

I Don't Want Anything Else  
by Emmy Barlund

Universe, let it be warm enough to be outside tonight. I need the sky even if it will never need me back.

The 'Visit NYC' hoodie Sam gave me attempted to keep me warm, as did the travel mug filled with tea that I had my hands wrapped around. What a way to spend a Friday night.

The expanse of the unmaintained field rolled out to the horizon, passing the town lights in the distance, ending only at the mountains.

Above me was a cloudless black sky dotted with its hundreds of millions of stars.

I looked up at them, and wondered what it would be like to live on a different planet, going around a distant sun. I wondered if you could see our sun from there, maybe as a dim star. Not noteworthy. Not a part of any constellation, not a destination of any NASA mission. Insignificant.

I thought about looking at our world from such a distance, and I felt incredibly small.

Sometimes we all need to feel small, to remind us that our problems are too.

But my problems didn't feel small. They felt weighted and heavy like black holes in my head.

I had to grow up. I knew that, but it was the act of doing that that terrified me. Growing up meant being independent, and not being able to wake your parents up in the night when you've had a bad dream. It was large and daunting and filled with nostalgia and getting real jobs. What I wanted wasn't a real job. So songwriting was a dream I had to leave in childhood. It didn't get to follow me when I did this whole "growing up" thing.

Part of growing up was going to university. I didn't know where I was going to go to university, much less my major.

I knew which schools had accepted me, but not which one I wanted to attend. I had UCLA, the University of London, U of A, and Yale, which I applied to just to spite Sam. But I wasn't going to Yale with her, because that would be far too petty.

I wanted to go to school, but I didn't want to leave. I would be propelled into a future I wasn't ready for. Leaving meant that I would know exactly how terrible I was at playing music. It meant chasing a dream, only to discover it was just a pipe dream.

I laid on my back on the hood of my car, the Foundations cd my dad owned curled out of the open windows. I stretched my arms into the sky, reaching as high as I could. I tried to grab onto the stars and let them pull me up into the atmosphere, let them take me far away from here.

Universe, let me in on your secrets or let me disappear. I won't take anything else.

I woke up to the sound of my neighbour's music floating in through my open window. Mr. Jones still preferred heavy metal at seventy.

A routine had come into my life, and I knew that I had exactly seven seconds before I remembered I was seventeen, and in the midst of deciding my future.

A blissful seven seconds it always was.

Then the train of heartbreaking last-times hit me at full speed.

I stumbled down the stairs to the kettle. My dad leaned against the counter next to the coffee pot and read the paper, either not realizing he had paint on his hands, or not caring. I thought about how one day he wouldn't be in the kitchen when I woke up.

"Morning," he said softly, not looking up.

He'd already flipped on the kettle.

"Morning, Dad. Painting already?"

He closed the paper to look at his hands, laughing when he saw the navy blue splatters.

"It seems so," he shook his head to himself.

My suspicion was correct, he didn't even notice. Maybe that's where I got it from.

My dad worked as an art professor at the college in the city, but he still contributed paintings to galleries, a reminder of his younger self, living it up as a not-quite-starving artist in New York City. His stories about parties and crazy dates always enticed Sam and me. Adults had nothing but stories and nostalgia.

“Have you thought about where you want to go, Eddy?” He asked, sipping his coffee.

“I- yeah a bit I guess.”

It's all I could think about. I traced lines of a song with my finger on the counter behind me.

*It's a great big world out there*

*Darling, tell me, how can it be fair?*

*What will become of me?*

*What will become of you?*

His eyes smiled as he spoke to me, “it's your decision. Go with your gut.”

“Can't you just choose for me?” I pleaded.

“It's not the 1960's son, I can't decide your future for you,” he chuckled, folding up his newspaper. “I'll be in the studio if you need me.”

Of course he would be. He always was. He was a painter, I was his son. I couldn't paint. Who was I?

I took my tea up to my room, and sat in my desk in front of the window.

I couldn't choose my own future, if I did I could so easily choose wrong. And then my dad the painter, who liked coffee and the paper, would be disappointed in his son. Because why couldn't he just figure it out? Why doesn't he know where he wants to go like every other seventeen year old?

I absently picked up the guitar that had stood beside my desk since I bought it at fourteen, and strummed a melancholy melody.

Where was I going to school? Where was my life going?

My phone buzzed, distracting me from the tightening spirals in my head. It was Sam.

U r going to a party with me tonit in the city.

I sighed.

Sammy do I have to?

Ya. It's Emily's rich friend's party in her fancy apartment.

Who's Emily?

Grl from skool u never talk to.

I'm too busy learning to spell correctly.

