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Fragmented Perfection

Alyssa Spaulding

He died on the twenty-first of May. This he knew.

But there was no great paradise of sky or an oblivion in flames for him; neither Nirvana nor Brahman were waiting—there was nothing but this. But this, he thought in the beginning, was exactly where he wanted to be. So he took it upon himself to watch over her.

There were, of course, limitations.

But even so, there was a beauty of existing as he did—trapped within the paper of candid and posed memories alike. He remembered words from the past on the fanciful occasion when memories would filter through the sheen of plastic film that covered the world. Not necessarily of who spoke them, but he remembered every word better than he ever had in life, unchanged by the passing time.

He felt nothing, could touch nothing, but still he traveled from one photograph to the next. He followed her when he could, a shade in her reflection on the glass of those frames.

And when he wasn't watching over her, he remembered.

"You know what? You can be such an asshole sometimes."

"Really? And I always thought that that's what I liked about you."

On the twenty-eighth of May, he bore witness to her tears from the birthday snapshot on the fireplace mantle, unable to blink his forever-still eyes or reach out to her with paper hands.

Behind the glass of a fixed stare, the sight of her bowed over on the living room couch was haunting, crowded as she was by the middle-class luxury of their one-story home. If he could, he would cry with her, and though the reason would be different, he figured that it wouldn't matter anyway.

"God, just stop it! Life isn't perfect. Why can't you just accept that?"

"And why can't it be perfect? Why can't our lives be better than this?"

"Because that's not how the world works. What do you call this, peaceful disagreement?"

"Don't do that."

"Do what? Yell at you? Because I can do damned well what I please."

"No. Don't fight me when you're scared."

"I'm not scared, I'm angry."

"No, you're not; you're afraid."

Black didn't become her, his widowed songbird wife, and her sobs that weren't in anyway graceful or picturesque felt odd in his paper ears.

"And what could I possibly be afraid of?"

"You're scared of everything going right."

On the sixth of June, a whim of masochism seemed to have befallen her, and he awoke in her hands, the scrapbook blinking open and yawning wide. Her fingers, the hands that he had once memorized by touch, flipped through their pictures, prints of happiness and laughter.

But she had always been so much more than simple smiles and stiff poses.

She held slivers of him in her hands, weighing each piece against the other. In her right, she grabbed hold of their vacation on the beach, when the water had yet to dry on their skin. The sand had tangled his hair from the unphotographed moment he had spent beneath her, pressed into the sea shell floor as she imbibed his laughter.

But he remembered too the ocean waves that were as loud as their quarreling yells and as beautiful and sloppy as their half-hearted apologies.

Beneath the fingertips of her left hand, she traced his body amidst the rest of her family during the reunion in California. Trapped within a still frame of a cheeased smile, he recalled the tears after the revival of family burdens by the lake. He had held her as she screamed, his shortened nails delicately scratching her scalp as he whispered nonsense to her until all the words he had left were just *sweetheart, sweetheart*. He comforted her even after she had punched him seconds before, blaming him for everything he had nothing to do with. But even he had known that blaming him was easier for her than admitting there was no one to blame at all.

He looked up at her from the pictures she cried over, all complacent smiles and polite cheerfulness. But he grasped onto all the time in between with such thirst, everything broken and repaired between them,

Those were, after all, the moments in which his sweetheart had shined, more alive and real than all the photographs she touched with longing fingertips. And as time passed, as if time mattered to the dead, those memories grew stronger, focusing like a lens each time she held him, mourned him, loved him.

He wished for many things, to be able to feel his wife's feather-touch over him, to be able to give her even the smallest sign that he had kept his promise, but most pertinent was the fruitless wish to steal away her pain for himself. He wanted to give her the moments of happiness that she so mourned, whilst giving himself this moment where she loved him. To capture her tears for himself and her. But the hands trapped in the pictures could never move, and she would never know he was even there.

So he kept his silent vigil, witness to her compassion and pain. He both wished for her to love him always and for her to find the happiness she cried for.

Selfishness wanted her love even beyond death, but he knew it wouldn't last.

"I'm so tired of you."

"I am too."

"Tired of who: me or you?"

"Does it matter?"

He remembered a sigh, as light and shallow as the time when *enough* could have meant something.

"No, I guess it doesn't."

They had lived together for years, and for stupid, petty and normal reasons, everything about them went wrong. For all the reasons of falling apart, theirs was simply from the simple pressure of sharing existences.

But ever since the sixth of June, she kept the scrapbook close. So perhaps, he thought, everything about them had somehow gone right after all. And though there were other photos to travel through, he sometimes stayed within her book, waking only when she missed him enough to open it.

"It's okay," she said randomly as she stood motionless by the coffee pot, mug forgotten in her hand.

He remembered a guilty silence.

