

No Halo
By *holly wedgeworth*

Audrey sat in the front seat of her car. A bottle of wine that she didn't realize she already emptied was in her fist. Her tiny fist. The skyline was milking out the final drops of violet as the temperature fell with the sun. She waited. She felt stupid. She licked her sour lips and put a cold hand to her burning cheek. She was glad there were some clouds out today so that the sunset looked more like a painting than it did like nature. She was also incredibly glad that no one was on this side of the trail parking lot at 7:46pm on a Tuesday night in July.

The song that came through her speaker melted into another and she threw the bottle into the backseat. She let out a sigh and stared at the empty passenger seat. She knew she had another in here somewhere. Audrey ruffled through torn out journal pages and found the treasure laying under a bag she had packed earlier. She let out a purple burp and skipped to the next song. It was almost time to get out. She twisted the cap off the wine bottle and beat her chin on the tip to the punk drums.

Audrey leaned her head back and screamed along with the song, "SO I DIDN'T SHOW UP TO YOUR FUNERAL - BUT I SHOWED UP TO YOUR HOUSE! AND I DIDN'T MOVE A MUSCLE, I WAS QUIET AS A MOUSE - AND I SWORE I SAW YOU IN THERE, BUT I WAS LOOKING AT MYSELF!" The intensity in which she yelled those lyrics twisted her stomach so much she almost puked.

She let out a scream and clenched her hands around the bottle neck. She could barely feel her shoulders shaking as she drank more of the wine, letting a tear fall from her left eye and run down to her mouth. The salt mixed so beautifully with the wine that she was tempted to smile. Audrey looked at the mountains that became more and more haunting with the darkness. They challenged her.

She raised the bottle tip to the air and made a toast, "Here's to you... Rocky. Can I call you that?" she burped again and let out a giggle, "Here's to you, Rocky. You who once laid on the ocean floor, now to pierce the sky, later to become fire."

She paused, feeling dramatic, and took a quick swig. The 13.5% with notes of oak and huckleberry now tasted like water. She offered a weak smile as the sun removed his eyes from the mountain peak.

“We understand each other, I think,” she let a hand fiddle with her messy bun before ripping out the hair tie. “Yeah, *yeah*, don’t look at me like that. I know what you’re thinking. You think I’m weak to give up. You think I have more to live for. But here’s the thing, Rocky, I am-” Audrey stopped.

She sat still for a long, long moment.

She drunkenly fumbled for the keys and turned off the engine. Audrey put her bag on her right shoulder. She sat up and looked at her eyes in the rearview mirror. They were swollen, dark, and sorry. A finger brushed the shape of her eyebrow and fanned out the wet eyelashes. Audrey felt beautiful. Then felt stupid for feeling beautiful.

“It’s okay, you can do it,” she whispered. She opened the car door and fell to the ground. The grass next to the asphalt felt cold, like it tried to wake her. “Not even you,” she mumbled into the dirt, a string of slobber falling from her red lip.

Bottle in hand, she stumbled towards where she thought the train tracks were. It was about a five minute walk when she was sober, so she figured it would be around a three minute drunk run away from the parking lot. It was starting to get dark fast, so she attempted to move quickly. The soft ground had begun to toss her back and forth to where almost each step was in a different direction. She looked up to gain balance and met eyes with the moon. He was full tonight, and not yet at his brightest. She let out a belly laugh and raised her chin even higher. The stars ran in circles, chasing each other, flirting or fighting, making the sky more streaked than her tear-soaked face.

“That’s cute as *fuck*,” she said, as she laughed and swayed. “Make sure you use protection,” she yelled, and broke out into a run.

She couldn’t stop giggling and felt her feet dig into the earth with each step. The space in front of her was expansive, empty, and welcoming. The air around her

was the perfect combination of warm and fresh. The wine, for the first time in forever, wasn't hurting her stomach. The guitar riffs of her favorite song were still playing loudly in her head. The musk from her flannel was mixing perfectly with the smell of pine cooling off from a long day in the summer sun. The tears in her eyes transformed from despair to ethereal. That night was perfect. That night was so, so perfect, that she felt stupid.

About ten yards later she stopped. The moonlight glinted off of metal tracks and smooth rocks under them. She fell to her knees and let her bag hit the ground with the weight of a life. She figured she could wait a little longer and relish in the 'moment before'. Audrey pulled a single cigarette out of her flannel pocket and put it in her mouth. She fumbled for the lighter in her bag and after a few flicks, took a long drag. It instantly warmed her chest, lightened her head, and numbed her feet. She blew out the smoke, watching it waft away from her nose. She stared as it twirled and circled, dancing just like the stars, before disappearing. She laughed as she tried to imagine what kind of circles that smoke did in her lungs.

