

Small Parts of Us

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Reports said Udo Dirkschneider had a heart attack on stage. It was 1990, and he was singing in Accept, a notorious German heavy metal band. It was said that Udo was hitting some high-screech vocals, and then he dropped. He writhed on the floor, grabbing his chest with his microphone hand. The mic was on the floor, too, rolling. When it landed, it made a harsh noise and spit feedback. When Udo landed, his heart broke.

The thing is, I've lost someone. What I can say about her is that she's a runner. She's trained in running her whole life. She has the muscles for it. I've seen them. She looks like my mother, too, but nobody wants to hear that. My mother was an addict who left when I was so young that my father could still palm my ribs.

Years later, Udo said he never had a heart attack. What he called it was a "body breakdown." One of those things where so many years of the mind and body and road and long nights meet, and something's got to give. He can say what he wants, I know it was his heart.

Her nose sounds busted when she talks. Whenever she says something, it's like I can hear the breaks in her breath—*click, click*. I might have loved that most about her. I might have loved it more than her passion for old movie quotes, her obsession with intergalactic comics, how excited she was at the prospect of having children. And I can see it. I can see them

bouncing right now in our happy arms. If I close my eyes hard enough, sparks of color shoot across the reel and shock the image. But it always returns the same, so close to what real could be. Is not.

I listen to Accept like medication for the loss of her, pull the songs from an amplified bottle. Sometimes people see me on the streets, my hood up, my fingers picking air. They might think I'm rocking out. If I plugged them in, they might think Udo's words about cold winter dreams and losing more than you've ever had are killer lyrics. They might praise his rippling vocals. They might not even hear a word.

She once sent me a video of her singing in the car. It's the only thing I saved after she left. There are certain points in the video where the car's rolling forward at high speeds, and I can see chips of sunlight blinking on her face. Her eyes shifting as she watches for hazards along the way. Brushing back her dark hair. Shifting. Bobbing. Singing Etta James. Each note taking her further and further away.

In 1985, *Metal Heart* was released. I showed her the album cover, a metallic heart with wires and sprockets over blue and blood red, surely chosen by Udo. He had an obsession with what the future might hold and saw the drain on the human heart, how maybe it was losing too much strength the longer we lived, unsure of how to survive on its power alone through so many small hours, so much loss. He proposed machine hearts. But even these, as Udo notes, even the strong metal hearts, unplugged, will die.

Sometimes I lie on my back on the hardwood floor and look up at an angle out the window. Those screeching Udo vocals an echo behind me. A hard-beat reminder of all that has come and gone or never been. I fixate on the cold glass, the window frame showing false memories of a life never lived. Walking hand in hand along the winding streets of foreign cities. Arguing album art at the record store. Lying under the stars in silent green valleys. Building that tiny house we'd talked about in Missoula or Corvallis or Burlington or it-never-really-mattered-as-long-as-it-was-with-you. Five acres. Maybe ten. A small farm, room for the children to run. Me looking up from the garden dirt, a trowel in my hand, seeing the curve of her in the distance by the tiny house, her dark hair spilling over a shoulder. Harvests that come and go. Harsh winters, low light, quick springs. The children settling in Avignon

and Pittsburgh and Oviedo. Me looking at my weathered, aging hands, still busted from boxing. Watching her stitch them at seventy, take hold of my bent fingers, kiss each knuckle, ask me to tell her again what it's like to split someone's skin, to hit with power, to break such small bones.

What I tell her are lies.

That there's a purity and spirit and smooth pulsing that comes with each punch. That it barely even hurts. That stepping into the pain is a brave thing to do. That I was like a lion then, when I was young. When we first met. When our skins were fresh and smooth and clean. When I didn't have to remember what it was like to be strong, to believe I could pull us up out of anything.

And the screen at the window is hardest to watch when I know the picture is coming to an end, when the look of her fades and the features of that angled face start to lift like a shade. Because there's always a pulling in my stomach to reach out, to say to her again the words she has never responded to and hope, maybe this time, the future will change: "I have written about you, and it is beautiful, and it is sad."

And before we disappear off the screen, that us so many years from now, she asks me to tell her one more true thing about my life before I knew what it was to love her. And I tell her there was no life. There was dried knuckle-blood and sad eyes and so many breaks inside me that I couldn't even say the word anymore. So many small parts of us. All these fissures that were so ready, so close to taking apart what was left of me then.