**A cosmos in between**

**2023 Isaac Harrison: A short story**

*“We don’t need to explain our love. We only need to show it.” – Paulo Coelho*

Why does she lock the gate? The caravan park is already surrounded by trees. By towers, lights and stars. Is it respect? Of what? Of whom? Instinct? Consideration? I do not understand. I abstain from asking. Old Man Bill eyes her as we stroll down the street. I don’t know why he does that.

“Oi, Abrigo! Sally’s bonfire is ‘morrow night. Thanks for helping ‘er bury Mr Scruffy. Who’s the lass?” Charlie hacks. He wants more than a nod. She hides her face as his eyes pierce through his thick glasses. I respond with a smile. Why do they question her? Hypocrite! I do the same - I question everyone. Everything. His frail, crossed arms demand a proper answer. His demeanour is stringent - and she said she hates people’s gazes. He does not know that. How can he?

“She’s from the band, Charlie. You know how important practise is.” I wave. He accepts my lax tone. But does he understand why practice is important? His shrug sees his gaze diverted back to his beer. Why does he still drink? His doctor reported that he only has a year left. We press on.

“Why’d Scruffy die?” Lyla asks. I can see the kind and concerned glow in her eyes. I know that she is warm-hearted. I never ask why. My hands can only sink into my jean’s pockets.

“Time is merciless, Lyla.” I cite. She understands my extracts. She can see through my mordant slant. So can Michael, Arlon, Zeina, and Phoebe. That is why I joined the band. Her countenance is still shy but also now crestfallen, staring at the ground as our feet trek over gravel and loose pavement. Feet dash around the corner. Here we go.

“Abrigo! They’ve raised the tax again! You’ve got a buck to spare? I know I owe you a mansion, but-”

“Don’t worry Hogan. You needn’t justify it. I have no use in a mansion.” My gesture turns his puerile, apologetic plea into grateful praise. I care not that I cannot understand how his grin and shut eyes together outshine the lampposts. I live for faces like those – relieved and grateful.

“That’s the spirit! We’re all glad that you’re with us! Mailbox is unlocked, as always. And who is this young lady?” Chipper Hogan - some people are too obvious. I am glad, too. She hides behind my buttonless frock coat. He too does not understand her. My discourses, however, do pay off. He stands down and respects her timorous demeanour with a small, silent smile.

“Lyla, this is Hogan. I posit your luck is still out.” I look over my shoulder with a gesture. Luck? When Man stops preying on chance, Man might control his life. Not now, Abrigo. Snape out of it. Hogan’s blank face chuckles when he regains his composure. I’ve already scolded myself enough today, too.

“Ha, yep! They don’t know what they’re missing! And a pleasure to meet you, Lyla. Abrigo glorifies your singing in your band. Heck, he never stops raving about you and your bandmates. Ain’t that right?” Hogan should watch his impudent smirk. An insinuation should not stir me - he is my friend. He only japes because. Because why? It does not matter. His jovial manner draws Lyla into the light. That is a start, and a good one, too.

“Hello, Hogan, sir. Nice to meet you too.” She stammers, trying to shake his hand without trembling. Their palms make contact. He then vanishes behind his caravan door. Mrs Camile should let him off the hook. Stop shouting, please. What right does Man have to determine what his equal deserves?

“Abrigo! Wrangle him out here, now! He’s stolen my jug!” She huffs with crossed arms. She could do it herself - I have duties. Lyla cowers behind my back as her towering figure casts a shadow.

“Mrs Camile. I know that you are angry. I also know that Hogan requires said jug. Please acquit him once more. He will return it.” I straighten my voice. I could not have sounded that slipshod, judging by her expression. She understands. Right?

“Abrigo. You’re great, but he can’t keep getting away with this! I know you preach service, altruism, compassion, and whatnot. But you deny justice! I just want what is rightfully mine. And don’t cite anything. I’m sorry, but you need to put your foot down. Please.” She sighs with an irked scoff. I relax my hands. For anger only smites itself. Sorry? Sorry! Man’s actionless apology has long lost its value. An apology asserts that you repent for your action - it means that you do not stand for what you did. Yet people repeat said actions and - I already have a headache. Relax. Justice? What right - forget it. I cannot understand her. I only strain myself. Fruitless. I can only interpret her countenance. I cede and knock on Hogan’s door. The slot slides open, only allowing our eyes to meet. I can see a relieved glimmer in his deep pupils. Her voice is that loud.

“Oh, Abrigo. How can I help?” Hogan keeps the door locked. My visage could not be clearer. Sweat is already cascading over his eyebrows. He exhales. I align myself both with Hogan and Camile – a resolution would be splendid rather than another week of gripes volleying at the bonfire. Lyla’s azure eyes snatch my attention. She too has rapport. Shame it scares her. Shame true understanding is only in Heaven. Hogan closes the eyelet. The door handle twists. What was once a cordial countenance is now an ashamed, diffident, and atoning trot. Just look me in the eye, Hogan. Your soul bleeds through your lens. Your values. Your actions. Camile crosses her arms, towering even over my head as I keep it raised. Lyla’s fingers still latch onto my sleeve. Camile’s acerbic aura is gnawing into both of our backs – no wonder she’s so. Do not presume. Hogan presents her with the kettle. Phew.

“This is the last straw, Hogan. At least ask in the future. And yes, Abrigo, I forgive him.” Camile rests her cogent voice with a deep exhale. From mistrust, disappointment, and choler, to pity, sincerity, and clemency; I can hear all of the different micro-tones in her voice. Hogan remains speechless. His lost hand tries to find its way to my shoulder. It zips into his pocket. His back turns to my face.

“Sorry, Abrigo. Things are hard. You’re the only one here by choice. Why?” He asks. They all asked this. From Uncle Johnny to Little Lily. Even Shade, the sequestered lad in his treehouse expressed his bemusement. Same response as always. The truth. At least Camile’s left us alone, easing Lyla’s hand.

“I have everything that I need here. So I can help others with what they need.” I tell him. The tax may be hard, but our gigs and my job at the bar grace me with profit to be shared. They both give me blessings gold cannot outweigh. The cheering crowd motivates me. Michael’s determination and payoff show me what power lies in devotion. Arlon’s optimistic jokes, scheduling, and friendship remind me how kindness is historic. Zeina’s talent, intelligence, and rational wisdom carry me through university. Phoebe’s bright, affecting, and extrovert radiance, usually, slay a sour mood. And Lyla’s true smile, touching voice, and dainty aspect assert that warmth still exists on this cold earth. We besmirched Father’s work. Yet we can salvage the happiness and love that he placed in nature and our hearts. Through suffering. Through false understanding. My understanding.

“Are you happy, though? What do you want in life?” Right. Wake up. Distrait once more. What? Of course! Good things never last, but neither do the bad things, Hogan. That makes the pain bearable. That makes the pleasure special. His unsatisfied eyes reveal the world that lies behind them. In truth, I wish we could visit the worlds behind people’s eyes. We can only ever see the surface. Yet two worlds cannot merge. Otherwise, they destroy one another. However, marriage is the apparent converging of two worlds. I cannot fathom how such a feat is possible. A lapse of mine, I deem.

