

# Sophia

*N. L. Harris*

Sophia was an enigma; she was a force impossible to describe. She was the ghost of a first love that would ultimately become a last. A memory of smiles and light and a time when things felt okay. The bodily remains of the beginning of a cruel cycle buried six feet under. Rosa couldn't even begin to understand how the dead could still hold so much power over the living, but Sophia remained the source of the greater part of her troubles despite being long gone. Rosa had never known Sophia, but Juliet did.

And Juliet had loved her.

'Had loved' likely wasn't an accurate description of Juliet's feelings, as the woman still clung to the dead girl the same way she clung to the cigarettes that tainted her lungs and the outrageously expensive wine Rosa could always taste on her lips. She clung to her feelings for Sophia like it was the sole thing keeping her alive, and it probably was. She surely didn't harbour any lingering romantic attractions - her feelings matured with the rot of her age - but she still couldn't let go of the girl who was her first love. The girl who made her feel unstoppable when they were thirteen and bright-eyed, recklessly fighting their way through life like nothing could go wrong so long as they were together. Yet things did go wrong and Sophia was dead, leaving Juliet as nothing but a nihilistic shell of the girl she once was.

Juliet at twenty didn't have romantic feelings for Sophia, but she still loved her nonetheless, and she couldn't bring herself to love anyone else.

Rosa fell for stifling suit blazers and ties so tight they could suffocate her (and god it wasn't the ties but both of them were suffocating). She fell for one-sided touches, intimacy that served merely as a distraction from her partner's unending grief. She fell for an empty husk of a person pretending to feel. It was foolish and self-destructive, but Rosa fell hard.



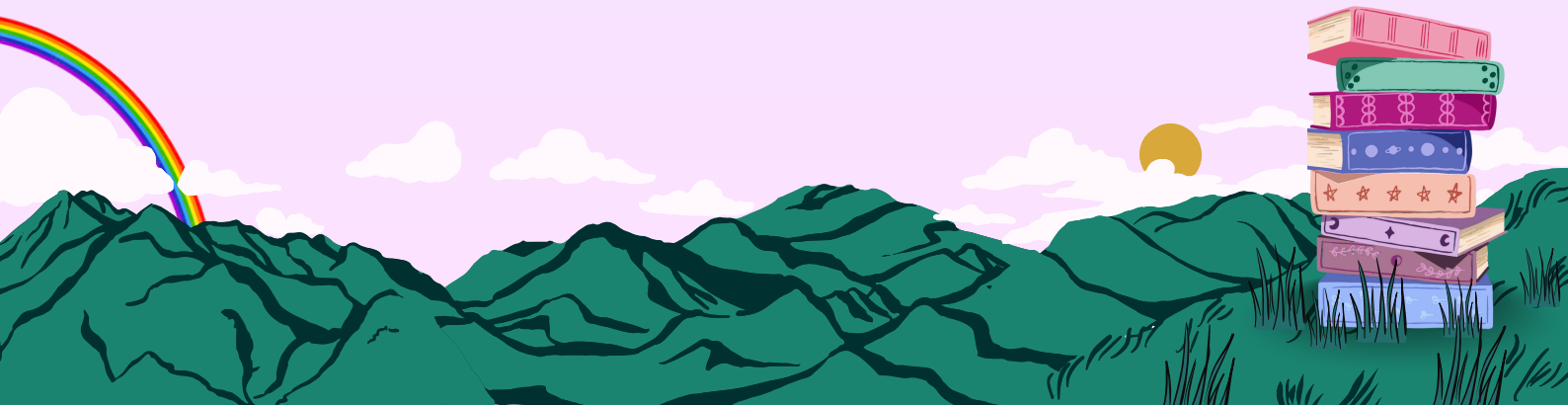
When it came to self-destruction, Juliet was a ticking time bomb and everyone knew it. Waist deep in cigarette butts, liquor bottles, and barely touched meals, Rosa had no idea how the woman's body was still functioning. Rosa had offered to move in with her once when she was hospital-bound with translucent skin and hands never free of tremors, but Juliet had refused.

She always refused.

Juliet preferred to be alone and despised accepting any sort of help lest she feel more pathetic or incompetent than she already did. Rosa tried anyway, offering her quiet reassurances and letting herself be used for loveless affection but at the end of the day, the sun fell the way it always did. It was painful, but Rosa kept telling herself that she could defuse the bomb, she could save this woman and whisk her off her feet to the happy ending they both deserved but were too broken to get. She tried and she tried but after another hospital trip ended with Juliet institutionalized, *she* was suddenly the one all alone.

She had time to think. Time to ponder over whether inhaling the second-hand smoke that Juliet was in essence would really be worth it in the end, whether sacrificing every part of herself for someone who could never love her was something she truly wanted.

She knew it: Juliet was poisoning herself and poisoning Rosa by extension- or rather, Sophia was. Sophia was a contagious disease that latched itself onto Juliet and rendered her unable to love anyone else. It spread to Rosa, who knew for all the pain it brought her she could not leave Juliet. Rosa figured it would spread to whoever fell in love with her too.



