“7:15,” Arthur answered.

The intoxicating electricity she had felt only moments before dulled into a buzz. She gave a tired smile. “If I can do it, you can do it,” she said as she created an alarm on her phone.

“Thanks for coming out with me,” Arthur said as he started to rub Rowan’s leg. “You know, it’s the first time you’re actually going to see what my field is all about.” He paused in thought and in motion. “In person. Wow, I never really thought about it like that.”

“Less talking,” Rowan said. It was meant to come out sarcastically and flirtatious, but her voice flattened out.

She made up for the remark by taking off Arthur’s glasses. She traced the corner of his eyes. Admiration injected in her breath as she felt along the curve of his face. She made herself stop and look at the blinds.

His callused fingers rubbed against her hand. His touch reeled in her focus. “I bet I can bribe one of the grad students to let you keep something.” A grin replaced some of his doubt.

“Mhmm.” Rowan gave him a quick kiss before settling into his arms. And even though she didn’t want to, she unconsciously started to play with her red curls. They were as much a gift as a curse. A comforting resemblance to her mother, and a painful reminder of their conflicting ideologies.

Rowan’s phone vibrated like a cicada’s wings. But the stupid thing did not respond to her thoughts. She waited for the day when the snooze button was merely a psychic link.

She breathed in deeply, waiting for the alarm to shut off by itself. It kept buzzing. Sunlight tickled her eyelids. But instead of absorbing the sunlight, she turned onto her side. The hotel sheets tangled themselves further between their bodies and she groaned. Why didn’t she shut the blinds all the way?

Arthur twisted and mumbled something underneath his breath. Rowan pulled away, twisting back into the sunlight. Finally, she let her eyes flutter open. She blinked a few times as if the spray of rays could dance off her eyelashes.

Crap.

She propped herself on her elbow to check the time.

“Arthur.” She shook him with minimal effort. He groaned and pulled away. “Arthur.”

She rolled her eyes then she collapsed back onto her back and stared at the ceiling. A sigh escaped her lips and something tugged at her muscles. She just wanted to stay in the hotel. Make snow angels out of discarded sheets and pillows and not deal with the rest of this trip. If Arthur hadn't come on the trip with her, there was a high chance she would've been on a plane home already. But he was here. And she hadn't gone home.

Her eyes flicked to Arthur once more. His soft snores filled her with a sense of security; a sense of emotional intimacy spoken in another language. She reached for her phone.

As soon as she stopped the phone's annoying buzzing Arthur shot up into a sitting position. He reached for his glasses on the bedside table.

"What time is it?" His voice, while groggy, was painted with anxiety.

"Late enough," Rowan said as she stood up. Her feet dug into the plush carpet and she closed her eyes once more. Yesterday was her day for nerves. Now, she had to be there for Arthur. Today was his day for nerves. Arthur's hand brushed against the tips of her fingers. She finally let herself open her eyes.

Arthur had found his glasses, but that was as presentable as he got. His brown hair had decided that today would be its rebellious day. Her fingers twitched as he pulled away from her and the bed.

"I hope Dr. Mathews doesn't—"

"Well, let's not think about the time. Maybe if we drive fast enough we can get there in time," Arthur said as he picked up the closest pair of jeans he could find.

In five minutes, they had made it downstairs. It took them an additional three minutes to find the green car Arthur had rented out for the week. "You okay?" He asked as he opened the left side door—the passenger door in this country.

Rowan nodded but said nothing. She didn't really want to tell him what was bothering her. That issue had been a lifetime ago, and she was supposed to be over it now.

Edinburgh was one hour away from the archaeological site. Arthur had told her all about the site, but in all honesty, she had forgotten most of what he'd said. She had mostly spent the past few weeks prepping for her presentation at the university. She should have been happy that her boyfriend had moved his schedule around to be with her. He wasn't due to be in Scotland for another few months, but, somehow, he had convinced his mentor to let him come to check out the site.

But when Arthur had come into her little apartment smiling waving his virtual ticket, she could not help but give fake smiles. She didn't want to disappoint him further. She wanted to handle her Scotland issues by herself, but

his enthusiasm drove her to silence.