“I am, Hogan. And I do my best to make everyone here happy. I only want the best for us all.” I finally express my thoughts - what I know. Through his slough, I can sense a smile surfacing on his hidden face. Of all the countries that make up his World, I am glad it is his emotions that communicate the loudest. The Truest. I may not understand the conflicts between the countries and themselves on his planet but I can still help him. Care for him. For he is the only one around here who does not don a mask. Does Lyla bear one? I have only been the band’s songwriter for four months. Hogan’s door locks shut. Now only the evening wind graces my ears. I continue to guide Lyla to my caravan. The light from the lampposts, small campfires, and my neighbours waving with one hand and a drink in the other mollify her aspect. Just down the path and under the cedar tree. When I arrived those long, nine months ago, it was one of many spots left. Now, not a single slot is available. How my mind wanders with my feet. I become so absorbed in thought that, as with this evening, I open my eyes and I am already at my door. Is my excogitative nature a flaw? According to whom? It does not hurt me. It does not hurt anyone. So no. Just a doubt. Just a question.

“So this is your, house, Abrigo? Not that it’s shabby or anything! It’s quaint. I like that.” Her flustered voice defends herself. Did my demeanour turn offended? No - she is just considerate. Kind. My smile, as usual, alleviates hers. I unlock all three of the binds Otto helped fuse to the door. I do not deny the Duality of Man. My kitchen is clean and the table is unfolded from under the inbuilt couch. The tiny loft where my wide bed lies are shrouded in darkness. She looks around the rectangular shape of my caravan. The alpine designs on the tens of pillows that adorn the U-shaped couch pique her surprised interest. That fuels my grin, seeing her eulogise over my choice of cool-coloured furniture. They make the space feel small, cozy, and tender. Manageable. My own. Best to have her the first one here before I eventually invite the others. Eventually. For sure, I will. Right? Yes. Eventually.

“I didn’t know you played the guitar! Why’d you not tell us?” Wake up! Great. Should have hidden it. I am not disconcerted or defensive - It is just a hobby. No harm in that. She is just curious. Kind.

“Acoustic fingerstyle. Unfit for a band. We already have bass and electric, withal.” I explain. Justify? Too modest? Only strumming, rifts, and chords mixed with notes get recognition. Too sour? My voice stopped her from opening the case. Her pout is disappointed, yet understanding. I wish more people could understand like her. Understand? Challenge my admittedly cynical outlook, at least. I am a mess. A walking contradiction at times. But I perfected my perspective. Mine only.

“Well, where do we sit?” Her leaking energy warms up the frore atmosphere. The ceiling lights bring out the pale pink hue hidden in her blond hair. My hand shows her the couch around the table. My laptop, notepad, and Zeina’s brainstorm are already laid out for us to build upon. This will be an interesting project. Michael really imbedded the fact that our last song was too baleful. My mood last month was anything but magnanimous. An explanation. Not a justification.

“Can I have some tea, please? If not, water’s fine. Thanks, Abrigo.” Her now comfortable, polite and saccharine smile accepts the large glass. Tea? I should have recalled her love of green tea, thanks to Zeina and Arlon’s obsession with it. Her eyes ask me to lighten up and sit down beside her. We get to work right away. They want a piece about persistence. Tenacity - so Michael. I then explain what Indefatigable means. I then reason that I use sophic words since Man keeps simplifying everything. We make life too comfortable to cope with suffering. Ruining the point. Casting illusions. Focus, Abrigo! We only have a week! Slow down. Listen to the nagging wind outside. It fades away. The droning buzz fades the moment she recites a warmup. This always happens. Even for Arlon and Phoebe. Lyla’s voice is something else. Honest. True. Soothing. Bright. I am blessed to have my lyrics played by this band to people who want to listen. My brainstorm turns to haze and I just stare at the sheet paper. My hand chokes the pencil. It is now crystal clear. Right.

“Abrigo? Hello? No rush, but I think we should produce more than a lone line.” Gah! Her hand brings me back to the present. Right. Persistence. Something about dedication and fortitude through hardship, no matter the trepidation and trials sounds resonant! Now I feel exhausted. I slouch in her positive and comfortable aura. A contrast to her shy and faint demeanour. I wish everyone could be their true selves at all times. No masks. No altering personality with different people. Hah, ironic. When was the last time I was honestly myself, not adjusting my approach to suit the eyes before me?

“Be simple, I suggest. I think stubborn is better than obdurate. This is hard, Abrigo. I’m sorry that they don’t respect your work. Bet that’s why they assigned me! Hmm? Michael doesn’t understand that it takes time to write a song. Remember that silly rap he made? Took him one lunch!” Her pencil scrawls across the lined paper with a lively voice and laugh. I do not stop her. Michael? I only respect his work. I will not doubt my friends. Nor myself. Just pay attention. Too much to consider right now.

“Isn’t that a little too sad?” She points at the phrase I just spewed on the line.

“Yes, but in the chorus, we remind them that the reward, whilst distant, is bound to arrive. No matter how long it takes. No matter how long the tunnel is. There is light at the end. And if not, run down there, and spark it yourself.” Think before I rant. But we have good days and bad days. Maybe even weeks or months of darkness. But the storm will always move on. They need to hear that. Know that fact. Lyla’s smile seems to resonate with that idea. Her demeanour softens as a stilled and blithe glimmer illuminates her eyes, adding her own sentence to the chorus.

“That’s too profound. There are kids in the audience. Isn’t that too blunt?” She questions another candid addition to the new verse. Too blunt? I suppose that there is a fine line.

“The truth often is always guileless. We are lied to so much that - never mind. You know what, you are right. What do you propose then instead?” I relax my clasped hands on the table. We both fall silent. Out of ideas, I guess. I can only guess. I have never seen such an ambiguous expression on her face before. However, Phoebe’s indecisive countenances are similar. That is why we cannot truly understand one another. I can only speculate, presume, and extrapolate. I catch my hand after it pushes her pencil away from crossing out half of the chorus. I am too defensive about my work - my value. An explanation, not an excuse! She accepts my apology with a rumbling stomach.

“Please, feel free to take whatever you want from the fridge, under the mattress.” I point across the caravan. I should have offered to do it myself. The piles of stacked boxes on what could have been a spare bed are all taped shut. I trust her around them. By the time I free myself from the notepad, Lyla is back and has already finished the container of dried apricots. Her tapping foot on the planked floor is in no beat. She is fidgeting. What is she thinking? Her eyes notice my concerned manner, only to ask what the time is.

“Oh, I just have a p- party in twenty minutes. Across the lake. Zeina’s picking me up in five minutes.” How long was I distrait? But that is a relief. My assumptions were far from the truth, as always. A party? Well done, Lyla! Progress! However, I know why I do not feel as relieved and proud as I normally would. I lied to Hogan. I want to know Lyla better. I want to know him better. I want to know everyone better. I overcame my fears long ago, yet it was fruitless - we’re all prone to presume in the end. I can still show her to the gate. We can still express kindness, even though we only see the mark it leaves on the surface and cannot see how deep it goes. Looking up, I was distracted again. Zeina leans out of the window, trying to see the park through the protective trees.

“Thanks, Abrigo. You can come if you want.” Lyla shuffles around, now timid again. Makes sense.

“There’ll be booze, Abo.” Zeina casts her voice through her hand. Lyla’s small smile hides her stuttering mind well. I still shake my head. They are not surprised. But Lyla looks dispirited. They understand my aversion to alcohol. Only Lyla understands why. That does not stop her from having me confirm my decision for a second time. I find it hard to believe that she is even going. A test?

“After our lunch tomorrow, I will stay with you all in the mall.” I too should get out more, I suppose.

