

### **And Time Marches On.**

I remember those days so clearly. Everything before and after all blurs together, but my time with him is still so clear in my memories.

I met him when I was barely an adult, only just learning of the responsibilities the world expected of me. We were both so young, and we had yet to experience true pain and suffering. We fell in love with each other, believing our feelings for each other were so pure. We thought the sun rose just to warm our faces and the flowers bloomed just for us to smell. I suppose every young person is naive in this way. Believe me, I would know. I have experienced youth many times.

He was so beautiful, and his beauty reflected onto everything around him. His hair was golden and pure, his eyes blue and bright, his smile more radiant than the sun itself. He was always kind to me and everyone else, never a bad word to come out of his mouth; he was perfect in every way. Back then I thought of him as Ryan. Now I only think of him as my love. Names have no more meaning to me.

We spent all our time together. I'm not sure we knew anyone else, ever thought of a life without each other. Everything else faded away when we were together. We'd spend our nights watching the stars, and the days pretending nothing existed except each other. We thought we had all the time in the world.

But the world had a different plan for us. I don't know what the name of the disease that took him was, but I did know that could have been avoided. He began to become sick. There was nothing we could do about it. In all of our infatuation with each other, we neglected to create a safety net below our lives, so there was no money to help him. I think the worst part was that I had to watch him crumble away. The gleam left his eyes, and his once beautiful face became gaunt and sickly. Finally, I had to stand above him as the light finally left his eyes. I cried and cried, because, deep down, I knew that it *didn't have to be this way*.

After his death, all I wanted to do was break away. I had nothing without him, no friends, no family, not even a penny. I had invested everything into this person, and now all I had left was a jar of ashes on my bedside table. For a while I was angry. How could he leave me like this? Cold

and alone, without the will to continue, not even a way out. But that didn't last long. My rage was overwhelmed by pain, leaving me hollow inside.

I watched myself age, forced myself to pick up my broken pieces and carry on. I found a job, unfulfilling and lonely. I never recovered from the pain, always sitting heavy in my heart. As my years added up, I began to see where we had gone wrong. We were a tragedy, for sure, but a preventable one. If only we had thought, had taken our eyes of one another for just one movement and seen the state of the world around us. Maybe things would be different.

I grew old and grey. I was old, older than I ever thought I'd be. Surely, I thought, this was the end of the line for me. At last I would die, and be with my love once again. But just when I thought I was at the end, things started to change. I would wake up, and my face would be less wrinkled, my hair a little less grey. The pain in my body faded over years that I thought I would not have. Over time the faces I had originally known were replaced with new ones. And as they would age, I would become younger, reaching the age I was when my love died. Then I would age again, become young, and start the loop. Over and over again.

Hundreds of years that I walked the Earth, seeing every face and never his. Learning every name and learning not to care. My sorrow had imprisoned me, kept my heart beating when all I wanted was for it to stop. Every night I hoped I wouldn't wake up, and every morning I did. I learnt to accept my sentence, cursed by my foolishness to live every life and never feel happy.

Time marched on, dragging me with it, forever shackled to the hands of the clock.

---

It's the morning of another day now. I've spent so many days just like this before, with the sun shining through my windows even though the grass beneath my decaying apartment building is covered in frost. I'm middle aged now, and I haven't been taking care of myself. My hair is stiff and a dull brown, flecks of grey running through it. My face is beginning to wrinkle, and I have grown gaunt and thin. The image in the mirror is too painful for me, reminds me too much of my love. I have to look away.

All of the lives I've lived have been dull and I am not known by many people. I simply wander through each day, making do with what I can. I do not wish for greatness, simply death. I wander about the streets, watching others go about their day, observing the way the world around me has evolved. Plants climb up the sides of buildings, and technology is everywhere. Lanes of cars drive both next to me and above me. The park across the street has trees that I've been watching grow for centuries, and I walk past a store that I used to shop for clothes at. Now it's old and covered in black mould, the faded sign a declaration of eras passed. I will watch everything new fade as well, in time. I will still be here, watching, when the Earth is eaten by the sun. Sometimes I wonder if even then I will still be forced to live,

I sit on the bench of the park with the old trees, and I watch the ducks on the sparkling water. The wind is cold, and the sunlight feels as empty as I am. Clouds on the horizon promise rain, but it will not be here for some time. My knees are hurting. I'm used to the pain of old age by now. It has become a comfort to me.

It's very quiet in the park, but the silence is disturbed by footsteps crunching over the leaves. A shadow passes over my lap, but I don't look up until I hear the voice.

"Mind if I sit with you?" It's familiar, a voice I never thought I'd hear again.

My head jolts up to meet the strangers' eyes. He smiles down at me, bright and friendly, and I worry that my eyes may fill with tears. I've seen every face to pass through the Earth, and never one that looked like his. But here, my love smiles down at me, with his golden hair and bright blue eyes. He looks exactly as I remember him. I nod, too stunned to speak.

He looks to be about the same age as I. So this is what my love would have looked like if he had lasted longer. He turns to me and smiles.

"Sorry, I couldn't help but notice you. Someone so pretty shouldn't be so alone." No one has spoken to me like this in years.

"Thank you" I say. My voice sounds weary and quiet from disuse.

"May I ask your name?"

"Cathrine." He leans in to shake my hand. After a moment I take it.

"Oliver." A reminder that no matter what, no one can be him. My mild happiness fades a little.

"I'm on a break from work right now," He continues, "but I would love to get to know you some time. Apologies if I'm too forward. I shake my head. I'm going to tell him no.

“I would love to.” The words tumble out of my mouth unbidden. Oh well. Too late to take them back...

“Fantastic!” He gives me a phone number, I promise to call him, and he kisses my hand goodbye. Then I am alone again. But something is different this time. It feels like my heart is a lake and something ugly has been fished out of it, my waters left to be pure again.

I call Oliver when I get home. We agree to have dinner the next night. He seems like a happy, friendly person, someone I could get to know. Someone who could make me just as happy as my love did. Maybe this time things won't go wrong.

The sorrow has been lifted from my heart with one man's smile. Finally I feel something other than pain and sadness. I feel hope. And with hope comes joy, and faith that I can be happy again. That my heart will no longer be broken.

That night I sleep better than I ever have. And when I wake up, I feel like my reflection will no longer bring me pain. My bones hurt though. More than they have in a long time. I lift my hand to look at it, and I am horrified. I climb out of bed, but it is tough because I feel so stiff and weak. In the mirror, my worst fear has been confirmed.

My face is ageing right before my eyes. All of the years that I should not have had are catching up to me, and death is taking its revenge for evading it for so long. Tears run down my face, even as my hair grows whiter and I find it increasingly more difficult to stand up. Why must the world be so cruel? Just as I was becoming happy again, I must face the thing I have wanted for years. How can this be fair? Do I not deserve something good?

But when I think about it more I smile. Now I will see my love again, my real love, not someone who happens to look like him. I think I can already see his smiling face behind me in the mirror. And as my heart slows and my thoughts muddle, I can think one last thing with a final clarity.

I am free. No longer am I a prisoner of the clock. Still, even without me, time marches on.