On the fourth of August, the world was burning, one by one, as his sweetheart slipped the pictures of them into the fireplace flames. On the fourth her devotion had apparently run out, too tired to support a dying heart, and it had begun to shed its skin of the burdens. He couldn't even cry out to her from the blackening corners she suspended above the flames.

Ashes now, the pictures of their smiles from the creek by her mother's house, of their kiss beneath the mistletoe.

But he didn't leave. As those ashes fell, he watched her while she set what was left of him aflame. He didn't need to hear her voice to know she was tired of grieving, tired of facing mistakes – his and hers – in every frame within every room. Awry, his desire to be angry, to scream or beg, collapsed in the lost forever he dwelled in. Because even though he knew blaming her for running away would be easy, he knew too that there was no one to blame at all.

On the gallows of her lashes, her tears of surmounting regret hung. But even as she burned their past, there was an undeniable truth in the embers. She was grieving, she was running away, but didn't she deserve to?

Didn't she deserve more than this?

The world was burning, and she was slipping away, but still he stayed. He stayed in the blackening scraps until they were no more, only to wake again in her arsonist hands. He could have run to the other pictures of himself in the house, away from fires and aching hearts, but he didn't. He stayed in this last moment when she was still *his* and watched their world burn.

And he never looked away.

"Tell me the truth."

"About what?"

"Do you love me anymore?"

He remembered not knowing what to say, only because he didn't know the truth, and if he didn't know the truth, then he couldn't even tell her a lie. So he said nothing.

Her tears had hurt in a way that stung like shame, but it was her nod that twisted his gut, as if she understood.

And maybe she did understand.

Forty-two pictures she burned yesterday, and though there were a hundred and fifty six more for him to travel from, he knew that it was the end. She didn't belong to him anymore, even if he belonged to her still.

So when she walked into their bedroom, he didn't follow her through the Sears portraits of them, didn't watch over her through their wedding photograph on the dresser as she fell asleep. Everywhere else, he watched her slip away but never the bedroom. He didn't belong there anymore.

Thus on the sixth of October when she led a man, stranger to him and perhaps to her too, in that room, he escaped to the snapshot of himself sleeping on the couch with his mouth comically wide. And he recognized futility.

It wasn't love in the next room, but one day it would be. Maybe not with that man, maybe not with the next one, but one day she would throw away more pictures to make room for the new.

He didn't even wonder what would happen if she burned every last photo, and he avoided thinking about where he would go – *should* go – and of what lay beyond.

It didn't matter anyway.

"Sweetheart," he called out to her, seconds before the chestnut door devoured her to spit her out again into the outside world.

She had understood, he thought, and that was what made him remember. He turned to her, three days after she asked that question. He was afraid for a second that she left anyway, even after he called for her. Tell me the truth, she had said, so when he saw that she hadn't left, that she was waiting—had always been waiting—he told her the truth.

"I do love you."

Then he saw something snap and break within her, a constant in her life that slipped from her delicate fingers. She had been waiting for so long, waiting for him to leave, for him to stay, for *something*. In the ripple of her silence, he was worried that he was too late, that her doubt had rightfully robbed her of forgiveness.

"I still love you," he said again, "and I'm not going to leave you. Ever. I promise."

"I told you not to lie to me."

As he watched her take the stranger to their bed – her bed – he found himself wishing that he had lied.

"Shut up! Don't give me all of that right now. I'm too angry to put up with you right now. Just because you say a bunch of pretty bullshit words won't change that."

For all the time after he rediscovered his wife, he had kept true to his promise to stay. And for all the stupid, petty and normal reasons in the world to fall apart, he refused to go down without a fight.

"I love you."

"I'm still angry."

"I'm still here."

Framed portraits, misplaced candid shots, he could travel through them all. Yet his grip on acceptance, on his consciousness so closely bound now to delirium, could handle only so much of existing through the printed past to watch the future roll on without him.

So on the thirteenth of November, he retreated into her scrapbook and settled into the slivers and cracks of their life yet unable to find a home in any of the pieces.

It took him twenty-one days to find the memory he wished to live in for years and years after all the photographs would inevitably burn or tarnish with age, after the love of his life would move beyond the need for the scrapbook.

A newspaper clipping, a small article dedicated more to the accident than to him, hidden in the last page--he would wait for her, in the book, in that folded moment when *enough* was all they needed.

“I love you—please don’t go.”

Flames and blood, metal and glass, but at least he had done well protecting her.

It took her thirty-eight seconds to *understand*. He was beyond the help that had yet to arrive, and he could see the awful revelation on her face that he would break his promise after all.

It took her thirty-eight seconds to realize everything that he had already known.

“Our life wasn’t perfect. But it was pretty damn close, wasn’t it?” she whispered to hide the tears.

He remembered smiling, and he thought that he might remember telling her: yes, yes it was.