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Carousel

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Author Bio

Bethany Frankel is a sophomore English major with a Writing Concentration with a double minor in Educational and Peace & Justice Studies. When not writing her novel and drinking copious amounts of coffee, she can be found working on her music or petting dogs. She was born and raised in Delaware, which is, in fact, a state.

Carousel

2013. The eyes of the carousel stared at Ava. Around and around it went, metal machinery and rusted horses powered by the ghosts of children laughing. It was an echo of a memory that eternally spun in her mind, but was frozen in the bitter January chill. Her gaze followed the imagined path of one animal in particular, picturing a chestnut mare disappearing and returning to view. Black acrylic eyes peered into Ava, peeling back memories and moments best left buried. Ava forgot how to breathe as the carousel blurred and time rolled backward.

1943. Lila had always loved the summer. When the air got warmer and the smiles got looser, it was only a matter of time before home was on the horizon, before the wind whipped through her hair on the interstate and the seaside porch lights welcomed her back. Summer held the promise of ignorance, of forgetting why tourists looked at her and men asked her to dinner without ever getting to know her. It was a cycle of bright dresses and picnics on the beach and riding her bike along the boards. What mattered was that she knew faces on the sidewalk and every breath passed in familiarity.

It mattered because it was the only place she could hold on to, the only thing from before that she could keep.

The lure of Hollywood had changed everything, every glance, every relationship, every moment outside of this small town. She was one of the unfortunately lucky people to obtain the golden dream. She was silver on the screen, the darling of the red carpet. The girl who came from a small coastal town and claimed international fame on talent alone. When people stopped her underneath the bright city lights, she told them she was in the prime of her life.

But the best moments had always been spent here: at home in Cardenia, the hidden cove along the coastline. Her happiest memories had been born on nights like these, when the crowds of dancers turned the rhythms from the bandstand into a living entity.

The soft glow of the sky called her back to childhood, to the endless evenings spent strolling along the boardwalk as the sun dipped towards the sea. An array of pink and gold reflected in her eyes as she stared over the crowd, the shine of the ocean barely visible in the distance. It was moments like these where she felt she could be anybody, that her life had curved in a thousand directions and she lived a thousand lives. Here, she could be a quiet girl in love with the soft murmur of the waves, imagining someone's lips on her cheek and hands tangled together above the cooling sand. Something normal in her unusual life.

Faintly, she heard the delighted screams from the amusement park, squeals from children who were growing up to be just like her, growing up to be someone, to return home and gaze over the ocean thinking that dreams never turn out the way they're planned.

Her father's disgusted grunt pulled her back to the makeshift wooden dance floor and the white tables. "Would you look at that indecency? It's a goddamned parade of killers." Following her father's gaze, a thrill ran through her when she

saw the pack of soldiers walking down the boardwalk to the bandstand. They were a sea of green and gold, muffled shouts echoing through the fading daylight. Though her father merely saw plastic murderers, Lila could only recall the image of Richard Arlen dying on the big screen.

The newcomers integrated easily, winding their way between pastel dresses and the eager grins of girls that only thought of war as a word. Placing her wineglass on the perfectly ironed tablecloth, Lila descended the stairs and pulled the sleeve of her dress slightly off her shoulder. She looked around the stage with disdain, spying pristine tablecloths, symmetrical banners, identical floral arrangements, and the matching pearls adorning the neck of every housewife. Her mother's smile told her that this was her future: sitting beside a man who drank a little too much but was kind nonetheless, looking pretty and listening to the swing band but never dancing. Lila didn't want that, not today, not someday. She wanted a return to the chaos, the feeling of flying from swings and skinning a knee. The feeling of sitting in a whitewashed office in LA, eighteen years old with nothing but a dream, being eaten alive by audition nerves.