Arthur's eyes narrowed as he put the car into drive, and she felt his left-hand tense as he suppressed his urge to hold her hand. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply before staring at her hands. She refused to look up.

Thirty minutes into the trip, and the sun disappeared behind the clouds. Not long after that, spotty rain began. Rowan traced the outline of the raindrops' path on the window.

Normally, she loved the rain. It was a luxury in a place like California. But she couldn't stop thinking. She couldn't ignore those persistent buzzing thoughts in her head. She was in Scotland.

She cocked her head to the side and looked at Arthur. "Hey." Her voice scared away the silence and mingled with the patter of rain. Rowan rubbed Arthur's leg. "We're making good time. And we could always blame the weather on our punctuality."

He gave a wavering sigh. She rubbed a bit longer. Her eyes flicked for half a second out the window before looking back his face. She gave him a supportive smile.

He gave a nervous chuckle. "I'm sorry—"

"Don't be." She looked back at the rain and tracked the paths with her eyes. "You supported my neuroticism yesterday, which I still don't know why you would." She chuckled at the memory. She had cycled through three dresses and presented her speech six times to Arthur.

"Sometimes, it's best to let you ride out your waves of panic." He smiled. She rolled her eyes, but there was a smile on her face. A real one. "Besides, you did great. Dr. Mauning would say the same thing if he were here. Plus, you sure showed those people the important molecular mechanisms that underlie pluripotency and the factors that induce the reprogramming—"

"You didn't understand a word I said, did you?"

"Not one."

Rowan had been dreading this trip for months, not because of the conference but because she would have the constant reminder lingering around her. She had been avoiding the windows, the sights. The airport had been a nightmare; the terminal kept pulsating with reminders of Scotland and of her. From the souvenirs to the tourist pamphlets. She just wanted to do her presentation and get out of there. She hated herself for agreeing to present in Scotland. She couldn't figure out why she thought this would be good for her.

"I'm pretty sure you don't remember what—" he paused to get off the highway. "—where we're going." Rowan's heart skipped. She bit her lip before looking at the water droplets on the side mirror. Hearing about his research had been interesting—at the beginning of their relationship. Now that they were here—

Initially, she was interested in him because they had met through a medical conference. He was interested in biological anthropology, and that was what initially had her interested. Arthur explored the whole human body even if the human was dead for hundreds of years. She studied parts of humans. They were so different, but their love of discovery was what bonded them together.

But after a few months of being together, his enthusiasm about life after death started to rub her the wrong way. His talks were no longer based in fact and science, but in speculation.

“I’ll admit, I was a little distracted.” Rowan felt his affectionate eyeroll. “All I know is that we’re looking at bones. That are old.”

“Yes. Let’s just go with old. The specificity of it doesn’t matter at all,” Arthur said.

Rowan laughed and waved her hand. “I’m sorry. It can be interesting, it’s just sometimes, it’s not exactly relevant to today.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Rowan removed her hand from Arthur’s leg and raised an eyebrow. “Well, it’s nice to understand how biomechanisms work because then we can use it to treat people now. The stem cell research that I presented yesterday can be used to save lives. Maybe not now, but some day.” Rowan started to finger her curls. She caught a glance out the window and looked sharply at her fingernails. The image of a sickly woman with red hair bubbled to the top of her thoughts. Rowan flinched; she had pulled at her curl a little too hard.

“You ever heard of the biopsychosocial model?” Rowan had, but she wasn’t exactly sure what point he was trying to make, so she remained silent. “It’s a theory built around the identity of the patient and doctor relationship. Basically, biology isn’t the sole factor behind people getting sick; there are psychological and sociological reasons as well. And it’s important that doctors understand the other factors involved.”

“Obviously.”

“Well, that’s my job. Understanding the sociological factors involved,” Arthur said.

Rowan shook her head. “You’re studying dead people. Sociologists and psychologists study people who are alive.” She didn’t know why they were having this conversation right now. Her eyes flicked to the center. The GPS said they were still twenty-minutes away from their destination.

“While I study bones, I’m interested in what’s around them as well.” He paused. The rain tapped the windshield softly. His brown eyes glimmered as a sheepish smile grew on his face.