Shut up. I'm picking u up at 8.

Knowing Sam, it wasn't my choice. That's the way our friendship had always been, she always decided things for the both of us. I let my years be dictated by Sam because I didn't know what I wanted, and it seemed like she always knew for me.

I walked to my dads studio, leaning against the doorframe. I watched his manic strokes of crimson paint on a circus tent that was slowly appearing. Song lines appeared in my head like they always did when I saw his work. Whenever I needed to write something, I sat in his studio and stared at his paintings. They fed me the words I couldn't come up with myself.

“Sam invited me to a party tonight and apparently I have to go.”

He jumped at the sound of my voice, but continued painting with a teasing smile.

“Of course, she is Sammy you know.”

“Can't we just tell her I'm sick?”

“Sam is too clever for that. And you need it in your life.”

“Sam? I could do without her,” I joked. We both knew that wasn't true. I was her voice of reason just as much as she was my social life.

“No, you need a party or two. You're in highschool! Carpe diem!”

I groaned, “can't I cease tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow never comes. You're going.”

I sighed. My eyes fell on a painting hanging on the wall, of a man dangling from a rope that was attached to the city above him. He clung on for dear life.

*Oh how we beg and we borrow,*

*We say we'll do it tomorrow.*

*But tomorrow never seems to come.*

Maybe those were the last lyrics ever pulled from my dad's painting. I shook my head.

The last-times kept piling up.

Sam picked me up a quarter after eight, wearing a twirly black dress and tall heels that stood out against the low sun.

She looked me up and down and shook her head.

“What?”

“No stupid band sweatshirts.”

I looked down at my Foundations sweatshirt.

“The city kids will appreciate it, I’m indie.”

“No, you’re changing,” she shoved a button-down shirt into my chest.

“Hi changing, I’m dad!” My dad called from the kitchen as he walked to greet Sam. We both groaned.

I joined her at the door after I’d changed. She made me run back upstairs to grab my guitar. Finally she nodded in approval, her dark curls bouncing as she did. When we were younger people used to think that we were twins.

“Edward, Samantha, only be a little bit stupid. If you’re sneaking back in, do it before I’m up so you don’t get caught, and have fun.”

We exchanged a glance.

“That’s lenient,” I said narrowing my eyes.

“Kids, there are only so many high school parties left. One day there won’t be any parties left. You can regret this later, but live in it now,” he smiled, “Oh, and I want a picture.”

Neither of us protested. It was hard to admit that after all the years of protest that the pictures he took of silly moments always made me smile.

I threw my arm around Sam’s shoulders like I had a million times before. We smiled and his outdated camera we bought him years ago flashed.

“Okay, bye dad,” I called as Sam and I walked back to her mum’s beat up Toyota.

“Bye dad!” Sam waved crazily at him as he watched from the doorway.

He went inside and we drove off, jolting forward at Sam’s ridiculous speed, to yet another last.

The fancy elevator we took up to the fourteenth floor smelled like wine coolers and brand name perfume.

It was crowded and deafeningly loud.

The hall was teeming with teenagers spilling out of the open apartment door like a school of fish. A mixture of new hits and songs too dirty for school dances blasted out of speakers from inside.

It was like our regular high school parties got condensed into half the space with double the people.

Some of them I recognized from our school's halls, others I could tell were from the city. They wore the expensive Kanye shoes and real diamond earrings, showing that it's not enough to be rich, you have to prove it too.

"Their heads are too big," Sam whispered.

"Now Sammy, they were just raised differently. Let them wear their Jordans and they'll let you wear your pumps," I muttered. She poked me in the ribs.

"I don't judge them for wearing expensive things, I just know they judge me for not."

I couldn't argue with her.

We pushed passed the dancing hoard to the drink table. Sam grabbed two Cokes, leaving hers alone but spiking mine with vodka.

"Sam!"

"What? I'm driving so I'm not drinking, I want you to enjoy it."

“You don't think I can enjoy a party without booze?”

“I know I can, you my friend don't get high off of being here in the same way,” she smiled, raising an eyebrow asking me to test her. I wouldn't.

“Fine.”

She raised her glass, “a toast!”

“To what?”

She tapped her chin in thought, “to highschool!”

“To highschool!” I echoed, clinking our plastic cups together.

I took a sip and could thankfully only taste the Coke.

Sam turned away from me, observing the party. Suddenly she squealed, clamouring over in her heels to who I assumed was Emily. They hugged and started chatting at the speed of sound.

I only caught some of it.

“It's so great you're here!”

“...so fancy...”

“...university...”

Sam looked back and nodded me over. I sighed and followed reluctantly.

