

My Heart, in San Francisco

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Walking down San Francisco's Castro Street on a Wednesday evening in November, the air is warm, fantastical. Neon lights from storefronts light the sidewalk, bathing us all in campy fluorescence. I feel the intoxicating pull of the city that has drawn so many to its rainbow diamond beauty. *I want to live here*, I think desperately, among the fishnets and the misfits and the Eucalyptus trees, in a Victorian walkup apartment.

I stand on the sidewalk gaping at the grandness of the Castro Theatre—its Spanish Colonial baroque façade, its bright red neon sign that shouts “CASTRO” to everyone on the street—until my date pulls me inside. We hop into our seats just as the curtains rise for a screening of Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless*, also an apt descriptor for my emotional state.

After the movie we drive up through Haight-Ashbury to the Inner Richmond. We stop on Clement Street, near the edge of the Presidio, for dinner at Burma Superstar, the restaurant recommended to me by all four people I know in the Bay Area—including the man at my side. We order tea leaf salad, basil lemongrass chicken with oyster mushrooms and braised Burmese beef curry.

I am so happy I feel like I am hovering above our crowded table like a helium balloon. I can feel the cells in my body reconstituting, feasting on fresh batches of oxytocin, the neurotransmitter and hormone let loose by falling in love.

The week before I arrived in San Francisco, my former partner took his own life. He lived for 36 years in the excruciating pain of debilitating depression and anxiety, as well as terrifying bipolar manias. I had seen and loved his brilliance—his writing, his wit, his kind heart—and watched it warp like the sight of the sun behind trees. We were together for seven years, most of my twenties. Four months after I left him, he died. I couldn't shake the guilt and the sense that I had killed him.

The days following his death were a cascade of phone calls. Heartbroken friends showed up at my door with

breakfast, boxes of oranges, an entire shepherd's pie and every kind of alcohol. One night I drank so much that I couldn't make it into bed from my fetal position on the floor. My roommate, bless her, coaxed me in with the efficiency of the registered nurse that she is.

San Francisco feels like a miracle. The long-planned, 10-day trip is the follow-up to a 72-hour fling I'd had the last time I was here, back in August, after I'd chanced upon standing next to a cute stranger at a concert. This morning, bright November sun shoots through the window beside the bed, casting his apartment in gold. I bury myself deeper into his soft grey sheets. He brushes a hand across my hips while he gets up to put music on the stereo, humming along to Frazey Ford. Up the coast it is winter-jacket weather and raining. People are hearing the news of my former partner's death one by one. But down here I am waking to the sound of the Caltrain whipping by. The loud bells of the commuter train remind me of the nearness of death, how lightness and darkness exist on the same plane. “High school kids in the Silicon Valley keep jumping in front of those trains,” I am told. “Palo Alto especially. It's Fantasia. All the terrible aspirations passed down from their brilliant parents.”

I've never had enough money for fancy vacations or long stretches of time off, but I can truly rest here. Despite ever-present insomnia, I can sleep through the night. I am drinking less, not smoking. I am eating Greek yogurt and Trader Joe's cereal in a kitchen full of the nutrient-rich groceries characteristic of many San Franciscans and Silicon Valley democrats. I spend luxurious afternoons in Dog Eared Books on Mission Street, after which I take a burrito to Dolores Park to lie in the grass and read for hour after delicious hour. I can feel the cortisol dropping. I can feel my body healing.

When I exchanged numbers with my summer fling the night we met, I noticed the desktop photo on his phone: a portrait of a woman in a hospital bed with IV tubes, white haired, striking. “My grandma,” he said. She died the following month, while he was across the Pacific working in Hawaii, then Indonesia.

“I look like my grandfather, her husband,” he told me. “Through the dementia, she thought I was him. And I could see her, 21 years old, looking at me as though I was him.” On one of his final visits back home to her in Georgia she had said to him, in her southern drawl, “Keep me open for letters.” In other words: Call me, maybe.

I hope all our last thoughts are of being in love.

We spend Saturday night in the Mission for the Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) procession. The Meso-American holiday is dedicated to ancestors, honoring both life and death. San Franciscans have been celebrating it since the early 1970s with a procession, altars, art installations and musical performances. The march starts at 22nd and Bryant Streets and winds through the neighborhood. Everyone, it seems, is part of the funeral parade—even activists mourning the loss of affordable rental housing and Burning Man expats taking their white corsets and parasols for a spin around the block. People in sugar-skull makeup sing in Spanish and hang strands of marigolds and white lights around the trees that line the sidewalks.

Afterward there is a festival in Garfield Park, where artists have designed public memorial altars. We stop in front of a painting of Lou Reed encircled in marigolds and candles. He died one day after my ex. I have so many memories of the two of us listening to the Velvet Underground while making breakfast in our old apartment. After I heard about Lou’s passing — just hours before the news of my ex’s death reached me — I rode the bus home from work over the Burrard Bridge that faces Vancouver’s West End, where I used to live with my partner. In that moment, I missed my old life terribly. I felt a profound sense of loss: love is letting someone go.

As we leave Garfield Park we pass a chain-link fence stuck with clothespins that hold letters and notes people have written to those they’ve lost. One stands out, scrawled in childlike pencil:

Thank you

For comforting me. 🍷



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