

I don't believe in "The End"

Life has a way of crippling you, doesn't it?

*I stand on the balcony of our Florida vacation home, watching as the foamy sea water crashes against the sprawling beach below. I sigh, breathing in the salty, fresh air, looking up into the sunlight and seeing...*

I grip the rail of the bed tightly, watching my knuckles go white as I glare intensely at the stark white sheets. I shake my head violently, trying to keep the memories away.

I can't pretend this isn't happening. Some nurses glance my way with curious looks on their faces but continue on their way, picking up clipboards, moving papers around, and generally doing useless, pointless things. They're wasting their time. It's almost as though they have no awareness of their mortality.

They should be trying to save her.

I look at the woman lying on the hospital bed, her body tucked beneath the sheets and eyes closed, mind in a deep slumber. Her face is that of an angel's, rounded, yet jagged with age. Her long black hair is spread like a fan around her head. She wears a hospital gown, but I can picture her in a blue sundress, her eyes wide and concerned...

*She walks out onto the deck and hands me an ice-cold drink, pocketing her phone and leaning over the railing with me.*

*"You okay?" she murmurs, touching my hand. She wears a brilliant diamond on her ring finger, and I can't help but admire it again.*

*“Fine,” I say, pulling away from her touch and running a hand through my thick head of hair.*

*“I know the last few weeks have been rough, but...” she pauses. “Florida air is the best cure for this type of thing, right?”*

*I laugh. I can’t help it. Even in my darkest hour, she makes me laugh.*

*Looking up in the air, I can see an unblemished heron, diving toward the water and skimming the waves deftly. I glance over at the woman, the most important woman in my life, and look into her eyes. I see pure and utter lov—*

*I’m getting off track again.*

I reach out and stroke her hand, bracing myself as a doctor comes over to me, gently resting a hand on my shoulder. I shrug it off, standing up and straightening myself into what I hope is a commanding position.

“You’re her only family, correct?” he asks me quietly and respectfully, brushing his glasses up his nose.

“Yes.”

I guess it was inevitable, the gleam of the grim reaper coming to take her from me but until now, the only loss I’d known was that of my estranged father (if you could consider that a loss). The doctor speaks to me, but I only hear the first part. The part that matters. The only thing that matters. The only thing that matters in this whole fricking world. I feel something spill down my cheeks and touch it. It’s wet, and I mildly wonder what it is.

I never expected it to be this early. I expected to have more time with her. But now... now they think she’ll be gone any moment.

I don't want to see her like this. I don't want to see her like this.

I don't want to—so I'll go back.

. . .

I step through the doorframe with my books in hand, my pencil case balancing precariously on top of my Intro to Physics textbook. I grasp my phone in the other hand, ignoring the buzzes that indicate yet another call from my mother.

She means well, but having my mother call me throughout the school day isn't exactly helping my social situation.

I find my way over to a desk between a mature-looking girl with dark brown hair and an empty seat.

I dump my materials on the desk and collapse into the chair, holding out my phone. I scroll past multiple messages and voicemails from my mother (she's Generation X and it shows) instead opening a messaging app I use to catch up with my friends a few towns over.

Moving should've been easy. I only moved about a half hour away, meaning it's pretty simple to go visit my old friends every once and a while. And being treated as the new kid seemed to be out of the question. I never really gave much thought to what it would be like being the odd one out, seeing as I was one of the most popular guys at my old school. Girls chased me. Guys wanted to be my friend. It was, in every sense of the word, *it*.

Not that I know every sense of the word.

There's a lot I want to accomplish in life. I want to be a millionaire, for one thing. But just ignore that one. I know there's not much hope there.

But there's hope elsewhere.

I want to marry a girl I love. She needs to be pretty. She needs to be kind. She needs to be smart. She needs to be funny. And she needs to love me.

I want to be top of my class, valedictorian, or student council president. Or both.

I want to have a successful job.

I want to have a lot of money (though a millionaire might be a stretch).

I want to have lots of friends to go out with at midnight (I want to do stupid things once and a while).

Most of all, I want to leave a legacy. When people notice my picture somewhere, I want them to think "Hey, that guy!", and not "Oh, that guy". Or even worse, "Huh?"

I yearn for someone, anyone, to recognize me as the guy who changed... *something*. The man who was good at... *something*.

I want to do something.

I just don't know what yet.

I'm broken out of my thoughts by a soft, fluttery voice that floats over to my ears like a butterfly. "Is this seat taken?"

...

This is how it all began. With a girl.

Doesn't everything seem to start with a girl?

Or, at least in the movies, it seems that way. I guess I should take that with a grain of salt.

As I hold the hand of the woman on the bed, I can feel her heart beating slowly. I can feel the *thump thump* through her skin.

I'd better tell her story before she's gone.

Maybe I should tell her too.

...

"The name's Vienna," she says in barely a whisper, her eyes wide like an insect's. She waits expectantly, and I can tell she wants me to reciprocate.

"Nobody's sitting there," I say, motioning to the desk beside me. "Atticus. My name's Atticus."

"Well, nice to meet you, Atticus," she grins, gracefully seating herself beside me.

"You're new here, eh?"

"Yeah," I respond laughing wryly. "And you're Canadian, *eh?*"

"Ha! Michigan, actually. Where're you comin' from?"

I tell her.

...

I can feel her heartbeat slowing beneath my palm.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

I can almost see the life draining from her lungs with every breath she takes.

