

Brighter Than the City Lights

By Jamesen Caldwell

High School Overall Winner

Even here above the clouds, Juno could see the glow from the lights of New York City. Flying wasn't anything new to her, and she especially liked landing at night. There was something special about seeing a foreign city for the first time, when everything was competing for your gaze, but tonight would be special for a far greater reason than the lights of New York.

She turned away from the chilly glass of the window and looked down at the faintly glowing screen of her laptop. The numbers 11:48 shone white against her background.

It was one of her favorite photos. It was of a girl with fluffy, light pink hair and lots of freckles. She was standing by the ocean, with her face toward the sun, the rest of her figure enveloped by the light blue jumper that Juno was wearing on the plane. The girl in the photo hadn't been aware her brother was taking a picture and that was part of what Juno liked best about it, she was just herself. Juno smiled, although no one could tell through the black mask covering her mouth and nose.

She hadn't realized anyone was paying attention to her until the old woman in the seat to her right leaned over and said, "Who's that?" Her face was lined and her eyes warm.

"Oh, this?" Juno said, gesturing to her screen, "That's my girlfriend, Aspen. She's why I'm coming to New York, it's the first time we're meeting in person."

"Are you happy?"

"The happiest I've ever been."

Juno could tell by the way the woman's eyes crinkled in the corners that she was smiling, "That's good. I'm glad the world is in a place where you two are allowed to be happy."

Just then, the plane began to descend into the John F Kennedy airport. Juno had only brought her backpack with her as a carry on, and she stuffed her laptop and novel back into it, as other passengers shuffled around gathering their things. The woman next to Juno stood once the plane had landed and said, "It was nice speaking to you..."

"Juno," she offered.

"It was nice speaking to you, Juno."

"You too...?"

"Marjorie."

"You too, Marjorie."

More passengers filed by while Juno waited for the aisles to clear. Eventually, she exited the plane after a man carrying his young child down

the steps.

She shivered as she walked down the tunnel into the airport, unsure whether it was from cold or nerves.

She had met Aspen nearly a year and a half ago while taking an online Art History course at the University of Edinburgh, and she had been able to tell people that the girl on her lock screen was her girlfriend for a year on Friday.

She walked and she remembered.

It was New Year's Eve and Juno had been eating a late dinner in her apartment, waiting by the window for fireworks, and facetimeing Aspen while she took the subway home from work.

"Hey Juno," Aspen said, her voice slightly muffled by her blue mask. "Do you do New Year's Resolutions?"

"Er," Juno replied, "Sort of. I mean, I've had goals and things that I planned to start at the new year, but I don't know if I'd call them resolutions. Why?"

"Well, I could kind of use your help with one of mine."

"Alright, let's hear it."

"So, there's this girl, and I want to ask her to be my girlfriend." "Okay, how can I help with that, though?"

"By saying yes."

Juno had reached the terminal now and turned left toward the baggage claim. She was waiting for her suitcase to emerge when someone walking by complimented her jumper.

"Thanks," she said, waving behind her.

It wasn't even her jumper, it was Aspen's. A few months after their relationship had begun, Juno had suggested they mail their jumpers to each other.

"Jumpers?" Aspen giggled, "How very British of you."

"Whatever you call them," Juno laughed, "Hoodies. Anyway, we should trade them in the mail."

Three days later, Juno found one of those big orange envelopes in the mail with small hearts doodled in different colors. Inside was Aspen's pale blue jumper. She had embroidered little stems of lavender around the cuffs and hood, and it smelled like cinnamon and candle smoke and hairspray and something that she couldn't quite place, but she knew must belong specifically to Aspen.

Even though it had long lost the scents that reminded her of her girlfriend, she still ran her thumbs over the thin, hand-woven strings of the lavender as she stood in front of the baggage claim. Eventually, she saw her black suitcase with the pink, blue, and yellow ribbons tied to the handle and strode over to take it off the conveyor belt.

She looked out the window that faced the city. Everything was glowing. It hardly looked like night at all. Aspen had told Juno where she would be

parked before she had even boarded the plane, and now she was closer than ever to that spot.

She pushed her way through the crowds of people and out the doors. Gasping in the frigid December air, she turned toward the nearest parking lot and felt her belongings drop to the ground as she saw the shade of pink she knew so well.

Everything was still for a split second as recognition crashed down around them. The next thing she knew, she had lifted Aspen off the ground and stumbled backward with the force of her embrace. She ran her hands through the pink hair and held her closer than physically possible. Everything was real. The feeling of her skin, the smell of burnt candle wicks, the sound of her breath. Or maybe nothing was real, and she was lost in an incredible dream. But in that moment it didn't matter. All that mattered was that she was feeling everything. They were glowing brighter than the city lights ever could.