"A beautiful fuckin thing," she whispered.

The cooled grass began to make her butt feel wet as she finished the cigarette. For an instant she remembered the water in California. It had been the same kind of sunset as the one she saw tonight. The same chill, dampness on her butt. The same alive feeling. She thought of how her skin must have been glowing in the salty sea. Almost as soon as the memory came, she forced it out. Audrey knew it was easier to be miserable than it was to be hopeful. And Audrey felt stupid. She opened her bag and took out the duct tape and blindfold. So, so stupid. She looked to her left and saw no approaching train. She looked to her right and saw no approaching train, but a bear, about twenty feet away.

Her breath caught in her chest as she gazed at the beast. It must've been an adult brown bear, a female. It was massive. The bear turned her head and lifted her nose to Audrey. Everything in Audrey fled: all fear, all shock, all pain, everything, ran down her back, out her feet, and into the ground. The bear began to walk towards

her. Audrey put down the duck tape and turned to face the approaching bear. She could smell her. She could hear the sounds her nostrils made. The bear stopped a foot away and let out a groan. It vibrated in Audrey's chest and rose the hairs on her arms. They silently stared at each other for a moment as she tried to drunkenly process what was in front of her.

"Do I smell like berries? It's just the wine, I don't have any food. I'm sorry," Audrey said quietly. The bear's eyes were shining. "Take a seat," Audrey suggested, gesturing to the grass beside her.

After a contemplative moment, the bear sat and seemed to sigh. The power driven stare turned into a gentle gaze at each other for what felt like minutes before the bear looked out towards the wilderness, the direction of the mountains. Audrey made slow movements to pick up the wine and take another swig.

"Can I ask you something?" she was whispering.

The bear kept her gaze towards the tree line, towards where Audrey's car sat abandoned.

"Do people always feel this..." she tried to think of the right word, "... *free* right before they die?" her question was so quiet that the bear thought it was just a breeze.

"Would you care if I died?"

The bear turned to her. Audrey held the bottle in the air and the wild animal reached out and licked the tip with her large tongue.

"Your breath is awful," Audrey giggled a little bit as the bear continued to get her saliva all over the bottle.

In the moonlight she could see how soft the bear's fur looked. It was reflecting and almost seemed to sparkle in her drunken vision. Her tiny hand that held the bottle looked childlike in size next to her massive snout. Audrey figured the bear could take her face off with one swipe of her paw. Instead of that image frightening her, it calmed her. Somehow she could tell the bear wasn't going to hurt her. Maybe the bear was tired and lonely, too.

“You’re so, so beautiful,” the bear stopped licking and stared at her. The intensity coming from her big bead eyes made Audrey’s stomach sink. She smiled weakly at her.

“So... what do you do when you feel like there’s no hope?” The bear looked towards the mountains again.

“Oh.”

Audrey looked too. They sat still and silent together for a long moment. A couple feet away some fire flies had started to play in the grass. A single tree was showing off its leaves in the full moonlight, just like the bear’s fur. He must’ve reached his brightest. Audrey wondered how she hadn’t seen the tree until now. And when was the last time she had seen fire flies? Had she ever? She closed her eyes and synced her breathing with the slow, melodic bear’s. The ground had stopped swaying so much and she figured the bear’s appearance did enough to bring her somewhat back to reality. Audrey opened her eyes again and moved some loose hairs out of her face.

“You’re fucking this up for me,” she whispered. The bear didn’t move, she kept breathing deeply.

“I’m supposed to be up there, with those stars or something. I don’t really know,” she paused, feeling stupid, “But I want to find out so badly.”

Tears fell quickly, stinging her swollen eyes, the salt burning her heated cheeks. Her head fell into her knees and she let it all go. She cried for everything she hated. She cried for everything she loved. She cried for all the beautiful things and all the things that went wrong. She cried for the miraculous moment happening on this night in July when she thought there was nothing good left on this earth. She cried from the exhaustion of feeling stupid. She cried because she had nothing else to say.

Eventually, Audrey calmed her breathing, felt a bug in her hair, wiped a snot trail on her flannel, and looked up. The bear had laid on its back and was rolling in the grass, snorting. She giggled a little. Audrey rubbed her eyes and traced the

outline of the dark mountains with her wet wine bottle tip. The bear stood, took a couple steps towards them, turned to look at her, and groaned long and sorrowful.

“Okay. I promise,” she whispered, giving a genuine smile and a small nod to her beast of a guardian angel.

The bear walked away, right through the fire flies, and vanished in a matter of minutes. Audrey laid down, feeling the earth spin, with her at the top. She had given up, and she had never felt so good.