"Stay with me," I say in barely a whisper.

...

I've only dated her for a month, and yet I can feel myself falling for her already. Every time I close my eyes, I see her face. When I go to work, I think about her (resulting in a very angry manager). I think about her. I dream about her. I live for her. She's everything to me.

We sit in a booth at the local ice cream parlour. I laugh. She kisses me on the cheek.

“I can’t believe this is your first time here!” Vienna cackles, leaning back in her chair. She had a bit too much to drink a bit earlier, and I can see its effects in her movements. I’m the designated driver, as usual. I try to appreciate the party-girl vibes she’s going for, but it often feels like her *fun* is hindering my own.

“I always thought this was a kid’s place,” I answer, glancing around at all the elementary kids chatting in the seats next to us.

“Well... you aren’t wrong,” she laughs sheepishly, sliding her spoon around her bowl to get the last bit of ice cream from it. “But my dad takes me here all the time.”

“What’s it like?” I say suddenly, wiping my brow.

“What’s *what* like?”

“Having a dad?”

“You don’t have one?”

I swallow hard, pushing my bowl away. We’ve been seeing one another for a month, but of course, like any normal couple (not that I know anything about normal couples), we don’t know *everything* about one another.

A honk sounds from the parking lot and I look over to see my mom in our silver Audi, beckoning to me. It’s embarrassing, to say the least, but I don’t have my license yet, and my mom’s willing to do *anything* to spend “quality time” with me. I hold up my index finger and smile at Vienna.

“I gotta get going. Do you need a ride home?”

“Nah, I’m good,” she answers, standing up and slinging her purse over her shoulder.

She leans toward me, and I press my lips against hers, yanking her into a quick hug before pulling back (this is a children’s establishment after all... they don’t need this PDA). I feel her eyes on my neck as I leave with a quick wave in her general direction. I don’t dream about her tonight.

. . .

I brush my hair from my face and kiss the woman’s forehead. I know I don’t have much time.

She doesn’t feel it.

My final kiss to her and she doesn’t feel it.

I hope she can hear my story.

It’s her story, after all.

She needs to know what she means to me.

“Listen carefully,” I say in a hushed whisper. “This is your big moment.”

. . .

There’s no light at the end of this tunnel. It’s likely been the worst day of my life.

I trudge up the road, noting the Audi in my driveway. I burst through the door, throwing my bag onto the couch and snatching the keys from the counter.

“Mom, I’m going out!” I yell, speeding into the kitchen to grab an apple. I rustle through the fridge for a moment before someone comes up behind me.

“Sweetie, are you okay?” she asks me, her voice filled with genuine concern. I select a bright red fruit and slam the fridge shut behind me.

“Fine,” I grumble, sliding past her and heading toward the door.

She follows me out onto the porch (I can hear her footsteps behind me) and walks quickly next to me, her eyes darting to my face.

“I know my baby. I know when something’s wrong.”

“I’m *fine*,” I say forcefully.

She bites her lip, a resigned look on her face. She plucks the car keys from my hand and raises an eyebrow. “You aren’t leaving until you tell me what happened.”

I grit my teeth.

But then I can feel my hands shaking.

I feel something prick at the corner of my eyes.

Sweat beads on my forehead.

“Have you ever wanted something so bad... and you get it... but then you lose it?” I stand there awkwardly, looking up at the woman who’s taken care of me for years upon years.

“Did you ever tell you about my Walkman?” Mom asks, diving into her pocket and retrieving her phone. She scrolls through for a moment before holding it up and grinning ear to ear. “I got it for Christmas one year from my Aunt Kelsey. I had wanted one for the past year, but my parents weren’t the wealthiest people, so they couldn’t afford it. It was blue and silver, and it could play hundreds and hundreds of songs. But one night, I caught my girlfriend Linda with my boyfriend. I lost it. I went home and I smashed that blue and silver gadget to smithereens.” She pauses, and I study the image she holds. In it, she’s young and smiling, holding the Walkman in front of a sparkling tree. “Within seconds, I regretted it. I had lost my favourite thing in the world.”



A tear runs down my cheek. It's a stupid story. I know it is.

And yet it impacts me on a level I would never have expected.

"Vienna ended it with me," I blurt out.

Then, more tears come, hot and uncomfortable as they stream down my face.

Without a moment's hesitation, my mom wraps me in an embrace, allowing me to rest my head on her shoulder (even though I'm a foot taller). I bawl my eyes out into her denim jacket, scared to speak. Scared to face reality.

"I love you, Atticus."

Those four simple words bring new meaning to my life.

They remind me that I don't need fame and fortune.

I don't need a job that makes me bucketloads of money (though it still couldn't hurt).

There *is* a light at the end of the tunnel.

. . .

"I love you, Mom."

I stand next to the doctor, watching as he pulls the sheet over my mother's face. I don't bother taking her in. I know what she looks like. Not the pale, lifeless version I just saw before me.

The one that's full of life.

*She dances with her friends, roping me in as we move to the music.*

*She lifts a hot pan from the oven, tossing a cookie my way.*

*She comforts me after my father's death.*

I can get lost in the past now.

It's okay.

Her light guided me through the past two years. She led me through the breakup.

She showed me how to move on.

I turn away from her, away from all the hurt and pain. I remember that evening on the driveway. The way she hugged me. Cried with me.

I can still feel her light, showing me the way.

And it's bright.

Really bright.