

Block

Dictionary.com defines the word 'catalyst' as "a person or thing that precipitates an event or change: His imprisonment by the government served as the catalyst that helped transform social unrest into revolution."

There are moments in your life when you look around and realize that the places you knew, the people who surround you, the very person you are, have all changed. I was in line at Pret a Manger with my avocado and chicken sandwich when it hit me

London changed my life. It made me realize that I could decide who I want to be and have the courage to be myself and follow my dreams and this is the biggest piece of crap in the world. How hard can it be to pick one thing, one place, one person that has affected me while I've been here?

I'm trying. Really, I am.



"This is a classic case of avoidance."

I lean back in my chair and try to affect a look of nonchalance. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

His perfectly-round glasses do nothing to dilute the look of disbelief he gives me. I sit up straight again, and try not to feel like I've just been called on in a giant lecture.

“Okay. So, I might be...procrastinating. But I still haven’t thought of a good topic to write about.”

“And do you know why you’re having such a hard time choosing a focus for your piece?”

“Hey, everyone gets writer’s block sometimes, right? I bet you didn’t bang out *The Interpretation of Dreams* in one sitting.”

“Actually, I was very driven in my work. Top of my class,” he answers coolly.

I scowl. “Gold star for you, then.”

“Does hiding behind constant sarcasm make you feel safer?”

I take a minute to study him as he steeples his fingers and rests his elbows on his crossed legs. His fingers are smudged darker than the rest of his hands and look somewhat empty without a cigar clutched in them.

“Hey, here’s a question for *you*: what’s up with the accent – or lack thereof? Aren’t you supposed to be Austrian?” I ask defiantly.

He shrugs. “I spent a good amount of time in other countries – even Britain for a bit. I have a museum here, you know.” He looks very proud of this fact, and his delighted grin changes his entire appearance. For a second, he looks like he could just be somebody’s grandfather. “Plus,” he adds, “You have no idea what an Austrian accent sounds like, and this *is* all in your head, after all.”

Yes, like somebody’s coke-snorting grandfather.

I glower darkly and go back to staring at the blinking cursor on the blank word document. “There just isn’t anything here that I’m really interested in. I’m not going to write an 8-page paper on why the ‘Mind the Gap’ sign is important to me.”

“Then what is important to you?”

“If I knew, do you really think that *this*—” I gesture at the space between us, “—would be happening?”

“It’s happening because you subconsciously *want* it to happen.”

I make a face at him. “You were always my least favorite psychologist, you know.”

“You seem to be transferring your frustrations regarding this paper onto me. I’m sensing it has something to do with the envy you feel toward your older brothers’—”

“Do *not* finish that sentence.” I stand up abruptly. “This is getting too weird, even for me. I think I need to go return some books to the library.”

As I walk towards the door, he pulls his gold pocket watch out and waves it at me.

“Tick-tock, Lisa. You can’t run away from your problems forever.”



“What’s wrong with me?”

I glance up from deleting the latest Facebook notification in my mailbox and answer absent-mindedly, “Huh? Nothing. Nothing’s wrong with you.” In the background, iTunes dutifully plays the BritRock playlist I compiled while in search of inspiration. I switch tabs on my desktop and see what Adrienne has sent me. A piece of flair with a picture of Oprah on it that says “Everybody gets a humpback whale! You get a humpback whale and *you* get a humpback whale!!”

Hee. Oh, witty virtual button.

“Oi, I’m talkin’ here.”

I sigh and look him in the eyes. “And I’m listening. What?”

He looks kind of uncomfortable at the sudden attention and starts fiddling with the padlock that hangs from a chain around his neck. “Dunno. It’s just...you’ve got this thing you have to write, and you’re havin’ a rough time thinking of what to do, and...just...why won’t you write about me?”

I was afraid this would happen.

I close the lid of my laptop and pause to think about the best way to break up with a figment of my imagination.

“It’s been a long time, you know,” I say gently. “I’m not some high school girl anymore who secretly wants to rebel against society and shock the kids in the parking lot with my blasting punk music.”

He shakes his head with a sad smile, “Yeh, those were good times, weren’t they? But come on, that’s not what it was all about.” His black hair is sticking up in random tufts as he cocks his head to the side and gives me that look that made hordes of girls decide to put pins in their face and glue in their hair. God help me, but there’s still a tiny bit of that schoolgirl crush left in me, too.

