

# Sanctuary

My heart whirred, setting off a chain reaction of stomach flutters and the sensation that my head was spinning. My nails, bitten down to the buds, dug into the sheets like miniature shovels attempting to rip into the earth and uproot anything in their path. Sirens and the ever-constant sound of New York activity droned through the window next to my bed, and I felt as if electricity was pulsing through my veins, filling up my limbs in the place of blood. My forehead was damp under my thick bangs as I swiped it delicately with trembling fingertips.

This has happened every night for the past ten years. It was routine, and I couldn't snap out of it for fear of what my body would do.

*Could someone be addicted to a habit?*

I didn't want to know; I just wanted it to end.

It started when I was thirteen: the mini panic attacks-"night terrors" I called them-in the middle of the evening as I prayed for sleep to take me under its dark wing. But my heart would flutter on, deaf to my protest, muscles would twitch, mind would sputter and spin like defective gears in a clock. The floor rose and fell, the walls would close in and suddenly I felt stuck in one of those horror film situations where the heroine was trapped and there was no way out.

Anxiety was the diagnosis. Doctors droned endlessly about medications that would only make me depressed and forgetful: an out-of-control maniac. *But you could try them if you want*, they'd slyly mention as they scribbled a prescription robotically. My mother and I would plaster smiles on our faces-master thespians at work-and shred the squares of paper on the car ride home, letting the wind carry away the distorted strips like confetti out the window. My face wrinkled in a smirk as I recalled the memories.

I let the images dissolve from my mind's eye as I eased into a dark, thick pea coat and fastened winter boots onto my feet. My palms, flat against the frigid pane of glass that was my window, informed me that it was a cold night. I covered them with red gloves that promised warmth. Weaving an identical scarf around my neck and placing a black hat upon my head, I was out of my apartment before I could give it a second thought.

The slickness of the city street was calming under my feet as I blindly walked. As usual, they had a

mind of their own, taking me wherever they thought I deserved to be. Like the countless nights before, I trusted them wholeheartedly, wondering if somehow, some deeply-hidden part of me was directing me to the solution of my problems. The pessimist in me doubted it, and to keep my mind busy I counted my steps as they slid against the stone.

*Slip-one, slip-two, slip-three, slip-four...*

I breathed in the same rhythm, my body becoming a percussion and wind duet.

*...in-out, slip-ten, in-out, slip-twelve...*

*...two hundred thirty-two, in-out, slip slip.*

Then, a stop. My feet had halted. My eyes rose to view my destination, snowflakes kissing my red cheeks and wetting my eyelashes as they dissolved

A massive, grey cathedral loomed over me, piercing the night sky with its sharp, elegant spires. Saint John the Divine, I recognized from scattered memories of passing by. I had always admired the building from afar; watching closely-packed herds of students and devotees flowing steadily in and out of the massive place. I shivered as my body cooled down against the frigid night air and the shadow of the building loomed over me, neither threatening nor promising.

Suddenly, my feet twitched and began skipping up the smooth steps, rapidly heading toward the vessel of religion. It wasn't long before I reached the closed door. I pressed my hand to the wood, almost to help my mind-and my feet, which were itching to head further inside-realize that I couldn't enter. I suddenly had the urge to thrust the door open, calling for sanctuary like the gypsies throwing themselves against the doors of Notre Dame, pounding their fists until they were allowed the relieving entrance.

I smiled at the ridiculousness of it all: it was at least eleven-thirty at night, about five hours after the usual closing time of the giant place. *Of course* the cathedral wouldn't be open. I laughed softly, daring my hand to press against the solid wood and push, announcing my presence to the stained-glass windows and the empty pews.

A creak surprised me, causing me to jump amidst the silent, falling flakes. Unable to believe the whine of the wood, I pressed harder. My heart hammered in excitement, toes twitching, as the heavy plank slowly slid open, revealing the inner skeleton of the beastly cathedral.

The ceiling was higher than anything that I've been under. Columns crisscrossed each other on the

ceiling like distorted ribs, then cascaded down, planting themselves solidly on the ground along the drawn-out aisle that disappeared into darkness. The only source of light was a golden, warm orb surrounding a small table a few feet ahead of me. Numerous candles were lined like secular soldiers along the wooden frame, placed closely together and slightly elevating row by row.

Upon approaching them, I noticed the writing on their curved, pearlescent surface. They were prayers; scribbled wishes of hope, of wellness, to their ever-listening deity. I wasn't religious-I could picture my Spanish *abuela* shaking her head disapprovingly at the thought of my mother, her only daughter, slipping from God's influence-but the beauty of the scribbled, selfless desires intrigued me, coaxed the idea of a holy Father back into my head. My eyes scanned the curved light-bearers and their messages with an interest as hot as the flames they protected.