Love, being an unavoidable and uncontrollable thing, was distasteful and undesirable to those unrequitedly infected. It caged the heart in a toxic cycle of yearning and being yearned for with no resolution. She knew someone would yearn for her as she yearned for Juliet, as Juliet yearned for Sophia. She knew that when Juliet's love inevitably killed her, that she would follow swiftly in her footsteps. She'd become a carbon copy of the woman, stuck miserably in the clutches of hopeless devotion for a dead person. Whoever was infected with a horrid infatuation with Rosa was doomed to suffer the same fate as she would with Juliet and Juliet with Sophia. It was an eternal paradox of passion and despair, leading only to incurable anguish.

Sophia would become a pandemic.

Juliet was simultaneously the brightest and darkest part of Rosa's life. The moments they shared together filled her with a high that nothing could match, but they were always followed by lows she'd never thought herself capable of reaching. Sophia was a disease but Juliet was an addiction. She hurt and she hurt and she hurt but Rosa couldn't let her go. A kiss on the cheek and a coffee date followed by days of not speaking. Promises that they'd be together forever only to find a note on an old receipt next to a shot glass. Kisses that tasted like their impending demise and combined desperation for something they couldn't possess.

Rosa found her on the roof, but she wasn't concerned. Juliet was dying, everyone could see it, but she wouldn't go out like that. Numb and despondent as she was, she'd always had a flair for the dramatic. She'd go out in a bar fight or a freak accident or because of some reckless decision she decided to make without caring for the consequences. She didn't want to die, wouldn't actively seek it, but she had no urge to prevent it either. In her mind, she had nothing to lose. If she died, then it was simply fate. If danger looked enticing it wasn't because she was searching for death but rather that she was playing with it. Testing its limits.



Hence when Rosa found her on the roof, sitting dangerously close to the edge with a cigarette in hand and an expression that screamed ‘hungover’, she joined her. She sipped at her black coffee, the third that day, her personal pick of poisons, while Juliet swung her legs and smoked in silence.

“You love me, don’t you?” Juliet had eventually broken the silence.

“I do.”

“So you’d suffer if I was gone.”

“Yeah.”

“But not enough to die?”

“I wouldn’t know. You’re not dead.”

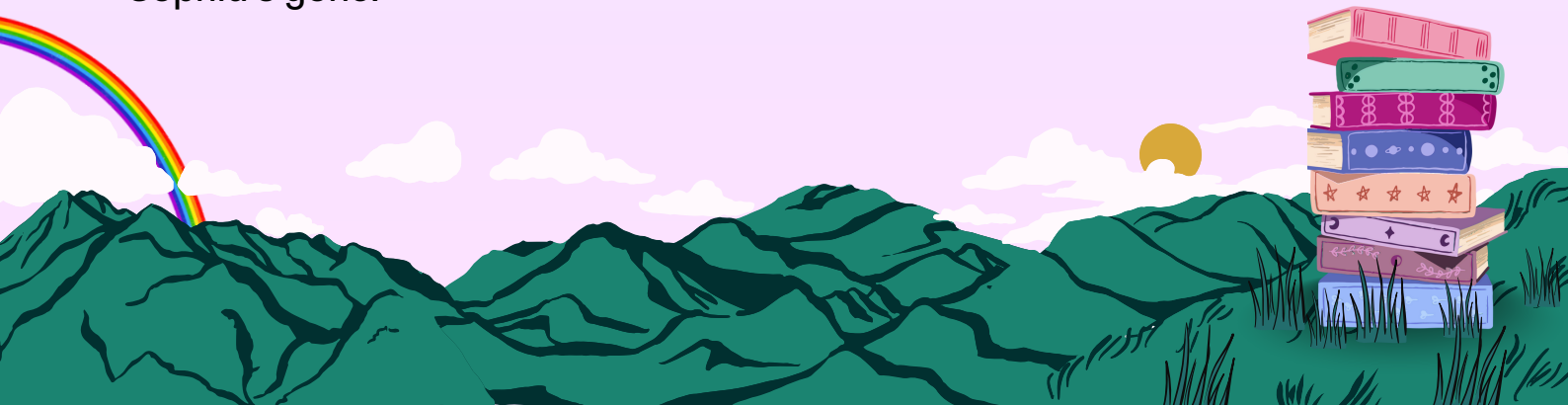
“But if I-”

“Nah.” Rosa seized the wrist of the woman beside her, snatching the cigarette out of her hand and taking a slow drag of her own. “You won’t”

Juliet chuckled. “That’s an indirect kiss, you know.”

“Mhm.” Rosa smirked, popping open the first few buttons of her dress shirt in order to breathe more comfortably. Juliet would have found it attractive had she been capable of feeling anything longing.

In exchange for the cigarette, she stole Rosa’s coffee, gulping down what was left of the scalding liquid before lazily letting the cup drop from her hand to the ground below. The smash that followed was oddly satisfying, but neither of them reacted. Juliet sighed and laid her head on Rosa’s shoulder. “Sophia’s gone.”



“I know.”

“And you’re not Sophia.”

Rosa paused, taking another drag and letting the threat of black organs and a hospital bed seep into her lungs before replying. “No, I’m not Sophia.”

They sat in a comfortable silence long after the cigarette had burnt out and the butt had been crushed under someone’s heel. Their hands found each other again, fingers intertwined, touch simultaneously full of love and completely loveless. Juliet spoke once more.

“I think I love you somewhere.”

“Somewhere?”

“Yeah, somewhere.”