“I remember when I first met you. You had your red hair in a bun and your purple sleeveless dress.” She had worn that dress yesterday. It was tossed in some corner of her suitcase right now. “I asked you a question about

advisor's research, then you introduced yourself." She saw his left-hand shift from the top of the steering wheel closer to the bottom. Closer to her. "I had never met a Rowan before you." He paused again. He opened his mouth for a brief second before closing it again. Almost as if he thought better of what he was going to say. "You know what a rowan is right?"

She didn't say anything, but she swore Arthur could hear the hammering in her chest. Her mom named her Rowan. She stared at the GPS.

"It's a red ash-tree prevalent in many Scottish superstitions and myths. People often believed it would protect their families from witchcraft and enchantments. People would carry twigs from the tree in their pockets, and they would craft many objects out of the tree like cradles and crosses."

Rowan hated her name sometimes. She hated having that constant reminder—that her mother picked a name that lived through fairytales and superstitions. Wasn't her red hair the source of enough superstitions? She started to play with her hair again. Twisting, curling. Her hair hugged her finger over and over again. It was almost as if this action were enough to scare away her mother's presence. But it wasn't.

"Archeologists found these pieces of rowan near the bodies. It meant so much to them, to be protected from the witches." He glanced at Rowan for a second before looking back at the road. "We might think this superstition is stupid, but it was a huge part of how people thought back then. Women were worried about faeries taking their children and men were worried witches would interfere with their livestock's ability to provide resources."

"Arthur." Rowan's voice rubbed hard against her windpipe. His name was a squeak. Her mind raced back to when she was a little girl. Memories that she had tried suppress underneath waves of fact and truth.

She knew the myths. At bedtime, her mother would read to her. But they were stories. Just stupid stories.

Rowan blinked a few times before staring back down at her lap. She shook her head, mostly to herself.

"Arthur, that's complete bull." She said the words, but she wasn't sure what she meant by it.

"Rowan, that's what's so amazing about it. People believe in these things. And sure, maybe we don't believe in some of the things they believe in, but it's admirable. It's important—to them."

Rowan had held her mother's hand. The cancer had spat on her brain. There was nothing they could do. There was nothing the doctors could do, except make the frail woman comfortable. No matter how much Rowan had pleaded with her mother to find another cancer center, she had refused. Rowan knew it was a futile effort, but Rowan's mother would keep rubbing the stupid wooden cross around her neck. *"God knows best. God will protect me."* It was her mantra since the first inkling of her declining health.

It was a load of bull.

Rowan knew that. Yet, Rowan still stole a glance outside. Foggy light rain squeezed the green hills. Straggler trees punctured the fog with viridian tips. “*God knows best. God will protect me.*” Her mother grew up in the Scottish countryside. Her voice would always seem to bounce when she described the orange trees in the fall. It was something beyond a descriptive tone. To her, everything was God’s art. And even though she was physically dying, she somehow always found a way to be alive.

The back of her eyes prickled. Rowan withheld the temptation to roll down the window and touch the rain. To feel its embrace as if it were her mother’s hug. Instead, Rowan looked back at the GPS. “We’re making good time. We might actually beat Dr. Mathews.”

They arrived at the site a few minutes later. Pitched tents had congregated at the bottom of the hill as if they were waiting just for them. Rowan reached Arthur’s hand for the first time since yesterday. She rubbed unspoken love into his skin as both their eyes flickered a between anxiety and excitement. The lens of his glasses were speckled with nature’s clear paint. “You’ll do great.” She gazed up at him and gave him a reassuring smile. “Just, be your usual dorky self.”

“I’m just worried that— “

“Just breathe. Enjoy yourself.” She let go of his hand and reached up for his face. Her fingers pressed against the grain of his growing beard as she gave him a soft kiss. Then she tugged at his elbow. “Now, we’ll actually be late if we don’t get off this hill.”

Arthur breathed in deeply, before nodding. This time, he took her hand. As he led her down the hill, Rowan couldn’t help but notice the sun trying to paint the green hills from behind the clouds. The grass swayed around her ankles after each step. Electric warmth danced on the surface of her skin as she finally felt something beyond anxiety.

She let her eyes linger on orange confetti hidden in the distant trees.