

I gasped for breath, fighting to escape the smothering feeling. My hands clawed at the body suffocating me, striking nothing but a white comforter. My eyes widened to the sterile, white ceiling of my Willesden Junction flat. I sat up, suspended over the edge of a cliff — although I saw no cavern, a hole crept from my feet to the wall, shrouding me, vacuuming the air from my flat.

*Loneliness.*

My gaze seeped through the window, slinking along the windows lining the street below. Rainbow flags pulsed silently in the wind, briskly ushering pedestrians along the gray pavement. I doubted that they could breathe either. London's streets not only brooded under the weight of Brexit, but bled for the 49 killed and 53 wounded in the Orlando shooting just 11 days prior. The rainbows billowing in the wind reminded me of my best friend, Vince.

My imagination fogged over. My heartbeat slowed to the rhythm of foamy waves lapping over my feet. Sunlight broke through the mist to reveal a treehouse with a backyard jungle.

“Come on, don't just stand there! Let me show you around!” yelled a five year-old boy with wild brown curls.

It felt like we had always known one another. Before I knew it, we raced up trees, collected seashells, and charted through untamed grass. The constellations hanging above baffled our little minds as we labeled as many as we could. After what seemed like an entire day of pleasantries, it was time to go. His deep brown eyes studied mine.

“Visit me again someday?”

Our fingers laced together. The air pressed against our chests.

“I hope so. I won't ever forget you.”

The mist formed a wall between us — his face whitening into nothing. I woke up and was alone again, sitting on my rigid twin-framed bed.

Vince and I first met in Kunming, China, a city constructed overnight. We joined the seven million villagers flooding it to clumsily discover the possibilities. It was there that I was offered my first jazz club residency and he pursued his first film project. Our friends were humanitarian, ambitious creatives who convened over spiritual talks, exquisite cheeses, Chinese noodles, indie films. We felt fresh, alive — almost

invincible. There was nothing we couldn't accomplish. We spent six months intoxicated by Asia's exoticism, bonded by our religious experiences. In the two years following, Vince and I continued our texting everyday. Our connection wove into the fabric of our lives, though we were separated by an ocean.

We tried recreating our mountaintop experiences after Kunming, but we didn't anticipate how hard reality would hit. Health, work, and money troubles whittled away our spirits. All our repatriating friends compared our China experiences to our starkly American ones and Vince naturally began vocalizing his doubts. His religious skepticism and search for identity didn't alarm me until the day same-sex marriage was nationally sanctioned and he came out on Facebook as gay.

We never really argued on the subject. He knew at that time that I leaned more conservatively. He knew that I was worried that he was falling away. He thought the Christian religion was narrow-minded and incompatible with his public identity. The ocean separating us suddenly became real. As he discovered his new community, we talked less. As he gained more of himself, I lost more of us. Really, he was searching for a new salvation — one I couldn't understand.

Even so, one random night, he texted me, "Why can't we just make a 'Vince & Gracie - Go Back to Kunming' Kickstarter campaign?"

After the Pulse shooting, I debated on contacting him. We had stopped talking months before because his boyfriend was jealous of me.

While I was still conflicted, he texted me.

"Hi."

It took me a day to respond.

"Are you in shock because of all the Pulse stuff? How are you doing?"

"Yeah, I've been at work scrolling through every post. Just crying right now at my desk."

"Can't imagine how the LGBTQ community feels right now. I'd never want anything to happen to you. Is Dallas safe when you're out at night?"

"Honestly, men are always trying to pick fights at gay clubs. Always gotta be smart."

We updated each other on our present lives before I confessed, “I want you to know — I’m always here for you. I’m not ready to say homosexuality is OK and I won’t pretend. But I do value you and other LGBTQ lives. You are some of the bravest people.”

I could almost hear him sigh deeply from half a world away.

“I value you too. I value having friendships with diverse opinions.”

We texted for weeks. Slipping back into sharing memes and music, we were, once again, exchanging seashells and stargazing on the island.

“Come on! Look at this song I found,” he beamed. He sent me Snapchat selfies of his brown eyes and boyish smile glowing in the tropical sun and I sent him a video of my run along the Irish shore.

Meanwhile, global tragedies exploded around us. I checked in after a shooting occurred near his workplace. He checked in when I boarded planes for France and Germany in the days following the Nice and Munich terrorist attacks. Life was too precious, too short not to say we loved each other.

“Please be careful, Grace. So many crazies out and about this summer.”

“Promise to update Snapchat. So you can still see that I’m alive,” I replied.

I think we both wanted it to last. It didn’t. Our lives diverged once more as the summer closed. Our stream of texts trickled into nothing. Perhaps we didn’t have much in common beyond old memories and fun trivialities. Those few months, sweet as they were, didn’t stop the inevitable. The ocean crystalized.