She wanted to look at the ocean and have it stare back at her and not know her. To walk down the street and not be recognized, never hearing her name on the lips of strangers as if they knew her. She wanted to be unknowable, merely the small-town girl she could have been. For one night, she wanted to be the direction her life had taken if she had never been an actress.

"May I have this dance?" Lila turned at the sudden voice, words flowing from lips and mixing with the strumming bass. He was like the heroes in the cinema, as if he stepped straight from the silver screen. The glow from the string lights glinted off the polished buttons on his uniform. He held his hand out and smiled, a loose lock of hair falling across his vision. His eyes were the same blue as the ocean after a storm and the fabric of Lila's dress.

She could see the disapproving glare from her father as she took the stranger's hand, but his grin was inviting, and she wanted to spite her father's whiskey-tinted words. Here, she could be anybody. The band took a breath, and the notes slid down into a ballad, the tempo slowing as the piano began singing. Even though she didn't know him, it was endearing how his hands shook nervously when they rested on her waist. Something about the gentle way he held her made her heart pump slightly faster.

"So, what brings you here?" Lila asked. The soldier looked so out of place, his uniform stark and foreign in the sleepy seaside town. Even the scar that cut through his eyebrow blended better into the cold European soil.

"Just passing through town," he said, swallowing hard as she moved imperceptibly closer. "It's one of our last nights on American soil before me and the boys get to ship out to Italy. Our commanding officer is decent enough to allow us a last taste of refined culture before we're elbow deep in trenches." There was a crooked smile to accompany the bitterness of his words.

"Have you ever been in warfare before?" Possibly an inappropriate question, but something within Lila relaxed at the calm nonchalance of his eyes.

His hand slid to tangle fingers with her, dress twirling through the air as the piano rippled. "No, but I've also never danced with a famous actress before, so there has to be a first time for everything."

The words sent a chill through her, every muscle stiffening and easy smile

fading. She could never belong in a small town, removed from the bright lights of the big city. Of course he knew who she was the moment he saw her across a watercolor sea. Her face was on every billboard for miles.

“At least, that’s what my buddies said. They’re over there,” he continued, waving an arm at a group of officers clutching beer bottles as lifelines. Their guffaws and hollers calmed the waves beating Lila’s heart, turning her face back to the stranger.

“You don’t know who I am?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not much of a moviegoer. Promise me, I would have remembered the face of a pretty dame like you.” A wink caused Lila to blush furiously, hiding her candied laughter behind slender fingers. “I’m Frank.”

“I’m Lila,” she murmured, curling into his arms as the band picked up the tempo and the drums crashed with the waves. The smile that broke across her face mirrored the lightness in his eyes.

They spent the night twisting and twirling, dancing through the past and future, never once letting go of each other, never leaving the dream that existed between the bass and the saxophone. The sun slipped beneath the water, the dazzling light of a million stars reflecting in his dress shoes and the glint of her teeth. Time seemed to stretch and grow around them, a string that knitted his hand to hers. Everything melted away, and Lila was a vision of possibility, a glimpse into an alternate future.

The band gradually slowed to a halt, asking for beer bottles as their lips rested with unsung notes. Frank’s eyes glittered when they met Lila’s; the racing of their hearts was something personal, laughter contained between linked hands.

“Do you want to get out of here?” Lila asked, dragging him through the throng of people towards the boards. He nodded and draped an arm across her shoulders, her skin tingling where it touched his.

The amusement park sparkled in the distance, bells and fresh popcorn inviting them. Inside was a timeless wonderland, a flurry of activity where nothing mattered but the squeal of bumper cars and skeeballs rolling down lanes. Lila watched Frank’s grin transform into childlike awe as the two of them ran past crowded lines and children toting multicolored animals.

Lila came to a stop in front of the carousel, marveling at the lights that pulsed in time with the metallic music. The ride had been installed at the end of last summer, its wooden horses still shiny with weatherproof paint. She dragged him towards a chestnut mare, the fabric of her dress sliding off the surface. Frank smiled and wrapped his arms around her.