“Promise?” Her quick voice shines through her nervous nature as traffic flies past her. I affirm it. That makes her slide into the back of the car seem jovial, waving goodbye through the window as the muffler zooms up the hill. I will not let my values be undermined. Or pressured. However, I do need to treat Michael sometime. Zeina handles us all like family. Arlon talks with me about his feelings. Phoebe’s enthusiasm compliments my reserved habits. Lyla can see the countries behind my eyes. They need something other than lyrics from me. But now I am alone. And now I need Panadol.

It’s been five years! Why can’t they just forget? I’m in real trouble, there’s no way I can pay it back! Is he back yet? He joined his band at the mall today and didn’t say when he’d return. Great! Think man, think! You’re dead. They’ll gut you! Maybe literally. C’mon. No answer. Darn his do not disturb.

“He’s at the lake, Hogan. When’re you going to not kiss his feet?” Oh, shut up Camile. Damn you Boris. Damn all of you! This isn’t a joke, they’ll kill me! And you all call me apathetic and uncaring. Just under the wrecked fence. Then the ruined playground. Over the first hill, then the second. The forest wall at last. Music! The stone bench! Stupendous! Stop. Think - am I pushing it? No, no. This is Abrigo, he’d do any - am I abusing him then? His devotion? Bah! I’m a dead man if I do nothing! He’ll understand. It’s good playing. Why’d he not tell his band about it? Singing too? Some weird, slow tune. It’s not a hymn, too. Why’d he stop? He’s wrong about no one respecting it, as I like it. But I should wait - let him think. Is he all right? Good things happen when he thinks for a long time.

“I’m such an idiot! What was I saying? The most pessimistic quote I know! It’s the truth - after I told her Truth was guileless. But the wrong words saw her dead - stop blaming yourself, Abrigo!” The hell? I should say something, but what though? The notes are slow and resonant. Guilty and grieving. Guilty? You’re a saint, man! So look at yourself, Hogan - you’ve drunk half the bottle. I’m pathetic. I deserve this. All of it. He’ll only disagree -he’ll help you. Bah! Just get going. I need his help.

“Hogan, what brings you here?” His eyes are tired. Irked. Angry at himself. I’m just as beaten as him – but his smile isn’t forced, like always.

“Abrigo! They said I’d find you here. You good, man?” There. He’s consoled me before. How hard can it be? He smiles and nods. He doesn’t lie – but this feels off. Right! Original plan first, then. What’ll he say? I’m dead if he doesn’t help me. I can’t call the police either, since it’s only been a few months.

“Yeah. You?” He’s noticed the beer. Geez. Those piercing eyes. And my faked nod fails. What? Sit down? Well, here we go. He’s my friend - it’ll work out, so I’ll see through it.

“I’m just hiding from Camile. I didn’t steal anything, though. You know how it is.” His eyes wander away over the dark lake. He’s enthralled by the moonlight reflecting on the water. It’s just glistening colours. What’s to be admired?

“No, I don’t know. The truth, Hogan. You’ve never sought me before. And I’ve never seen such a flimsy visage before. What is on your mind, my friend?” Darn he’s good. Unsettling? Nah! Comforting. A good friend. Yes - my only friend. Out with it, I guess.

“Money. As always. Not from you, though. You said it; time is merciless. My debts are coming tomorrow, after the bonfire. Some ‘old mates’, heh. They’ll bleed me dry. No one else believes me. Or cares. You’re all I have.” I confess with tense shoulders. Of course, he looks - upset? Angry? Now wasn’t the time, I guess. But I need his help, so just a little more, c’mon. Keep poking.

“I’m pathetic. Admit it. Sure, I’m glad you see my value. I’m glad your ‘god’ sees it too. But that’s only two people. The others say I deserve it. Don’t deny it - that’s the truth.” Am I challenging him too hard? Am I manipulative? I’m not – as I need his help. His silent head rests against the bush. He glances at his guitar. Then the water. Now the stars. My eyes. This is going to be a long one, I bet.

“My words can’t convince them, can they?” Hmm? Damn no! They’re denser than me! He accepts my exaggerated expression. What is he thinking? Picturing the situation, as always. As always? How do you work, Abrigo? And why do I care? This grog’s hitting different, too.

“Yep. You’re the only one who’ll help me. Rest say I deserve it.” I find myself gazing over the lake. My reflection in the bottle is clearer than the one in the water. Both look sad. Limp. Defeated at last. Pity.

“What time?” Time? I Dunno! They want revenge – ‘course they’ll make it easy for themselves. He needs an answer. After the bonfire, I guess aloud. He looks into the hands of his pocket watch.

“But who am I kidding? How can you say I don’t deserve this? I’ve taken more money from them than I’ve from you! And all for what? Some drink - past pleasures. Like you say.” I cough. Was that too much? I toss a pebble and watch it bounce across the lake. It sinks. It’s buried. Gone.

“And they want to beat you? They haven’t the right.” His voice doesn’t have its usual vigour.

“That won’t stop ‘em. Sorry, but I need a miracle, not a monologue. You’re a good man, Abrigo. You’ve got great friends and a stable job you enjoy. A band. A purpose. A ticket to this heaven, or whatever. How can you say we’re equal? Are you lifting me, or lowering yourself?” That was too far! I’ve done it, surely. No response. No anger. No tears. No veins. Only a sigh. Thank goodness.

“You also have a ticket.” He falls silent. My spine is a snake. My ribs cage my lungs. Abrigo, I’m trying to use you - yet I need to. They’ll kill me! I’m begging you. Everyone hates me! But not you! Why? Why! Stop staring at me – at my wrecked face! Depressed frown! I deserve this! Wait, but he’s hurting too, I heard it. He deserves aid, not me. Let nature take its course, they say. Is this natural?

“You can stay in my caravan. Help yourself to whatever you need while I’m out. And when they come, I’ll conjure a miracle.” Oh? Abrigo! Did you? He did! What was that tone? Peeved? Yielding? Freed? Ireful? Bah, thank you! Yes! He smiles. He can see my relief as I sit down next to him. Time to help.

“Sorry that you have to help me with this.” Gotta keep this right - slow and easy. His hand rests on my shoulder. What is that face? On an angle that emphasizes his eyebrows and pupils?

“Don’t be sorry, Hogan. I can’t just sit back and let someone suffer because I think I’ve understood the most complex thing that exists.” He’s referring to this apparent ‘father’ of ours, I bet. It’s sincere, though, but he mumbles something under his breath. Cannot understand one another? Therefore cannot understand the creator? Geez, do I want to do this? Do I need to? Of course! He helps me.

“Aren’t you a pacifist?” Why’d I ask that? That’s what I need to know? I hardly understand myself. I see booze – I drink it. I feel tired - I sleep. Why do I deserve mercy? He’s grinning. Should’ve kept it in.

“I’m defending our skins. If you cannot fight, then you are a slave to he who can. You’re an ex-boxer, and I only quit martial arts a few years ago. We’ll be fine. I’ll keep you safe, since as long as I can write, read, and think, I’ll be fine.” He affirms. This relief is bliss! I’m saved! Now he’s silent again. I’ll never underestimate or understand you, Abrigo. Abrigo? Hello? That’s a cool watch, sure - but it’s not that captivating. What loud gears, too. Louder than the lapping water and my swishing beer.