“This is Eddy! You know him from-”

“Calculus. I sit behind you!” Emily exclaimed.

I felt awful for not knowing her.

“Hi,” I smiled at her like I remembered.

“Hey. I have to go talk to my friends classmates, their Green Day opinions are literal

trash. Enjoy yourselves!” She waved and ran back to a glamorous looking group of scowling teens in the corner.

“Do rich kids never smile? Is melancholy a rule? NOW is the WINTER of our DISCONTENT!” Sam cried in a posh accent, throwing her hand over her forehead.

I laughed.

“Calm down, Yale, soon you'll be one of them.”

“Says the boy who hasn't decided where he's going. What's taking so long?” She teased.

“Honestly? I just don't want to grow up.”

She softened, her eyes swirling with sadness.

“Time stops for no one, darling,” she ruffled my hair, smiling again, “Come on, you're killing my party buzz. Down your drink and let's dance.”

I did as I was told, and let her lead me into the living room turned dance floor crowded with teens.

She kicked off her heels and threw her hands in the air, spinning like there was no one else at the party. I joined her and we spun together like a tornado of limbs. I laughed as she hollered along to the lyrics.

We all cheered when Sweet Caroline came on.

“*Sweet Caroline! Bum bum bum!*” Everyone shouted. We sang about good times, hands touching hands, and so much more than that. We sang to remember that night, we sang to remember ourselves.

As we were singing, I saw Sam's smile spread over her entire face, like the sun emerging from behind the clouds.

I stared at her happiness, and I wanted to grab her hand and pull her into the past with me, shedding the months to come like unwanted skin. I wanted to keep living in a time when I was always dancing free with Sam.

We had spent all of our lives killing the time we would never have again, just waiting to get this far.

If I had known it was a waste I wouldn't have done it. But now there was no going back.

*“Good times never seemed so good,”* I sang quietly.

“Let's get out of here,” Sam said, calling her goodbyes to Emily while leading me out the door.

“You, leaving a party early? What alternate dimension did I stumble into?”

“One where I want to decompress with a person I care to want to know for longer than a night.”

We grabbed burgers and milkshakes, and drove out of the city into the field we'd spent our summer nights dancing and screaming and wishing in.

She put the car in park in that place that belonged to our teenage years.

The milkshakes and songs and secrets those stars had heard over the years were uncountable. Thankfully, they were good at keeping secrets.

We laid a blanket on the hood, I pulled my guitar from the trunk.

We sat in silence, eating our burgers and staring up at our sky with no ceiling. We didn't need to say anything.

“Play for me, Eddy,” she sighed contently, resting on her back.

I wiped the grease onto my jeans and picked up my guitar.

Usually I played other people's songs, but that night felt awfully heavy. So I decided to try something I'd been thinking up for the past few hours.

The chords came easily and I started to sing.

*“I can see myself standing all alone*

*At a party, I don't know anyone*

*And it smells of beer and everybody here is from the city*

*You never liked them said 'their heads were far too big'*

*When you were with me, you said 'my darling*

*Promise here outside beneath the stars  
You will never forget the world that was only ours',*” I saw Sam smile.  
I sped up the strumming as the chorus started.  
*“Now the room is blasting house music,  
I feel like I might lose it  
Everybody here is killing time  
Pour more in my cup prove it  
I’m just as grown up as you,  
I’ll dance ‘til I forget the reasons why  
We even turned up in the first place  
Why I am here in the first place?  
I bet somebody turns the speakers up  
Blasting some old green day song  
And they will say, that ‘they were way better a couple  
Years ago’ and heads will nod as if their word is law the teenage  
Music connoisseur self assured from their four years of high school  
Just tired and cynical.”*

She laughed.

*“Now the room is blasting house music  
I feel like I might lose it  
Everybody here is killing time  
Pretending to be happy and weightless  
Really we’re all lost and aimless  
Searching for the best that we can find  
Gone are the days of daisy chains  
And I will wonder why I’m here again  
I can feel my heart tearing  
Honestly I’m past the point of caring  
Why all my views are fully formed or rounded  
When it comes down to it we’re from a small town  
Little fish never gonna wear a crown  
Getting dirty looks  
That we don’t care to see  
Is this a new page?  
Is this our grown up phase?  
Now the room is blasting house music,  
I feel like I might lose it  
Everybody here is killing time  
Pour more in my cup prove it*

*I'm just as much grown up as you,  
I'll dance til I forget the reasons why  
We even turned up in the first place  
Why I am here in the first place?"*

I stopped, setting my guitar back down, and staring up at the sky.

"You wrote that tonight," she stated.

"Yeah," I said quietly.

"It's good Eddy. It's really good."

