

The Song of an Empty City

The distant hum of a thousand cars echoed across the empty streets, the sounds of distant honks with their irritated interjections cutting through the fog and din of the city. A thousand people with a thousand different lives. A helicopter flew overhead, its humming blades slicing the rain, droplets flying off and down into the thousands of lights in the city below. People meandered in the dark, shaking their rain soaked heads as they walked to catch the nearest cab or bus. The cafes were lit with a warm golden glow, lighting the small figure that stood on the sidewalk outside. Drips of rain from the awning slid down their ragged raincoat, their tired eyes reflecting the light from the cafe before they turned toward the dark street and into the night.

Eastside was quiet this time of night, aside from the few late hour revelers marching home, arm in arm, singing songs with the voice and pitch of somebody who wasn't overly concerned about who was listening. Raincoat walked past them, their eyes tracing the bar goers carefully, their small feet flitting down the road, briskly crossing the puddles which gathered in the cracked cement. A low white fog laid ahead of them, where they knew their destination lay. The river, the river that haunted them every single waking moment, but now even more so, now that it had been ten years since the accident. A shiver rattled down their spine. They wrapped their arms around their chest, covering the thin, baggy sweatshirt they wore under the raincoat, blowing warm air onto their hands to keep the cold at bay.

"In all the lit windows in this city, there isn't one lit for us," a quiet voice said. Raincoat turned around on their heels, a familiarity in their face to the spirit that had joined them. A boy, maybe eight or nine, with messy dark hair and deep well-like eyes. He was not human, not anymore. He was almost a shadow, maybe not much more than that, other than his ability to

speaking, but when he spoke, only Raincoat could hear. His voice itself sounded the most human any voice could be. The sound of a child that had yelled too much in their life.

“Ten years, and you still come back,” The boy said. Raincoat bit their lip subconsciously, looking down at the boy. “You look old.”

“I’m not old,” Raincoat responded. “Just tired.”

“Wanna go for a walk?” The boy asked. Raincoat reached out a shaking hand and enclosed their nervous fingers around the boys’.

“What do you do all year when I’m not here?” Raincoat asked. The boy thought for a second, stepping into a puddle. It didn’t splash, it didn’t even shake. He frowned.

“Nothing. I don’t exist,” He said. “I only exist when you’re here.”

“Oh?” Raincoat said quietly. The boy sighed, bounding up to the dark bridge. Raincoat followed him, looking over the side at the rushing water.

“I should be going to college,” He said, his arms on the railing, looking miserable. “I should be having fun and making friends. And maybe dating, I never decided if I wanted to do that, or even who I wanted to date. But I always kind of wanted to find somebody who cared.”

“You don’t think like a nine-year-old,” Raincoat chuckled.

“I’m not nine anymore, Raincoat,” he said. “You’re not a kid either.”

“I’m sorry,” Raincoat said. They stood in silence, watching the rising, crashing water below, the metal grates below their feet seemingly the only thing protecting them from meeting the rocks below, getting pulled under the current.

“Do you remember that day?” He finally asked, looking up at Raincoat. They wrung their hands together, breathing in and out slowly.

“Yes, I remember.”

It was a warm summer day, just like any other. It had been a little overcast but the sun peeked out from the clouds occasionally, and the light rain had caused a rainbow in the morning, which had summoned all of the children after school. Raincoat had followed the rest of the kids down to the city river. There was a “no swimming” sign, but it was fun to go play. Because of the recent showers, the river was higher than usual. Kids from different schools all went from their cramped, musty school rooms out into the open grass by the river to go play. Raincoat didn’t like going home. They went to the river every single day. They were very good at swimming, they always had been. But that day...

That day, the kids had gone into the river and played, and a new kid had joined. Splashing around, dunking each other under the water, playing on the bar in the river, pushing each other off of it. The new kid had watched from the shore, his eyes on Raincoat. They smiled at him, sand between their toes, their hair stuck to their skin with water and humidity. The new kid jumped in, and he swam. And he swam, and swam.

“Mom always said it was only a matter of time,” Raincoat said.

“Do you still talk to her?”

“No, she kicked me out this year. She can’t afford to take care of me. I’ve been living on the street since then,” Raincoat said.

“Where’s your stuff?”

“I didn’t get back to the shelter after work in time and they took it. So today, I went and begged outside that fancy cafe on fifth street. I got about three dollars. I think I can buy-”

“Do you think my mom remembers me?” The boy said, a heaviness to his voice. “I haven’t seen her yet. You’re the only one who visits.”

Raincoat looked into the water, watching the waves crash over the surface, whirling, dragging debris from the factories, the remnants of smog and dreams.

“Do you think she knows my name?” He asked. Raincoat didn’t respond to that question. They felt their mind going back to that day, back to the boy they didn’t know, as he swam toward her in the grey water. It was seconds, barely seconds. Maybe a million years in a breath. And the kid was gone. Raincoat told the other kids to be quiet, waiting for him to resurface.

The other kids screamed, rushing back to the shore. Raincoat followed them, looking behind toward the water where the boy still hadn’t broken the surface. The kids grabbed their things, vanishing up the slope. Raincoat stood there, staring at the choppy waves. They wondered where the kid had disappeared to, maybe he swam downstream. But something inside them knew. Ice formed in their chest, a solid, heavy weight that they would carry for the rest of their life. As they walked away from that river, they carried not just themselves, on their own two shaking feet. They carried him. The nameless boy.

“Mom, a boy drowned in the river,” Raincoat said. “We were playing down there-”

“If a boy drowned in the river, the police and their parents would be out looking for him,” Mom said.

“I saw it happen-”

“That kid probably was playing a game with you and swam back to shore,” she snapped. Raincoat felt their chest burn. They had wanted to scream, to yell that they had seen the boy drown and nobody cared, nobody cared. Nobody cares.

Raincoat stood on the bridge alone, their hands on the railing, shaking quietly. Tears marked their paths down their face, gliding down their neck. They sobbed, as the rain continued to pour. The thousand dark windows stared down at the bridge with empty, dark eyes. The distant

sounds of cars, of the voices of people living their lives entirely oblivious to the forgotten boy under the waves of the river. Cold water splashed upward through the grates of the bridge, as Raincoat looked up at the sky, closing their eyes and letting the rain wash their tears away. The tears washed down the metal grates, into the dark river.

“Thanks for remembering me,” The boy said. Raincoat opened their eyes, as he stood there, bright and warm like he was on that summer day, the bright eyes of a child filled with hope and potential and love.

“Where are you going?”

“I need to let go. I need to move on.”

“What if I’m not ready to move on?” Raincoat whispered. The boy frowned, and he reached out and took their hand.

“You will never be forgotten,” He said. He let go, and he was gone. Raincoat felt as if the ice in their chest was melting. A sudden summer breeze swept through their whole body, and they remembered the boy. And finally, they let go.

Far away and nearby, billions of people kept living their lives. Billions of people, all wanting to be remembered, and loved, and wanting to mean something. And all coming to different conclusions for what that means. On the street, emerging from a bar, a group of party-goers sing a song together, their voices rising through the epic glass walls of a billion windows. And they sing,

When everything’s gone,

When the world is at its end,

I will remember you, my friend.

I will remember you.