A giddiness spread through Lila, something warm and exuberant--something her characters had experienced but never her. There was no way to tell if it was the bass that echoed in her head or the fantastical lights of the carousel, but a ridiculous bravery washed over her. “Do you love me?” she yelled, glancing at Frank’s surprise over the symphony emitting from the speakers. Maybe it was because he was still a stranger and because they both were headed in different directions different lives; maybe that was why she fell for him.

“Is the ocean endless?” It was neither a confession nor a refusal; it was what she wanted to hear, what made her lips fall against his. They were words that lingered in her mind, never lost their clarity. Not even when the summer ended.

Not even when she went to Hollywood and he went overseas.

1992. Ava was seventeen when she learned the definition of home. Years of traveling across oceans and making acquaintances with forgotten highways had left her to imagine a place she could call her own: a small yellow cottage by the sea, with window boxes overflowing with peonies. She had never imagined that home could come in the form of a person.

His name was Jude, and he had a grin that could set the whole world ablaze. When he first kissed her beneath the flickering light on the porch of her twenty-seventh home, he became her favorite song. Something about him made her open her shutters, crack her windows waiting for his summer breeze to warm the tile floor of her heart. When she told her grandmother about him, Ava could hear her smile through the rotary phone.

But there was still a caution to her voice, a warning in the eyes of her mother. "I just want you to know that the love you feel is going to have to be strong enough to fly overseas," her grandmother said, gentle like the seagull feather that once landed in the backyard. "That's what it's like to love a military man." Ava dismissed her concern; it had worked for her grandmother, so why should it not work for her?

Ava tried to remember what love felt like when Jude would leave for weeks, months--sometimes one state over, sometimes one country away. He moved parallel to her, too busy training to call or on an isolated base with no mail service. Her friends and family advised her against stringing her heart across landlines, but she was tying the rooms of her body to the badges on his uniform.

1945. The war was over. Lila noticed every day since the victory, counted them like broken bones. She kept herself busy with fundraisers and scripts and premieres, but every character was stiff, and her smile felt numb. Directors and cast mates tried not to say anything, but the cracks spreading from her foundation were turning into the beginnings of an earthquake.

She didn't come home for the summers anymore. She had driven back for the holidays, thinking everything would be different with the chill in the air... but the sight of the abandoned boards and the motionless carousel only increased the ache growing in her. Even Hollywood was more desolate, the stillness of her heart made more obvious by the city that never slept. No matter how hard she tried to put it behind her, Frank's smile haunted her every time she closed her eyes.

He was there in every note, every changing rhythm. Every chord that reverberated from the guitar, soft and echoing through the chambers of her heart. He was written on the lips of the singer, his name whispered like a prayer through the microphone and the memory of stolen glances in a crowded space.

Most of all, he was noticed by his absence. The man dancing across from her looked nothing like Frank. No permanently unruly hair, no eyes to match the color of her dress, no smile that alternated between an answer and a question. This man had a face that blurred into a thousand others, some black and white Hollywood product. It was static when he touched her, only a hand on a waist; his lips only removed her lipstick, like all the other dashing wannabe talent that made her feel nothing. His voice sounded like every director she had

ever ignored; he smelled like the backstage dressing room where she had lost her virginity. It was all foreign, unsettling--it all felt wrong.

"Are you okay?" he asked, stepping back to examine the ache that had settled in her throat. She couldn't tell if his concern was genuine or just another trick of this city.

Lila's voice was small, strangled. "I just need some air." She shoved past him, ignoring the stares and the curiosity of onlookers--men bending to whisper rumors into the ears of women who tangled pearls around their knuckles. *Another movie star lost to the greed of la la land.* She pushed open the garden doors and left the murmured voices behind, the chill of the twilight air sending a shiver through her and the mint green topiaries.