I thought for a moment. Maybe I could say it.

"Do- do you think maybe I'd be good at doing that?"

She looked at me, "doing what?"

"Writing songs and singing them, in front of people."

"Like a singer?" She asked.

"I guess."

"I do. I really do," she said.

"I want to," I told her.

I could feel her smiling at me.

"I always wondered what you wanted to be, you know. People told me things like lawyer but I knew otherwise," she said.

"How?"

"You have too many stories in your head."

I smiled at the sky. I liked the idea of that.

"Are you scared to go to Yale?" I asked. She sipped her lemon milkshake and thought for a moment, a crease forming between her eyebrows that would one day remain there all the time.

"Not scared. I'm ready to move on from high school, I won't miss anyone all that much. I'll never see Emily again and I'll probably forget all of the gossip. This will all fade one day. But, I'll miss my room. I'll miss fighting with my mum. I'll miss your house, and your dad who's my dad, and you. You most of all I think. I can just, feel this ending, you know? It's already ending."

We were quiet again. This felt like a last.

I hated lasts.

“You're wiser than you think Sam. And you'll be good at Yale, you won't have time to miss anyone when you're conquering the world.”

She laughed, “yeah, you're probably right. I'll visit you, you know? Wherever you end up going. I'll FaceTime you at ridiculous times at night. I'll show up at your dorm with a bag and a milkshake tray, okay?”

“Okay Sam.”

“Do you know what you're gonna do?” she asked.

“I think I want to go to UCLA. I've kind of always known. I've just been avoiding it.”

“Are you scared, Eddy?”

“Of the future?”

“Yeah,” she said.

My lungs burned thinking about it. I felt tears well in my eyes that I blinked away.

“So scared, Sammy. So scared.”

She put her hand on my arm and smiled.

“No matter where we go, or how we grow, nothing can ruin this,” she motioned between us, “alright?”

I smiled at her, my best friend, who'd grown up. “Alright.”

“Play us out, Eddy.”

I gripped my guitar tightly and strummed familiar chords that I learned for us years ago.

“*May you grow up to be righteous, may you grow up to be true,*” I sang. She joined in and we sang because no one could hear us and nothing could ever ruin it. We sang of wishes come true, of building ladders to the stars, and climbing every rung.

“*May you stay, forever young,*” we smiled at each other. It was over.

We never went back to the field. It had its legacy, and neither of us wanted to ruin that.

My dad was waiting on the porch when Sam dropped me off.

“Wait!” She exclaimed as I went to open the door. I stopped.

“What?”

She leaned over and hugged me.

“Thank you, for coming tonight,” she said quietly.

“Thanks for helping me end high school.”

We smiled at each other, knowing what our smiles were saying. I got out. She waved to my dad and drove off down the road.

I walked up to him and sat down too, watching the streetlamp from across the street flicker like it always had.

“Was it a good party?”

“Not in the way I was expecting, but yeah,” I said.

He nodded. “That's usually how high school goes.”

We were quiet. I watched the light flicker.

“Dad?”

“Yes?”

“Did you know you wanted to be an artist when you were in high school?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Yes. My parents wanted me to study law, so that's what I tried to do, but we can't follow the paths we're expected to have. Sometimes we have to make our own futures.”

I thought for a moment.

“I don't know what I really want,” I said.

“I know.”

“I want to keep playing music though. Maybe in front of people.”

“Do it,” he smiled.

“You think?”

“Yes,” he slung his arm over my shoulder, “if you can, do what you love for as long as you can. Do what you want to.”

“I can't, I don't want to grow up.”

“Neither do I,” he laughed.

“I don't have anything figured out,” I confessed.

“Neither do I.”

He laughed into the dark.

Maybe all I needed to do was learn to laugh in the dark.

“We have our whole lives to figure it out. Until then, well, we'll just have to keep making mistakes,” he said.

Him and Sam were starting to make me think that growing up wasn't the end of something, but more of a beginning. Maybe it could be my beginning.

“I'm going to UCLA. I want to make music.”

“I was waiting for that,” he grinned, nudging my shoulder.

“What?” I said, eyes wide.

“You needed to figure it out for yourself, even if I expected it. Who am I to tell you who you are?”

I shook my head at him, grinning.

We sat on the porch in comfortable silence and watched the sky.

I saw the stars and thought about how small all of my problems were to them, and to me. Maybe I was never going to grow up. Maybe no one did, I didn't know.

*Who are we to wonder where we're going? Who am I to tell me who I am?*

Universe, I don't need to know all your secrets quite yet. All I need is Sam and my dad.

All I need is laughing in the dark with the stars above my head.

I don't want anything else.