Emotion

published in Asterism Literary Magazine, April 27th, 2023

INSPIRATION.

I saw her on TV when I was young. She was giving a speech at the International Conference for the Advancement of Women. She spoke with such conviction. Her gestures were graceful yet firm. Her words hung in the air. *Each and every one of you has the power to bring about change.* She was speaking to me, directly to me. My heart pounded with excitement; my lips curled into a smile. I had found my calling.

HOPE.

I lived within the confines of a small apartment on 5th street, barely able to pay my rent. One morning, I received a letter in the mail. I opened it. It was an invitation to intern at a nonprofit specializing in helping minority communities. The color it brought to my face overpowered the drabness of my apartment. Blood rushed to my cheeks. I grasped the letter to make sure it was real. *I had done it.* Somehow, I had done it. Now, I could bring about real change. Moving to a new city, waiting endlessly for opportunities, had all been worth it. The letter in neatly typed Times New Roman font was there to prove it.

RAGE.

My jaw clenched – my teeth pressed so hard together that they began to hurt. Every fiber of my being burned, threatening to pull me apart. My breathing was erratic, shallow – I was still breathing, right? My blood pounded hotly in my temples, and I caught sight of a glass vase on the table beside me. I grabbed it. I wanted to *destroy* them. How *dare* they dismiss me, relegate me to a task beneath me, not even give me the dignity of sharing my ideas? Tears formed in my eyes, my vision blurring. *No, don't cry now.* I pursed my lips, trying to hold back the emotion that made me vulnerable. I couldn't. Was I proving their point? I didn't know. I needed to show my rage, prove that I wasn't weak. I was *angry*, not weak. My fingers gripped the vase. Without thinking, I threw it against the wall next to me and watched as it shattered into a billion pieces. It happened. Then it was over. I collapsed onto the sofa, drowning in my powerlessness.

FEAR.

I placed my shaking hands on my lap. I stared up at the ceiling fan, praying it wouldn't fall and decapitate me. I was in a safe place, I kept telling myself. In the guest bedroom of an acquaintance, who was kind enough to let me stay overnight. I was aware of everything in

the room and how it might hurt me. My eyes, wide open, were glued to the door. My hands were clammy...I wiped them on my pillow and gripped the edges of the pillowcase. Anxiety coursed through my veins...I could feel my heartbeat in the side of my neck and in my ears — it had become a permanent rhythm in my head. I heard footsteps. I was sure of it. I laid down, grabbed the ends of my blanket. and pulled it over my head, leaving a small gap to allow me to see any potential threats. Nothing happened. I waited. Still nothing. It must have been a figment of my imagination. Or was it? I turned over and faced the wall, trying to fall asleep and ignore the constant thumping of my heart.

EMPATHY.
As I walked out of the dorm to go to a party with my friends, I saw her sitting alone at the edge of the cafeteria, face in her hands. I told my friends that I'd be back in a minute — I needed to check on something, and I'd join them in the car. I walked over to her. We weren't close, but it felt wrong to have fun when someone was crying. "Hey," I said, taking a seat. "What's wrong?" After receiving a less-than-courteous "What are you doing here?" I explained how I just wanted to see how she was doing. She had visible eye bags, and four bottles of frappuccino in front of her. She told me everything...how she was failing her classes, how her parents were getting a divorce, how her brother had stopped picking up the phone, how her boyfriend broke up with her just yesterday unexpectedly. I sat there and listened. I didn't know what else to do. I felt bad — was it guilt, for not having inquired about her earlier, for being lucky and not having to go through the same thing, or was it genuine concern? I sat there with her for another hour, just listening.

JOY.
I was finally back in San Francisco. My *home*. I had been gone for two long years. I couldn't wait to get off the plane, to see my family again.

After squeezing my way through a tight line of passengers, I reached the airport lounge. Before I could properly take in my surroundings, arms wrapped around my neck, pushing me back from the impact. It was my younger sister. She had grown tall over the years. My little brother, only ten years old, ran towards us, joining the embrace. After finally being released, I saw my parents. Tears of joy dropped from my mother's eyes. She held my face in her hands, commented on how I had gotten so weak; my dad gave me a hearty pat on the shoulder. I had never smiled so widely in my life. The fatigue of the 9-hour flight was instantly gone; I was energized, full of something so positive, something so whole. I wanted to soak in

the moment, live in it forever.

ENVY.
As she walked up onto that stage, my fingers curled into fists, veins pulsing. I needed to throw something at her. Anything. Preferably something heavy. I probably couldn't throw that far anyways...I'd end up hitting one of the guys in the tuxedos up front. What did they know about innovation? About change? Did they seriously think she deserved this award?

Applause resounded in the air. She smiled. A wide smile, with perfect white teeth. She shook the president's hand. Cameras snapped and flashes lit up her face. The clapping didn't subside. I pursed my lips, directing my gaze to the wall, doing anything to avoid seeing her self-entitled persona. I deserved to be up there. Not her.

It was time for her to give her award acceptance speech. I couldn't bear it anymore. I grabbed my purse and walked toward the door. Ignoring the stares, I focused on that door knob. I left that auditorium, that organization, that world.

REFLECTION.
I sat in the chair in my room. Barely able to move now, I mustered enough courage to grab the glass of water on the table next to me. I looked out the window. Children played on the swings, their laughs and squeals filling the air. Pangs of sadness washed over me. There was so much more I wanted to do. So many things I hadn't done yet. Did I wish I could live my life again from the start? Begin with a clean slate, do the things I had always wanted to do but couldn't? The answer was complicated. I closed the curtains and went to bed, thankful for another day of light but wondering how my life could have been different.

***

"How will you remember her?" The man in the blue coat asked me.

As her best friend, I knew her better than anyone else. "She was a very kind person. Always ready to help, never hot of temper. The smile never faded from her face," I answered.

***