“Didn’t you once say violence was the tool of children?” I really shouldn’t push it. Why is his smile impressed and pleased? Am I reading it right? I can’t read his hands, legs, or feet either. I’m curious.

“Man is committed to making the world safer. A secure, comfy cradle - a place only for children.” Bit dehumanizing there, pal. And biased. But that mien is confident. I should stop testing his made-up mind - I need him to support me. We sit down on the rounded pew. Man, if only I’d be as confident as him. In my words, at least. He’s docile with everything else. And quiet. Detached, even.

“What else is there, Hogan?” Gah! That stare - it’s harmless, yet piercing. Caring? I should repay him. What was it that he said? Money is one form of currency but not the only one. He’s confusing, too.

“Nothing, Abrigo. Thanks for the talk, I feel better. But what about you? I heard you playing. What’s on your mind, man?” That was the perfect tone! Honest. Kind. Girlish. Bah! That’s a rude thing to think! His smile loses its vigour - it’s just a crack now. A glad one. Geez that was a massive sigh.

“You know what turbulence is, correct?” I nod my head. Duh - I’m not that dense - I’m not dense at all, actually. He’s just finding a metaphor or something to explain things, like usual. My poor head.

“It is tossing me around, Hogan. What ground I stand on was never really there. Today was another instance of that. I was a fool.” What? Abrigo, a fool? Go on, I’m listening. They say that all the time. He snorts another sigh and gazes over the lake. At least I’m leaving this bench relieved.

“I have told you before how humans are like planets, recall?” Yes - a silly presumption. If I were a planet, I’d be bored. And annoyed. I’ll probably have a species that’ll mine everything. Or make climate change. Anyway, he’s thought this through. For a long time - he’s told us about it nonstop.

“We’re incapable of truly understanding one another. Well, today, I thought I was wrong for a moment. I wish I were. A slap in the face, you know.” I sure do! Had hundreds of those. Literal, too. Calm down now – he’s sounding sad and doubtful. His hands are tense for a second. Distrait, again.

“You met Lyla the other day. What picture of her character did you create?” Ooh, I see, Abrigo. So much for ‘not being interested’. Then again, those eyes aren’t dreaming - they’re desolate. Oh, right. A response. Um. Don’t be mean, man. Lyla. Lyla. Let me think. Easy!

“Timid. Nervous. Shaky. Afraid. Small. Timorous. Any other synonymous for shy.” My tone isn’t callous and cold - it’s honest and unbiased. Doesn’t matter with Abrigo, though. He’ll see through it. I’m not trying to demean her, man - but you gotta have guts in this world. Like me. But not too much.

“That is not Lyla. That is the interpretation of her that you have fabricated in your head. You have an interpretation of me. An interpretation of everyone. Even of yourself. An image of the person. Not the real person.” Okay? Where is he taking this? You’re gonna lose me soon with this nonsense.

“I don’t see how this is bothering you, man. Just because you can’t predict someone, I mean, that’s no issue.” Just silence. He’s staring over the water again. What on earth is going on in his head? I should just leave him be - I’m no therapist - I’m not a lot of things. He stands up. Follow? Sure! That’s a brilliant idea – a nice walk. Anything to not sit here and mull over your views and ideas.

“We’re not perfect, Abrigo. Our thoughts and feelings aren’t fact.” There - something helpful, I hope. And he needs to know that one, for it’s true. He halts and whisks around to look at me. What aspect is that? Neutral? No - indescribable, I’ll say. Not another long and sharp sigh.

“But they are our foundations. You need to stand on something stable, Hogan.” Some tangent. This is pointless - what was I thinking? I’m an alcoholic. What advice can I give? I shouldn’t have said that.

“That’s the point. We’re all different people standing on different foundations. Worshipping different things. Living different lives. What advice can we give? None. We only know how to walk our road - not someone else’s. Not in their shoes. We are benighted.” He blurts out with zealous gestures and tone. Geez, I’m sorry. He trudges further along the bay. His long coat sways in the wind. The same wind is blowing pink blossoms into my face. The subtle stench ruins the sombre atmosphere. He stands under the tree and his eyes beckon for me to stand with him.

“We were at the mall. While the rest were swimming through the masses of people, shops, and lights, I sat with Lyla in some quiet corner. She asked so many questions. No preparation and presumption could save me. So I told her the same thing, Hogan; that no one’s advice will work for you. Because I assumed she would be similar to my sister.” He clarifies at last. That’s not the bad, man. At least it wasn’t a lie. No one's advice will work, huh? Well, how about you just invite her here again and discuss things? What? That’s all I’ve got! He nods his head with closed eyes. Now he stares at the cascading blossoms. This year’s spring is cold. His smile seems to thank me. Is it subjective, then? Bah! I’m not sober enough for this. He has more to say, too. His sister? Since when? Just listen.

“You’re a good person, Hogan. Even if only two people agree. Thanks for listening.” His hand rests on my shoulder. Me? Good? Humility and self-loathing are very different, Abrigo. Very. Fine. Even if I were a saint, these blokes are still gonna bleed me dry. Again, keep it in your head, damn it. Geez.

“We’re all worth more than all of the money, pleasure, and time in the world. Pits of bottomless value that we cover up with situations, subjections, and reasons to say otherwise, hiding the truth! Everyone here insults you. Everyone here hates you but me. It’s pointless, Hogan! Do you know why? Because in the end we die, remembered only by our actions and not the choices we had. In the end, I could be wrong about everything. We’re nothing but a grain of sand on a beach, on a planet, in a whole universe. Even though that grain is unique and beautiful when inspected through a microscope, it gets washed away!” Can you repeat that? No? A calm chuckle instead?

“Yet my friends and our neighbours praise my helpful input. I’ve been called a saint by many. If we weren’t equal, I’d have every right to give up on you according to them! But I’m no better than you - I’m no better than anyone! Our flaws vary. Our strengths vary. Our stories are inimitable - no grain is the same. We’re all people of the same blood. The same planet! We’re all suffering. But the moment someone causes suffering, we want to make them suffer for it. And we then say: oh, how good would it be if there were no suffering? Damn it! Oh, but they deserve it. By On High! Why do I try, Hogan? Huh? I’m a mess. I waste my life obsessing over what I believe is the answer - my answer! Not someone else’s. Not everyone else’s. Solve one problem, and there’s a new one. Heal a soldier so he can out and be killed. I don’t understand your suffering. I don’t understand Lyla’s. I didn’t understand hers!” Who’s? That was a diatribe. Vehement, unfiltered, and natural. Hey, Abrigo, do you need some of this? He glares at the bottle - then at my eyes. His cheeks clear up and there’s no water in his eyes. Just some sweat atop his turtleneck. A few petals nest in his hair. Still silence. How is he grinning? It’s not false. It’s not mad. Man, I’ve done it. Tell all that to anyone except me, Abrigo. I’m no help at all.

“But even with all of that, I remember this. Life is an experience - we’re not supposed to solve it. We’re not supposed to justify it. We’re just supposed to live in it together. Together with the suffering and joy. You can’t understand one another. You can’t answer another’s every question. But you can show love to another, no matter what. Get some rest, Hogan. Thanks.” He stretches his shoulders as his voice settles down. His eyes move from the stars to my eyes - smiling. I’m done. I’ll need more than some sleep. And he’s wrong. I’m an alcoholic and a leech. I’ve invented no life-saving technology. I’m no hero like Desmond Doss or Ruby Bradely. We’re not equal. Heck! This world’s full of murderers, tyrants, traffickers, and rapists! We’re all equal, huh? Are the abused equal to their abusers, Abrigo? Equal to the heroes? Those who sacrifice a lot for others? Huh? Give it a rest, man. At least he knows what he’ll tell her next time. I’m no murderer, but I’m glad he cares about the earth’s trash like me. Thanks, man. His only crime is believing he solved the universe. Does he?