Collapsing against the iron gate, she tried to reach out and capture her heart as it flew from her ribcage. The whole world seemed slightly tilted, an unnoticeable shift that made the oxygen a little thinner and the star-studded atmosphere unbearable. *God.* This was what she had wanted since she was a little girl, since she watched Charlie Chaplin waddle across the screen in the library basement. Her childhood was a wish for glitz and glamour and living life in the clouds. She wanted dark lipstick, elaborate gowns, and her name in cinemas. And so she had packed her small red suitcase at age eighteen and hitchhiked to Hollywood, spending years in desolation before the big break desperately longed for. *Starring Lila Evers.* Red carpets and sleek cars and life in lights. She had made it. All the lonely nights agonizing over the impossibility of dreams had been washed away as she sat at premieres, imagining she was alone in the library basement.

But the dream had changed. Somehow, without her ever realizing it, something had shifted in her, and the Hollywood sign seemed more like an omen than a blessing. The ideal future no longer contained an endless collection of films. When she closed her eyes, she was transported back to that night in Cardenia, staring into ocean eyes. The salt air on her cheek and his hand against her neck were animated memories.

And then it was as if her mind turned to magic, projected desires transforming into reality. When she opened her eyes, he was there. Standing in the garden, a flesh and blood memory. For a second, her heart stopped completely; there was no air, no universe except for his desperately blue eyes. His crooked smile was slightly tilted, everything about him slightly different from what she remembered. But she had no doubt that it was Frank, that he had found her, that he had come for her.

This was fate. Something about this was reminiscent of a miracle, but Lila could only explain it as a dream when she sank into his arms.

"Did you miss me?" she breathed, scanning the lines of his face. There was a serious color to his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"Is the ocean endless?" His hands pulled her flush against him, lips meeting with the thousands of words lost in the space of two years. This was the Hollywood ending: the screen fading to black and the credits rolling over a future in a seaside town. A future they could share.

1995. After gaining her degree in linguistics from U.C. Berkeley, Ava emptied her bank account and placed a down payment on the cottage down the street

from her grandmother. Twenty-five years of life, and Cardenia was the only thing that remained constant, the place where she returned ceaselessly with the waves. Jude requested leave to help unpack their boxes, pulling her close for a dance in the bare living room as the sun set below the windows.

Summers came, and he left with the changing of the seasons, but he always came home for the important things. When her engagement ring fell down the drain, he spent a day beneath the sink. Her grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary, her uncle's losing battle with lung cancer, her first miscarriage.

Still, there were so many things that he missed, moments that Ava could never get back. Things that Ava had given up: a shot at achieving her dreams. She had sacrificed a chance at traveling the world as a translator because she needed a steady income to pay the bills. She sat by herself at the pristine tablecloths as her friends got married, watched their happiness as they shared homes where both partners returned every night. When she got a promotion at work or when her cousin had a baby girl, he wasn't there. He was never there--not really. He was across an ocean, on the other side of the world. Every night, Ava kicked off her shoes and turned the lights on as if she expected to see anything besides the dingy cottage, but she was always alone, staring at the ring on her finger as if promises meant something. As if love could be true when one half was always absent.

Ava became quite good at distracting herself and found small ways to settle down, to build a home. She turned into a seasoned waitress at *Chez La Mer*, a lofty French restaurant run by Americans who had an exquisite taste in red wine. Every afternoon, Ava untied her apron and ascended the staircase to the rooftop garden, tracing fingers along metal vines and splitting the spine of a battered leather journal. From the deck, the faint crash of waves could be heard against the sand, the Pacific Ocean matching the tides of merlot that streamed down her throat. The book fell open to reveal dozens of photographs and hastily scrawled letters with edges curling towards the sunlight. Ava smoothed her hand over a page, the ink rising to meet skin and dipping where the pen had pressed down too hard. Fingers hesitated over the corner of a photograph, watery smile caught on frozen figures.