He saunters over to the table I’m sitting at and rifts through the papers that are scattered about. He doesn’t look at me as he offers, “Y’know, I di’int know how to play the bass when I started.”

“I know. You took a lot of drugs and spent that entire night trying to learn.”

His skinny chest puffs up with pride. “It was impressive, wasn’t it? Learning to play bass in one night?”

“Except you were crap.”

He deflates.

I get up and grab one of the books lying on the table and hold it up for him, his own face staring back from the cover. “Here’s the thing: you were stupid. You couldn’t play for shit, and all you did was destroy things, fuck Nancy, and follow Rotten around like a little puppy dog.”

I’m waving the book around now, getting worked up. “They kicked Glen out and brought you in for shock value. The whole thing was a sham and it ended in wreckage.”

“You don’t have to tell *me* that!” He says angrily, and knocks the paperback out of my hand. It slides across the floor and hits the wall. For a minute I think he’s going to throw one of his famous tantrums and break the furniture or cut his chest open with a razor. Instead, he stalks to the other side of the room and slides down next to the radiator to sit on the floor.

“People like watching car wrecks. Why not read about one?” he says, sulking.

I walk over and sit down next to him, thinking for a moment. “Because you aren’t important to me anymore. I haven’t even listened to ‘My Way’ in like, a year. I was only interested in the Sex Pistols by chance and stuck with it because people thought they had me pegged. But I was never punk, really.”

I look over and see that he’s nodding. “I was never vicious, really.” He looks over at me. “I mean, I really loved my mum.”



Once Sid leaves and Sigmund stops texting me “Yo Mama” jokes, I sit down at the table again and open my laptop. The blinking cursor taunts me.

Choose. Something. Choose. Something. Choose. Something.

I can’t.

Instead, I lace up my gray trainers, shove my keys in my bra, and go for a run.



My feet pound the pavement and I am acutely aware of how awkward my legs look, how loud my breath wheezes, how dark the bruise on my right shin is. I run down one of Hyde Park's many paths, past young couples walking hand-in-hand, and try to picture Henry VIII hunting wild boar where a pick-up game of football is currently in session. He's nowhere to be seen and I almost collide with a rollerblader during my lookout for Big H.

I make it to the Serpentine before I have to stop to catch my breath. People gather on the benches along the water's edge, taking a break on the walk home or simply enjoying the view. Small children chuck bits of bread to the geese and make lazy loops around the pool in paddle boats. A man jogs by, his black Labrador trotting alongside obediently, and I feel a pang of homesickness. I wish I could bring my dog here and enjoy the Park at an Apollo-pace: walk ten feet, stop, sniff, circle, reverse, lift leg, sniff, onward.

I wish I could share all of this with *someone*.

I think of everything I've seen during my time abroad, the places I've walked around, and the people I've met (alive, dead, or fictional). I have hitchhiked in the Scottish mountains, been serenaded by a French man with a ukulele, and surfed off the coast of Wales in the middle of February. I've been mesmerized by Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, attended the Evensong mass at St. Paul's Cathedral, and listened to traditional Portuguese fado in a crowded bar in Lisbon. Like a relief map, my experience abroad has mountains of success and exhilaration, rivers of wonder and knowledge, and canyons of doubt and isolation.

But I have been a solo cartographer throughout my explorations. I remain separate from these places and the people who live there because my mind refuses to erase the reminder that *this will not last*.

In an instant, I am reminded of the summer before sixth grade. It is the last night at Camp Miniwanca, and the girls are all whispering in the dark, mourning the loss of friendships so strong that they could only have been forged in two weeks at sleep-away camp. Hannah passes around a piece of Hello Kitty stationery for everyone to write their names and addresses on, so “We can write each other every day.”

Throughout it all, I lay quietly in the dark. I write my details on the paper and pass it along without bothering to copy down the other addresses. I do not voice what I’ve been thinking all along, which is that I will never see or hear from these girls again. Why don’t they realize this?

Since I moved to a new town when I was 11, I’ve resisted the urge to get attached to anything. It wasn’t until we had been in Michigan for four years that I figured it was okay to *really* make friends. In my effort to avoid getting hurt, I have become a fiercely independent person. I have also spent much of my time alone. Lonely.

So although I have seen many things, and visited places I never thought I would see outside the pages of a book, I can’t make myself pick one and pretend it had some great significance to me, when the whole time I remained on the outside, looking in. Any connection I’ve formed is cheapened by the fact that it was not shared or experienced with anyone else.

It was all just in my head.