“Hey, whether you agree or not, Abrigo; you’re my hero, man. No doubt will change that. I’ll see you tomorrow.” I still assure him. Yikes! That was a hasty hug! He pats my pack. You know what, fine. I’ll fight cede. Good – we’re done. What, you’re serious? If this was a good day, then a bad day, well, knowing him. Bah – I don’t! I just wander down the shore, hoping he can’t see me shaking my head. I’m glad I don’t understand him. I’m plagued enough. Our torments are our own faults – deserved.

Music? Crackling bonfire? I’m not late! Hah, I’m not late. Calm down. Breathe. Ten, twelve, no twenty, twenty tables. My throat. Focus. C’mon, Pheobe, respond. What emoji is that? Arlon’s no help. C’mon. Nope! Did they see me? Relax. Relax! They’re just people. Just people. Just a sea of eyes. C’mon, you’ve got this. It’s for him. I can’t read all of that, Michael! Breathe. Zeina’s right. This will be easy. This is nothing like the mall. See, they’re smiling! Laughing. Clinking glasses? There’s a stage. Chairs in a ring around the bonfire. Cosy. Crowded. Judging? Whispering? No. Don’t assume.

“Friends and families. Youngers and elders. We’re gathered here together to celebrate and mourn tonight. Sally, please, your toast.” Who’s that? Oh, Abrigo mentioned Sally. Her dog died. Sorry - I’m heartless! Where is he? C’mon. Long coat. Rough hair in a tail. Nope! Did she see me? Relax. They’re just eyes. Just - relax. I’m such a paranoid child.

“And now, we’re going to have our good friends, Abrigo and Westley, perform a suit to send off our companion! And also to our friends who have moved beyond this park. To happiness!” I missed Sally’s speech. I’m such a. Not now! Breathe. Just find him and go through with our plan. C’mon.

“To harmony!” The ground trembles. The ringing fades. Laughter. See? It's fine. There! On stage! Now what? Wait. That’ll work. Just wait. Hide. Why’s he staring at the floor? Westley looks elated. Abrigo is choking his guitar’s neck. Is that fingerstyle? Hey! Westley’s strumming’s too loud! I wanna hear Abrigo! Just another peek. Where’s that Hogan guy? Every other seat is taken. It’s loud. Stomping feet. Waving hands. It’s fine - not too noisy. He looks irritated. Small, sitting on the stool. Finally, some notes aren’t drowned out. Another wave of feet in time with the stum - not the notes. Now he looks sullen. Now ashamed. C’mon, he needs to hear this. Nope! Relax, it’s just a toddler! Toddler? She’ll call for her mum! She’ll come here! She’ll! Relax. Relax! They’re good people. Abrigo swears on it - he doesn’t lie. He trusts everyone… He trusts me. Finally, the rift’s over.

“Thank you, thank you! What a show, ay? Abrigo. Westley. Well done boys. Incredible!.” Duck back! Roaring applause. Breathe. Focus. Now’s my chance. No – yes, Lyla, you wimp! Where’d he go? Abrigo? Westley looks surprised, hands covered in sweat. The older man scratches his head. Don’t trip! Be strong. This is nothing. They’re proud. You did great at the party, Lyla, Michael said. But I just sat in the -

“Who’s this lass?” Eyes. Eyes! Darting up and down. Left and right. It’s all hazy. Focus. Focus!

“No need to hide your face, miss. You’re Abrigo’s friend, right?”

“We all are, Master Taylor.” Not another one! Please, go away! No - I need to find him. My fingers, stretch them. Relax. He’s smiling. A nice old man. A fellow human. So look normal, Lyla!

“Sorry ‘bout him. You seem, ah, forgive me. If you’re after Abrigo, he’ll be at the lakeshore. Tell him he did great. Needs the confidence, you know? Miss? You need water?” Breathe. He’s kind. He’s smiling. Happy. Innocuous. Does he know? Is my face red? Am I a mess? Focus! Don’t panic.

“T-thanks, sir. I’m good. Just need to t -tell him something.” There, yes! He nods his head. Phew.

“Not to me mean, miss. But couldn’t you just text him, then? Bah, wadda I know? I’m ancient, hah! I’ll leave you to it. The path’s behind the wooden gazebo. You sure you’s fine?” I’m pale, aren’t I? Stop stuttering! He just beams, nodding his head - giving me space. He vanishes around the caravan. Stop fidgeting! Stop shaking! Just move. He’s gone. Breathe. Just stare at the ground. Walk fast and Ignore. I need my energy to talk, not to face the horde now. Steep hill. Feeble branches. Dark - very dark. Flickering lampposts. I don’t know how it’s going, Pheobe! No, no, don’t call Zeina! At least my thumbs aren’t shaking. Good - they trust me. Encouraging, sure. There’s the water! Ok - I’ve got the notes, a few ideas, and a smile. This will work. Hopefully. Is that music? Singing? My ears have stopped ringing. Legs are stable. My throat’s clear. Yeah, that’s music. A guitar!

“Heart of my own heart, whatever befall. Still be my vision, O ruler of all.” He is singing! Dulcet, slow, but not supine. Don’t judge! I’m a hypocrite! Not now. His head just pokes above the flat hedge, surrounded by a round bench. The gate’s unlocked. Careful - no noise. Pure peace. Lapping water. Moonlight and stars. I can think clearly, phew.

“Torment? I know nothing about torment. Well, compared to. Compare? Comparison kills happiness! How am I sure? Everyone’s got their demons, even you. This is ridiculous. Do I care too much or too little? Just find the balance.” Talking to himself again. But with derision and regard? This is what happens when you isolate yourself, Abrigo! I know it too. Just talk. Just go up to him, c’mon.

“Why try? Why question? Doubt, fear? Besmirchment? Lord, I complicate everything.” He’s hunched over, staring into his pocket watch. His head flies backward into the bush, staring at the stars. He smiles? What a long sigh. Toneless. Mordant? Hard to tell. How are my hands? My voice? Good.

“Love is all that matters, Abrigo. His is unconditional. Is mine? Can people even show unconditional love? Stop doubting. Just. Just. Lord.” He maunders, splaying his arms along the bench backseat between the hedge and the concrete. A little closer. Like we planned! Zeina would’ve been better. I’m not the right person to. Stop! This will work. I’ve got this.

“See the stars? Cloudless. Bright. The city’s lights cannot usurp its splendour. What a sight - what lies between each person.” Is he talking to himself? No, it’s not weird - it’s Abrigo. A friend. Optimism. Wisdom - our band’s lifeblood. Huh? His providence? Gah! I’m sorry! Don’t block your face!

“Oh, it’s just you. Lyla? I am so sorry, you startled me. Lyla? It’s me, Abrigo. Relax.” My throat. Sorry! Breathe and focus. He sits down. He pats the spot next to him. I’m good. Thanks. Now’s our chance.