A younger version of Ava gazed at the camera, lips tilted upwards and hair permanently messy. Beneath a golden graduation gown was a two-piece black dress, embroidered with fragile pink roses. Ava's grandmother had made it for her mother, back when the two of them spoke outside of the holidays. A taller boy had his arms wrapped around Ava, the adoration in his eyes the only thing that remained unchanged by the cruel hands of time.

The image of him made Ava's stomach flip. There was so much possibility in the photograph: two people full of dreams and desires, not knowing what disappointment the future held in store for them. She longed to tell the girl in the photograph what she would be giving up.

Two more days until he was here. Only two more days until he came home.

The two days passed by slowly, every second ticking against Ava's nerves until her shift ended. The walk home was torn between excitement and apprehension; she was never quite sure what she would be returning to. Part of her had become so accustomed to living alone that her ring felt like the faux jewelry her grandmother let her play with. Ava had spent so much time dreaming about

what this moment would be like--running into his arms, looking just as he had when they met, still the same boy she fell in love with--that she was afraid reality could not live up to her expectations. The sun beat mercilessly on the back of her neck. She desperately wished this wasn't another dream that could not be made true.

The front door gave way beneath Ava's touch, falling in to reveal mismatched couches and countertops piled high with outdated *Vogue* issues. Her heart skipped a beat when her eyes caught him: Jude, hair cropped close to his skull, still in his fatigues. All her fear melted with the tiniest of smiles, and she collided with him.

"Ava," he breathed, arms stiff as rocks around her. Her mouth found his in the half-light, lips parting like the seas as he pulled her closer, *closer*, until they were reunited into one. When she pulled back, his eyes were far away; the kindness in his smile had faded until his whole face was replaced with stone. It made Ava's heart drop, turning cold. One word, and Ava already knew this was not the man she had fallen in love with.

"I'm so glad you're home," Ava sighed, an attempt to throw him a lifeline that he would not grab hold of. He just flashed her a smile that meant nothing and turned the television on, sinking into an artificial world. Away from reality, away from her.

Even though she could look at him and touch him and he was *right there*, it felt like Jude was still overseas. There was a part of him left behind in the war, something crucial that would not return home to her. He wandered the hallways like a ghost, going through the motions as if it equated living: wandering into the kitchen for a snack, sitting in front of the T.V. until the popcorn bowl overturned when he fell asleep. Ava awoke every night to the screams that penetrated every inch of the house. She would find him on the couch, thrashing violently and punching at the air; one time, he had accidentally punched her in the face, fending off some villain that didn't exist anymore. There was nothing in his eyes when he saw the purple blossom across Ava's jaw. His eyes were as unforgiving as the ocean.

Ava refused to believe that it had all been for nothing, that sacrificing what she had and loving him as she did could mean nothing. She refused to believe that a war could steal their love. Just like she had pretended it had worked overseas, she was going to make it work when they lived in the house she had dreamed of. This was the one thing she was unwilling to give up.

She slipped on the dress she had worn at their engagement party, trying to let herself think that this was just a normal night. That Jude had never gone to war and this was one version of herself that had never known the heartbreak of distance. She tried her best to keep a smile in place even when Jude bemoaned the activity, reluctantly sliding into slacks. When she pressed her lips to his, she pretended like her love could kiss away the haunted look in his eyes.

That night, she swept him down memory lane, walking the boardwalk against the flow of traffic. Hands linked as wooden planks creaked beneath shoes, the thin strip of beach separating them from plunging into the indigo waters. Streetlights flickered on as the sun crept towards the horizon, painting the sky hues of violet and pink. Golden shadows made Jude less severe, returning him to the boy Ava met in high school. Removing all traces of war from his

sunken eyes.

Darting through the crowds, Ava dragged him into the old amusement park where her grandfather had taken her on the ferris wheel and where Jude had kissed her after she signed the lease, leaning against the side of the cotton candy truck. The pair stopped at the carousel, wrapped in each other and giggling in line with dozens of children. She wasn't sure if it was pretend or reality--Jude trying to act like who he once was--but Ava just kissed him like she could cement love.

