

Autumn in the Afterward

by Casey McGrath

When I was seven years old, I had an imaginary friend that lived for exactly one afternoon. He was dreamed up intentionally in the style of an older Disney film I'd caught on TV days earlier, but instead of hanging out in lighthouses and chorusing lame but admittedly catchy songs, my over-sized purple dragon, Vesuvius, and I preferred to spend our time stealing snacks and exploring the basement.

Though sharing cookies with someone without an actual digestive track had its advantages, hide and seek got boring fast, and the one-sided debates over what to be for Halloween were predictably easily won arguments. Strangely, though, I never actually made the decision to will him back to unreality; I simply forgot him altogether, replacing him almost immediately with a more realistic troupe of imaginary friends: kids my age that lived in two level houses and walked to school together every day, dreaming up trouble in the plots of my stories while snacking on the bagel bites one of their mothers had made. They were funny, popular and mildly apathetic, faced each chapter with some kind of school related pickle that in reality would either never happen or would never happen to me. As a hopeless offender of social taboos, I was virtually friendless in this life; but in my midnight writing, I was part of a clique so loyal we almost had a gang sign.

Fifteen years later, I've yet to shake my dreamy notions of people. My memory has a relentless habit of glorification, and my subconscious easily exaggerates the endearing. Coincidentally, those who strike me as people I knew in some past life almost inevitably end up a ghost in this one, forever preserved by pictures I've been forced to tuck away or a set of albums I still can't bring myself to play again.

For the most part, it would be easy to diagram the cause of these connections with the guidance of some psychiatric counsel, to label each of us with some short list of disorders and to blame everything on bad chemicals, but being forced apart from anyone for legitimate reason makes even the most well-intended insights arbitrary and the random sentimentalities strangely unbearable.

"Now I'll never see what you look like in your Christmas sweater," I wrote, days shy of our last conversation.

"No worries," you reassured me. "I hate sweaters."

Retrospect sets everything to the melancholy hum of some Indie band: tacky lamps morph into twinkling paper lanterns, bonfires never smolder, and every awkward silence is replaced by eloquent, near-scripted colloquy. In the dead of January, I can revisit Texas's nonexistent autumn, our laughter as we stumbled through a movement of Beethoven. A year after we'd last spoken I can still remember your commentary, our ill-fated reunion at the baggage claim forever immortalized as this solitary instance of unobstructed joy.

But that wouldn't be the truth. At least, not all of it.

That October, I biked through the dark streets of Urbana, pedaling beneath the leaf-filtered gleam of the street lights with our melancholy soundtrack in my ears. Karen Peris sang us as much into existence as quickly as she preserved whatever we ended up being: a twisted, serendipitous kinship that was doomed to disembowel my heart with every strum of her guitar-- a jaded story that will, most certainly, stump me well into my eighties.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm the one who's made up. I wear confidence like a cardigan, buttoning each feminine detail over the barren fear in my gut. I can dance with my iPod in my ear, I can pretend that my

life is exactly where I want it. I can stuff my fists into my coat pockets and imagine some photographer is waiting around every corner to catch the September dusk playing across my cheekbones. I am fashionable and fearless, my legs are as thin as matchsticks, I am more desirable than an Express ad.

But in the pale light above the bathroom sink, my eyes burn a weary red. My brows arch toward each other, assuming their default expression of quiet terror-- as if at any given moment the horrible truth that my trespasses have in fact been celestially intended punishments will be found out and I'll be instantly restored to an enchanted vegetable and a set of disillusioned mice, doomed to spend forever mourning the loss of the imaginary.

In my father's house, there is a wall with more photographs than open space. Like me, it is hopelessly nostalgic, a careful collection of the moments that helped us survive the others. My sisters and I grin around certificates and diplomas, drape the posed arm around each other in the light of a balding Christmas tree; we clench tiny fists around November bouquets, swinging on the thick rubber seats of the local park's playground, our somedays still just some distant thing that would happen to us eventually, like magic. One day we would become what we'd imagined: the artist and newscaster, the rabbit in pipe cleaner ears and the journalist. We will step without the usual caution, we will embrace each other without the usual prompt. One day, we will lift from our past like birds from a forest, the branches stark and leafless in our wake.

