

The Scent Of Autumn



remember to breathe

BY NICK MATTOS

"Hey, babe?" Sunday morning in Ladd's Addition, and the first rain of the autumn taps against the windowpanes, cleaning the summer's dust from my boyfriend's apartment building.

"Good morning, handsome," he calls from the kitchen over the *drip drip* of the coffee-maker and the hiss of bacon on the stove. Through the doorway I can see him, shirtless and barefoot in his jeans, tending to our breakfast. I sit up with the white comforter over my legs, rub sleep out of my eyes.

"Just checking where you were," I say, noticing the gray sky through the trees outside. I lay my head back down onto the pillows, close my eyes again and breathe in deeply, stretching lazily.

For the ninth year in a row, the scent of Pacific Northwest autumn fills my lungs. Every year the scent is the same—the ozone scent of the rain, the leaves turning musky in decomposition, the dust of the dog days running off the trees into the river. Every year it is the same, and every time my lungs fill with the scent it shocks me.

I hear my boyfriend walking across his bedroom floor, smell beans and bacon over the autumn. "Your coffee's on the dresser, baby."

"Thank you," I tell him. I take a sip, taste that he's put two sugar cubes and a splash of milk into it, exactly the way I always take it. I sigh, gratefully.

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Along with the scent, every year autumn in Portland comes with a distinctive emotion. I look outside, see how the gray clouds make the sky seem impossibly close to the treetops. Air blows in through the open window, runs over my bare shoulders and chills me; I shiver and I pull the blanket up to my chin. The feeling settles over me.

I think back to this time last year, walking along SE 11th Avenue in my cut-off jeans, tipsy from mid-afternoon beers. A familiar smell cut through the exhaust and dust of the street—the *scent of autumn*, I thought, looking up and seeing smoke rising from a chimney across the street. Gradually, like the low clouds blowing in from the west, the feeling came over me with the arrogance of Portland rain, quietly boastful that it was coming home to roost.

I wasn't prepared for the autumn when I ended up in Olympia nine years ago. The ingénue I

was, I didn't even own a raincoat—I lived in a vintage mustard-yellow corduroy coat that was constantly soaked through with rain. I ran all over my college campus in the soaked jacket that autumn, chain smoking cigarettes and playing pretentious poetry games with art majors, eating *hum bao* and staying up all night trying to heal my youthful melancholy with frantic Christian Science prayer. Years later, in the middle of a Northern California storage unit, I unpacked a box and, crushed and battered beneath the dross of my late teens, was the corduroy jacket. I pulled it out, my eyes wide, and was stunned by the scent of musk, leaves, ozone. It smelled like autumn, that first autumn when I was wild and sad and free, and the feeling settled over me again.

What is the emotion that comes with the season? For eight years, when the dog days of summer cooled, I thought it was dread. A quiet sadness would creep into my bones like a threat, and I would shiver with fear that it would expand to fill the space of my life the way the clouds fill the sky in late September. I would rush frantically to numb it with parties, with projects, the ten thousand things available to those who are young and smart and terrified of feeling sad. Autumn came, again

and again, bringing with it the scent of rain and trees, melancholy—and I fought it, again and again, losing every time.

In this big warm bed in this small Southeast Portland apartment, with the percussion of the rain against the windows and the smell of Sunday morning breakfast, the familiar feeling comes over me—and I know that, all of these years, I have given it the wrong name. It isn't dread that comes with the autumn, it is surrender, the world teaching me again and again that the light and the dark give forth to each other, that the rain will run over the trees and down to rejoin the river, then back to the clouds to fall again. The autumn comes, just as it always will, and I stop fighting it, breathe it into my lungs and my bones.

My boyfriend walks into the room, plates of bacon and eggs in his hand. He sits on the bed. Today, the autumn has come, dark and sensuous, collecting slowly like the rain on the windowsill. We sit on the bed quietly, letting the cold air blow in from outside, across the skin of our shoulders, eating slowly. Outside, the clouds roll unbroken in the sky, dropping their rain across the city. We eat our breakfast and watch them roll, warm in our bed, smiling. ☐

Nick Mattos still has his tattered corduroy coat in a box somewhere. Reach him at nickmattos@justout.com.

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