“Do you need anything? Water? I got some tea this time. Last-minute practice before tomorrow?” His voice has calmed down. His expression is smiling and amiable - what a relief! He’s lucky it’s me and not Arlon that he spooked. He stands up. My legs won’t sit down. Am I missing something? Right. We discussed the plan - to fix things. C’mon. I look up at his stunned face. Speechless? It’s just a hug! He needs one - we all do. So please work. Anything. You’ve got this all wrong, Abrigo. You can’t give up! C’mon! Say it, Lyla. He won’t listen to Michael or Zeina. Just you. I’m not that inept.

“It’s all right, Abrigo. I understand you.” Huh? Who’s Tessa? Phew - he hugs back. First step is done. Zeina said to present our findings to him, okay. Just talk so that we can have a whole group discussion later. C’mon. I’ve stopped trembling, at least. He breaks free, shaking his head. Shrunken pupils. What? He’s looking past my shoulders. The papers - I dropped them! Abrigo? No, he’ll -

“No, Lyla. You don’t. Yet I’m sorry. I should have told you this instead. Just because we can’t understand one another, that doesn’t mean that we can’t care for one another.” What? Should have told me? He’s talking now, at least. He’s anxious. What did I do wrong? Think. Speak! Focus.

“No, Abrigo, you’re wrong! You just need to sit and talk with people. Who told you these things?” I vociferate. He’s never heard this tone before. Why’s my vision bleary? Am I? Not now! Don’t shake your head, Abrigo! You’ve told me to make progress, so now it’s your turn! We help each other in this band. This world, like you keep saying. I’m doing my best, please. Just listen! We’re doing our best.

“No one told me anything. I worked it out alone.” No - there’s no denial in his voice! Think. What did Arlon suggest? Pheobe? Relax. Maybe sitting down will work. Don’t interpret it wrong, Abrigo! C’mon, assure him! Speak! Breathe! We’re not losing him. We’ve made so much progress.

“It is just an ideal. Not the truth. It is my perspective, not yours. Not anyone else’s.” His voice is firm and earnest. Defensive? A whole day discussing and preparing for this? I should’ve brought them along. I’m terrible at this! I’m so. No – focus! We planned this. We discovered how he thinks.

“That’s the problem. It’s only your truth! Talk to me. You can’t give up trying to understand people.” I blurt out. My voice is riled and desperate - wrong tone. Wrong tone! I can’t help it! He stands up with clenched fists. He stares across the lake and then into my eyes. Piercing. Anxious. Judging? Not Abrigo, he’s not like that! C’mon! We’re trying to help! Can this slow down? My lungs, at least?

“Lyla, we both know nothing. Do you really know me? Do I really know you? I’m not some mad outcast. I wrote what I learned. It is unchallenged because my experiences proved it. But you’re missing the point. No matter our race, faith, values, background, culture, personality, planet, or whatever makes us different - Man can love his brothers and sisters no matter what.” His voice is certain and staunch. His eyes are unyielding. I see my watery face reflect in his. This isn’t working! I’m not admitting defeat just yet! C’mon, anything! Don’t prove his point. Sure, he doesn’t understand why I’m here and what we’re trying to do, but. Words - I need words. Think. Breathe.

“If we always loved one another, then there would be no poverty, no anger, no problems, and no violence.” His voice drops dead. He flies to his feet. Horror floods his face. What? Abrigo? Abrigo! So fast! He leaps over the fence. Come back! We’re not losing him! Stop running! Ignore the dark branches and bushes. Focus. He’s weaving at random. Fleeing? Pursuing? His phone -making a call? Frantic? Breathe. He’s too fast. Wipe my vision clear. Log! My knees - burning. So are my lungs. How deep is the park? Light? Voices! Angry voices. What’s happening? Through the wall of trees. Not another steep hill. Pulverised fences too?. There! Three men. Is that Hogan? Abrigo, when did you? Ouch! Since when? His knuckles knocks the man into the slide. I thought he said violence was the last option. No. what’s going on? Haze. No - focus!

“Abrigo, hah. ‘Bout time.” Hogan coughs. What do I do? I’m invisible. No - don’t reveal yourself! Those three men are huge! Rugged and angry. Trying to bury their fists into Hogan’s skull. He’s already covered in marks with a red chin, yet he’s smiling. The men regroup, trying to circle the duo.

“You mongrel. We said to come alone! Who’s the rat?” The black-haired man hoots. They’re no older than Hogan. They’re a head or two taller than Abrigo. Scary! What do I do? Where’s my phone? No. No, this has gone so wrong! Focus. Breathe! It’s not my fault, right? Yes? No? Be strong. Think.

“I did, Jónsi. But you also said you’d go easy.” Hogan’s hands crack as he flexes his training. Confident and smug. Idiot! You’ll make them angrier! The third man is injured, limping behind his mates as they all catch their breath. Where’s my phone? We need the police! Help them! Don’t ridicule. Act!

“We are all adult men. We must talk this through. None of us want a trip to the hospital, so let us call this off. How much does he owe?” Finally! Abrigo opens his mouth and forsakes his fighting stance. Please work - he’s better with words than all of us. If he can convince Pheobe, then surely.

“His life, at this point. Why are you helping him? He’ll never repay you.” The second man pulls back his overgrown hair, revealing a scar on his chin and a built chest. Stay calm. Think - they seem to be capable of thought. Hogan eyes Abrigo. This is all so wrong! Abrigo appears calm and confident. Having splayed his arms in a pleading gesture, he exposes his necklace.

“One of them, aye? Let us handle this scum, missy. I’ll forgive your assault, had some kick to it.” The man he walloped points, walking into the light. Abrigo stumbles back, struck. Missy? Scum? Them? You brute! But what can I do? Think. Wait! No! Abrigo catches the floor and rolls, standing up to wipe his bleeding nose. Please! Do something! C’mon! But I’m a spineless ant! No, be brave! Act!

“That was a little hard, Elon.” One of them comments. So callous. What’s Abrigo doing? Shaking his head? Staring at his palms? His eyes are shaking. He’s telling himself something, over and over.

“You gotta keep pests in check. Run away, little man. Benefits us all.” Look up! Don’t get distracted. Hogan’s bolted. Terror washes over Abrigo’s face. The man has a knife! Run. Just run! What do I do?

“You brat!” Huh? His kick disarmed the blade. Hide! Don’t notice me don’t notice me. What am I doing? I can’t fight! But I can’t curl up and hide! What would Zeina or Arlon do? They’re huge! They’re not some sandbags like Arlon’s. Gone. Silence. Thank goodness! Their angry voices chase after Hogan, down some hill. Take a peek. C’mon. No – hide. No – help them. C’mon, do something!

“Just always do the right thing, Lyla.” Zeina smiles from across the table. No - I’m a weak coward!

“You put your thumb over your fingers, not inside, okay? And use your hips, giving it some oomph, ya know?” No, I don’t know, Arlon! Why? Why! Do something. Hide. Help them! C’mon.

“That’s just what they think, Lyla. It’s far from the real truth, trust me. You’ve done great. They know nothing. You’re strong. And that’s the truth.” Pheobe’s benign face smiles. Really? Stand up, c’mon. Breathe. They’re menacing! Just nab the knife and hand it to Abrigo, he’ll fix it - he always does!

“You gotta stand up for yourself, Lyla. You won’t always have us behind you to help. I’m no wisecrack like Abo, but you gotta hold true to your values, you get me?” Michael clasps his hands on the table. Zeina nods from the corner. Arlon’s busy munching on a bar. Values? Um. Just act! Help them! C’mon, get up. Why? No one should get hurt over money! They need help. Fight, for once, c’mon!