*Dear God, please help my mother. She was diagnosed with breast cancer two weeks ago...*

*...Dear God, sometimes I feel like I'm slipping. Give me the strength to keep going...*

*...Dear God, please help my daddy and the other soldiers in Iraq. Please let him come home for Christmas so we can give him his presents...*

*...Dear God...*

I pulled back, chest heavy and ears ringing. Suddenly the prayers were voices, echoes of that day. My mother's eyes, jade green and as open as a crumpled scrap of paper as it burned, and the feeble gasp that escaped her lips. The crackling sound of my father's voice through the telephone, encased in my mother's hand with her tan knuckles turning white as she gripped harder, harder.

He told her that his plane was going down. Men had taken control of the jet, turning it into a missile headed for New York City's Twin Towers. Instead of crying-instead of saying how it wasn't fair, how he deserved to be carried out of that plane by *angels* because he had a family to come home to and a life to live-he told my mother how beautiful the sky was and how the city shone under the morning September sun.

He asked my mother if he could speak with me, as if it was like any other business trip and he just wanted to shoot the breeze with me. I swear I even heard a light chuckle through the phone. My mother was hyperventilating and saying *I love you* with every rushed breath, eyes magnetized by the never-ending flow of tears before shakily handing me the phone.

“Dad?” I choked out after a few seconds of stunned silence. I could hear the hysteria on the plane: people were screaming, crying, wailing.

“Hey, Ingy,” his voice was a whisper of a father holding his newborn girl. I was thirteen, but I felt as if I were eighty. My bones ached, my head felt suddenly heavy. I couldn’t breathe.

“Ingrid,” he murmured slightly louder, with more intensity. He couldn’t stop saying my name. “My beautiful girl. My artist. Remember when I took you to the Empire State building, *mija*?” The affectionate term for daughter, spoken in the language not native to my Hungarian father, broke my heart. It felt like it stopped beating.

The word yes slithered out, barely audible, from my lips. My father sighed brightly on the other end. “Remember when you said that you were scared of the heights, Ingy? Remember what I said to you?”

My reply was wrapped in the overwhelming sadness, the realization of what was soon to come. “You said, ‘Don’t be afraid.’” I paused while hearing his hum, his affirmation. “‘Don’t be afraid, because this is what being in Heaven’s like. This is what flying with the angels feels like.’”

“And nothing is more joyful, more free, than that,” my father finished his quote after my voice faltered. “I love you, Ingrid.”

“I love you, too, Daddy.” I sounded like a five-year-old, but I didn’t care.

The phone crackled as the plane’s speed picked up, and suddenly there was nothing.

*Never did silence scream at me like that morning.* I slowly drifted back to the present, breath shallow and head stirring. I had to grip the table’s hard, receiving wooden surface to steady myself, the fabric in my gloves digging under my nails.

I held my gut and tried to piece it all together, all of the fragments and shards of memories. *Was he leading me this whole time?* I wondered, remembering the countless late-night journeys that some mysterious force led me on and the unexplainable gravitation to the vibrant city. It was where his *soul* was, wandering the streets late at night and skirting around the very tops of the skyscrapers. He was waiting for me to stir his soul, to notice his presence that never waned; even after the dust and debris was cleared from lower-Manhattan gravesite.

I felt him in the cathedral: his warmth, his smiles, the way he whistled old jazz songs as he made breakfast on Sunday mornings. His presence curled in the space under the dim pews in the distance, settled

in every candle that glowed in front of me. It filled the hollow room like an aquarium, with crystal-clear water rising to the very top of the ceiling. I was submersed in it, floating and feeling the lightness of relief.

Only after I straightened my posture and breathed in the dusty air did I realize that I had been crying. My cheeks were stained, damp with the salty release of emotion, but I didn't feel the heaviness of sorrow. The even rising and falling of my stomach as I breathed was unusual, and the empty but relieving feeling of catharsis was imminent in my chest. The jitteriness, the heart-skipping, the symptoms of anxiety that riddled me for years were gone, leaving me pleasantly confused.

The devout would call it a miracle, but I think it was the signal of the end of a years-long search; the satisfying moment when a journey has reached its end.

"I love you, Dad."

The whisper slid from my lips so quietly that it was almost indecipherable, but I knew that it was heard as it slightly echoed down from the altar and hung in the holy air.

My toes tapped against the flat floor, reminding me of the coziness of lying under layers of sheets and the blissful exhaustion after a long walk. The moon and the city lights shone through the stained-glass windows as I slipped out into the night, turning the floor around me silvery shades of kaleidoscope colors, and I swore I could hear his laugh seeping from the deepest crevices in the medieval, stony walls.