Jude placed his hands on her waist and lifted her onto a chestnut pony, reins matching the silk of her dress. He stayed beside her as the ride started to move, classical symphonies raining down from aluminum speakers. Ava's skin was electric where his hands lingered, his lips a dream that she could always live. Looking into endless brown eyes, she could see the future lain out: the two of them, the be all, end all until time came to a close. From the vantage point on the carousel, it was always going to be this. *Always.*

1945. Lila and Frank married in June, the promise of summer pooling through the sand at their feet. Her father didn't come to the wedding, but Lila stared into her bouquet of lilies until she could pretend that the ocean replaced his voice. In the end, the only things that mattered were Frank's hands in hers as he slipped the golden band onto her finger.

The years passed by, and Lila never went back to Hollywood. Frank offered to drive her once, see the glorious sign and relive her life spent in gin joints and studio lots. As far as Lila was concerned, she never wanted to leave Cardenia; she found her home between the setting sun and the waves in Frank's eyes. The two of them bought a run-down shack three blocks from the beach, building and rebuilding their life until it was firmly theirs; no films, no wars. Just one of the thousand tracks her life could have followed, a path developed in a dark room.

They started a family, first a girl with familiar blue eyes, then three boys. Lila learned how to sew dresses from curtains, how to bandage scraped knees and make kites out of newspaper. She watched them grow up and have families of their own--grandchildren that appeared like the perfect union of Frank and herself. Her daughter married a man from the Navy, travelling around the world with their young daughter.

When summers rolled around, her granddaughter would get a break from the road and live with her and Frank as long as the weather stayed warm. On Sunday afternoons, Lila took her to the library basement and introduced her to Ingrid Bergman and Jimmy Stewart and the faces she used to know.

Ava had the same blue eyes that Lila loved so dearly; she even ate her peanut butter sandwiches with the crust cut off, just like Frank. When Frank passed away, Lila held on to those eyes the color of her favorite dress. Even with him gone, summers were still Lila's favorite time of year.

2000. Two weeks after the carousel had closed for the season, Ava received a letter in the mail. It wasn't written in Jude's neat script, but it was addressed from the same base. His metal dog tags were folded up in the paper. They slipped between Ava's fingers like blood. When she went for a twilight walk, the board-

walk lights failed to turn on. She screamed his name until the roar of the waves swallowed her voice.

2013. Sound returned to Ava slowly, interrupting the memory of a smile. The air was filled with the remembrance of bells and laughter, the cries of children out past their bedtime and the footsteps of teenagers beginning the night. It was all an imagining from another place, another time. Jude's face faded from her mind, replaced by that of her grandmother. She remembered someone telling her once that she looked just like her grandmother when she was in the movies.

A hand on her shoulder drew Ava from her reverie, jumping at the contact, tears tracking her face. Her husband offered her a smile, one hand held out to her and the other propping up their sleeping daughter. She had his blond curls and Ava's ocean eyes. "Ready to go home?"

Ava pressed her lips in a thin line, allowing one last look at the carousel. It had stopped moving, past and reality merging into a bittersweet remembrance. Ava looked down at her black dress, adorned with rusting dog tags and now, her grandmother's engagement ring. The carousel never changed, never aged. It remained stationary while the world grew around it, unaffected by time and removed from the humans that gazed on it. The wooden animals silently looked upon shifting faces, watched children turn to parents and grandparents, missed those that left the amusement behind. The carousel knew Ava, and it knew her grandmother, and it knew everyone. Gazing into its unblinking eyes, Ava could see the translucent figures of years gone by: a younger version of her and Jude, first love that never dies; the night her grandparents met, a moment where the future was designed. A moment where dreams had come true.

"Let's go home." She took her husband's hand and smiled. The carousel would always move again next summer.