“But you are a good person, Lyla. Thank you for being honest. I mean it.” Abrigo beams, sitting across in the quiet corner. He stands up and melts into colour. Breezy air smacks my face. Right! I’ll try. They’ll never see it coming. Duck the branch. Dodge the shrubs. Rotten fence. Concrete path. Flickering lights. Hogan’s voice! A playground? Old and rusty - abandoned. Where’s the knife?

“Abrigo, get help. I’ll hold them off. You don’t deserve this. I do. You’ve got so much ahead of you, man. I shouldn’t have dragged you into this. They’re armed and angry and your words are useless.” There! Hogan’s shaking his bruised head - defeat in his eyes. Abrigo resists. He’s so stubborn! He extracts cash from his pocket and drops it to the floor. The men stare at it for a moment. Please!

“We want it from him, not you.” C’mon! Focus. There’s no switchblade. A man is missing! Great - where is he? Hogan? Hogan, no! My hand does nothing. His eyes fall shut - head against the pavement. Blood. So thick. You monster! Do something! Abrigo gasps, begging them to see how they bleed the same blood. It’s useless! Help him. Go! They’ll hurt him next!

“Don’t worry kid. He’s no use to us if he’s dead. But to make us equal, you’ll have to let us hit you once. Then we’re on good terms.” No, that’s not right! Abrigo’s frozen – enraged. We both are, damn it! His eyes shake. Too many thoughts - yelling at himself and everyone like always. Please. Just run!

“Hello? Abrigo, right? Just hit him, pal, he’s static. Best before Elon gets up. Doesn’t that make it two punches, then? Save the intricacies, we haven’t the time. Righty then.” Their voices melt together. Their faces: blobs of static. Cold eyes. Dark frowns. Red fists. Abrigo! Dodge! No! Why? He gets up. He’s staggering. Placid, why? Leave him alone, you brute! Thumb on the outside. Use your hips. Now! Yes! He clutches his jaw! Watch the ground! Catch my fall! Gah! Sharp needles in my hand and elbows. Focus. It’s just pain - get up. Is that his tooth? The other man looks up from Hogan’s body. Abrigo stares at me. We can run now! Run! Don’t just stare! Horrified? Stunned? Abrigo - c’mon! The man yells. Duck! A hook, as Zeina taught. Feet, hips, and whole body. Twist! What? No. Please! His hand’s massive! It caught my strike. He’s confused. Now enraged. Why? Stop trembling! He's just a sack of flesh, right, Like me? My knees and shoulders give in. Huh? Why’s he twist- Ah! Sharp light! Why! Please! My hand! Focus! Breathe! Stop sobbing! I’m gonna throw up. It shouldn’t bend like that! Why? Curse you! Stop sobbing! Abrigo? His foot smashes into the man’s chest. Please. Why didn’t I call the cops earlier? They’ll kill us. They’ll kill us both! Abrigo? I can’t see my wrist through bleary vision. The trees are hazy. The ground is liquid. He only has one head now. Why us? Why won’t he stop trying to pick me up? Why am I angry? Don’t think. Melt, like always. They’re twisting his arms behind his back. Do something. What? Why? I’m pulled to my feet. Abrigo grinds his teeth. He then lets out a sigh. I’m so sorry. I’m so pathetic.

“All right, brats. Who knew people would care for Hogan? Jónsi, that’s enough. I’ve got him. Jónsi, don’t. It’s all good, we got him.” Jónsi? The man with the knife’s back! My throat - my knees. Abrigo’s eyes dart between mine, the blade, and Hogan’s limp body. Regret. Rage. Defeat. Desperation. So stubborn. The armed man trudges to Abrigo, flexing the weapon. Don’t. Please! Stop!

“Jónsi, step down. I’ve got him. Dave’s got her. We’ll just leave ‘em here and take Hogan. Jónsi, it was just a kick. Jónsi. Jónsi!” The bellow fades. Silence. My eyes water. Wet haze. Abrigo’s face clenches. He stares at me. He just stares as the handle sits out of his chest. I’m useless! What was I thinking? I tried. I failed. The pavement? When could it jump?. Stars? Abrigo?

Another shift? You’re just the best, Marty. Abrigo Oakwood, the file reads. I’m too tired to examine the details. The heart monitor’s not flatlining, so Katy put the drips in right. Five figures stand around the bed, including this Hogan fellow - a minor concussion can’t stop him. What a night. I couldn’t have predicted this Hogan bloke would have called the cops. Three assailants and three unconscious freshmen. Abrigo opens his eyes to see his friends. They all ignore me. For the best. He’s lucky Floyd’s our best surgeon with the others dismissed. Hogan’s lucky, too - his debts aren’t with the authority. He looks extremely apologetic and relieved, pouring praise and thanks over Abrigo. The others nod their heads, touching his arm. His eyes look at them, doubtful and disheartened as their aspects seep guilt and responsibility. The tall one gets a smile out of Abrigo when he calls him a good friend. The others admonish the built one when he congratulates Abrigo for taking initiative. The short, dark-haired lass holds his hand with a reprieved smile. He averts his gaze from hers. Now he looks guilty. All this over some money, of course. This job sucks at times. They’re lucky the other victim, that young lady, survived with just a broken wrist and a minor skull fracture.

“We should’ve stopped her.” The tall one exclaims. They still take responsibility. Hah, we share the same expression - this gets us nowhere. He seems defeated and stupid, with that face. Why? He was stabbed, silly. No, that doesn’t sound right. It’s a different reason. And it’s not my business. They withdraw their hands as his eyes fall shut. He’ll slip away repeatedly for the next few weeks - we’re low on his blood type. I see them out the door as Hogan takes another look at his friend.

“Thank you, miss. You’re a hero. Make sure he’s okay. We need him.” He looks at me with a small smile. Sure, I’ll try. I’m no miracle worker. Not paid like one, for certain. Sitting down, I think I’ll flip through his file. Poor thing. Lost his sister some years back. The psychologist blames his beliefs and obstinacy for his sequestered behaviour -strange habits too. But what do I know? A photograph of him, his parents, and several young girls standing around a gravestone is in the file. Her report’s here too. A tragedy, being trapped in the social circle where she was. It explains the highlighted incident. I slide the file into the drawer as the door opens, revealing the female victim, Lyla, as she shuffles over to the bedside. Yep. Shaken, timid, glum, and with a bandage over her forehead. Her eyes only pay attention to me for a second. His eyes also open and lock onto mine. That was quick. What is that look? Piercing, questioning, yet innocuous. I’m exhausted – that’s my excuse.

“Are you happy, Abrigo?” Lyla asks. Odd. He nods his head as a blasé expression fades away into a mollified one. Her frown blossoms into a small, relieved, grateful smile, sitting in her gown. He smiles too. A job well done keeping such youths alive. Marty better give me a break. If he doesn’t.

“Are you ok?” She asks. His face is confused and subtle. He nods his head again, after a long moment. Often distrait, the document noted. She doesn’t appear to accept his answer, resting her hand on his, sitting abreast of the frame as the sunset outside floods the room. Every corner is touched by it.

“Did you read it?” He asks. Huh? We’re both confused – but her head is lopsided with a soft chin. He takes a deep breath. They can't blame me if I’m forced to stay here due to our capacity and listen.

“The draft. My manifesto.” He says.

“Your what? Draft? N, no?” She shakes her head with a stutter, withdrawing her hand to twiddle with her thumbs. Guilty? A sign she’s confused and nervous, I guess. I can only guess. As big as those eyes are, I can’t decipher that much. He looks both surprised and relieved, resting in bed. Her file said nothing but a common strain of some anxiety. Similar to his sister – caused by social things in school.

“Then how did you understand my theory?” He asks.

“Theory? I don’t understand.” She responds with pale cheeks. Me too, Lyla. His hand and beam alleviate her nervous mood. His smile is so strange, yet natural. He looks modestly pleased if that makes sense. Is this to do with the ramblings and philosophy the psychologist mentioned? She rubs her nails together with a tormented bulge in her eyes, staring at the insipid and distrait mien that is his face. Hmm? She picks up sheets of thin paper from under the seat - one of her friends left it earlier. Her eyes swap from scrolling through the lines of text and his bedridden face. I stop trying to catch a peek as the sunlight makes the paper transparent and warm. He looks drained. She now looks dolorous. Ah, sheet music. She just looks at him - her face is somewhat shaking. I’m flummoxed, now. He appears sapped and defenceless, looking up at her thawing countenance. She pulls the stool closer to his pillow, getting a better look at his face. He sighs a long exhale.

“I convince people, I can’t convince people. I smile, and I frown. I sing I sob. Lyla, it is just what I think, how I’ve been shaped. Not you. Not your logic. But it brings me reason. Truth. Happiness.”

“That’s the problem! Seeing you detach yourself and live with your thoughts. We can’t bear it. It makes me sad, Abrigo! It doesn’t make us happy!” She gushes out. I feel guilty just sitting here. She wipes her tears with her sleeve as he sinks deeper into the bed. Trying to get away. Makes sense - his condition is an interesting one. She turns to face him as her watering eyes clear up.

 “What advice do you have to bestow, then? Go out more? Talk more?” He asks with a curt, unintentional tone. She gets it, I sense. But no response. Me too. She clenches her fists and stops sniffling.

“We’re your friends. Talk with us more. We’re more than these planets, Abrigo.” She raises her soft voice, staring at him with shaking eyes. Her hand grabs his wrist. Careful of the drips! She sits up and frees his hand. What has happened? Sure, it’s not my business, but there’s a story here. I’d give some words of encouragement but I’ll stay where I am. Be respectful, yeah. Planets? Did I hear that right?

“Why do I have to change? I finally find peace and. Sorry, Lyla. I am stubborn.” His voice is now apologetic after being demanding. His eyes are still upset, invoked, and agitated. Angry at himself.

“You’ve helped us all, Abrigo. You need help it too.” She thrusts her arm to her heart.

“Why?” He responds. Their eyes and voices grow blearier.

“To connect with people. To do more than watch their worlds turn.” Worlds? Wow, I’m in the dark.

“Why?” A sudden memory pops up: a quote the psychologist wrote down. ‘If I wanted to be more than an observer, I would. I watch from behind the bar. I watch from behind the bonfire. I watch from behind the stage. I watch from behind my window. From behind the cosmos between every planet.’ That doesn’t help me. It doesn’t help her. Just listen to her, Abrigo. Read her pleading face, at least.

“For yourself! For others. For me, Abrigo.” She sobs with a forlorn and agitated voice, weeping into the bedside over the short frame. His eyes break free from her gaze. He stares at his hands by his side. Then the drips. The beeping monitors. The scarlet and violet sunset – and then my eyes for a rather uncomfortable time. Then the ceiling. Distrait is an understatement. On a whole other planet hits closer to the truth. Through her sobs and sniffles, I can hear his low, mumbling voice.

“For myself? No. For others, maybe. For Lyla? I do not understand. I never will. I never can. I never try. What good would it do for Arlon? For Michael. Zeina, Phoebe, Hogan? My neighbours? We are all the protagonists of our lives. Everyone else is a side character in this stage of a warping world. A performance. For whom?” What did Gus put in his water? He looks at Lyla since her eyes want more than a slow nod to settle her thoughts. The inner conflict spumes through his pupils. An aura, of sorts. Leaning over the bedframe, her feeble elbows give way and she weeps into his side as he speaks aloud again.

“Reach for fruit that I can never grasp? Fruit Man should.” His voice cuts itself off. I heard it too. I’d guess memories flash in his eyes as the monitor skips a beat. Really? I’m not judging, but someone like him? If he leaves that bed alive, you’re lucky. Did he hear her, or did her confession fall on deaf ears? Her body shakes in time with her tears as she gets no reaction. He’s staring into the empty space between his feet, the ceiling, and the open curtain. A cold sensation washes over my spine. His eyes quiver and his skin gets goosebumps. The beeping accelerates by twofold. Threefold. Crap. An ocean overtakes his expression. One of guilt. Awe. Regret. Delight. Relief. Rage. Self-belittling. Self-effacing. Hopelessness. Hopefulness. Phew! Who is this Abrigo? He looks at Lyla as the monitor relaxes. He pulls his palm down to the mattress after staring at its trembling silhouette. He uses it to part her bangs from her dreary face. She looks up and he sits up. How long has it been? The sky’s now violet. He brushes her hair off his wrist. The skin on his hand reacts as if it were on fire. Now as if it were drenched. It calms down as he looks at the hospital door. What in? His guilty face looks freed. Relieved. Redeemed, even? Happy. Did I ingest anything? Did Boris spike my drink again? Lyla’s face is clearing up. Nah, I’m just exhausted. Haven’t had a break for ages. None of us has.

“I am sorry.” He apologises with a sincere and soft voice. Soft yet piercing. His chuckle is faint and amused. He then mumbles something. A song about persistence and resilience, he quips. Something that some dude called Michael knew. For him to keep trying? I’ve stopped trying to understand this. He then looks into Lyla’s blooming eyes. He thinks aloud again. This apparent Michael knew. These friends knew. Lyla knew. I don’t know anything. I’ll just see myself out. He thanks her with a beam.

“It’s fine. You’re here now.” She smiles true. The light reflects through her tears. I try to turn the doorknob, yet what his voice said the other day is stuck in my head. Not every day will be a good one. But you can salvage a good lesson from every day. From every pair of eyes; every hurt soul needing love. Love above all else. Above presumptions. Above misinterpretations. Above fault. Above me. Above us. Piercing. Perfect. His providence. He then fell unconscious again. Did I recall that right? I’m not cut out for this; I’ve got a pint to down. I open the door and look over my shoulder, hearing Lyla’s exhale sound allayed rather than apprehensive.

“Why do you think aloud?” Her bright voice and smile ask. He can only grin. Well, I’m sorry Lyla, but you’ve got a check-up in a minute. She doesn’t look at me. Did she even hear me? I hope my intrusion isn’t a problem. Abrigo’s eyes avert from hers to mine. They’re grateful. Nodding, Lyla withdraws her hand and stands up, rejecting my support. I feel my smile grow. Good.

“Thanks.” That is all she says. I guide her towards the door. But I’m not free from his gaze just yet.

“Lyla, I’ll try. Thanks for letting me know. I will see you tomorrow.” His voice reaches out. Her hand escapes my fingers - my skin can feel the glow on her face. He then makes another promise. Confusing, too, and it only just makes it through the closing door. A promise to learn and know how to land on distant planets. How to find the right continent to settle down upon. How to even travel from planet to planet. Starting with her. From across the cosmos that lies in between.