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Electric Dreams  
28.7.2022

Everlasting Promise

I love this woman.  
I always loved her.  
And I always will.  
Even if she is no more and I will persevere in a lonely life.

*After: A Good Day*

The clattering of hard material buffered under a layer of water raises her awareness to what her husband does. What is it called again? Washing... something. Vegetables? No, they wouldn't make any noise. Fruit? Nah, same issue. Bark! But why wash it anyway when you want to burn it? Besides, it is in the middle of summer and one of the hottest days in the year so far.

Slowly she stands up, moving around the kitchen table towards the sink. She is curious and wants to know what it is called her husband does.

“What do you do there?”

“Washing the dishes, my dear.”

“Oh of course, silly, I know that. But why do it right now? They are clean anyway and we will have dinner in not another couple of hours. So, why did you take them out of the cupboard?”

“Darling, we have had dinner 20 minutes ago. Don't you remember?”

This matter-of-fact statement throws her of balance. She is not prepared for such an answer. But it is only for the blink of an eye before she regains her ground.

“Well, sure I remember! Don't mess with me like this.”

“I'm not messing around, I just figured you forgot about us having dinner.”

“As if I could forget about having dinner with you. You said it yourself, we had it only a couple of minutes ago. We sat down at the table like we always do, like we always did for the past sixty years. I took out the plates, you cut the bread. One bottle of beer for both of us, not more – you must take care of your blood sugar, the doctor says.”

“That's right. It's all like it is supposed to be.”

A satisfied smirk plays around his mouth, making the wrinkles around his eyes adding up in number. She loves it.

And she hates it. Because nothing is like it used to be. Something is wrong, she feels it in her guts, deep down in her body something strives against the demeanour they treat each other. Something feels out of place, simply not right in its entirety. And it feels like this not just today, but for a longer period of time. For how long? She cannot remember the exact moment when she lost count of the slight changes making their way into her daily routine.

Was it around when she visited her friend up in the north in spring, where they went swimming in the ocean fully dressed? Or when she taught the neighbour's kid to ride a bicycle without training wheels? Probably it connected to one of her husband's frequent and, at times, long business trips from where he always surprised her with a little gift.

A gift is what she longs for. Or did she already receive it?

Slightly prickling sweetness fills her nose with the sensation of standing in a garden full of roses. Oh, what a heavenly scent! It includes the dampness of freshly watered earth, the coolness of her own hands digging in the dirt. The lightness of the leaves opens a portal to the light summer breeze tickling her skin, the enlightening sensation of the sun strokes her skin softly, while the humming of bees comes and goes – they caress the roses in front of her with gentle admiration, not focusing on one flower solely, but dancing from one to the other.

Yes. Roses were her most favourite gift of all.

Probably, he accidentally brought another sort of rose with him this time, but it does not flourish like the other ones, and he is afraid to tell her about his mistake because he knows about her admiration of those queens of the flowers.

Yes, this must be the reason why everyday feels a little bit odd. Out of place, she might say. However, she cannot pin down her feeling to one specific incident. If feels alright sitting in the kitchen, watching her husband doing the dishes. Why does she feel like she forgot something?

“Did you water the flowers, darling?”

“Huh?” She comes back to her senses promptly, drifting into the present like a bee targeting the sweetest-smelling flower without thinking about it, reacting only on instinct.

“The flowers on the front porch. It was so hot today, they must be starving for water.”

“No, I didn't do that. You haven't told me.”

“Well, now I'm telling you. Look outside the window, you can see their little heads hanging low. Would you do lift them up?”

She crosses her arms in front of her chest and stares in disbelief outside the window. It does not take her aback seeing the flowers running low on water, but it does anger her a little how he treats her. Like a child who needs to be told what to do before bedtime. She would have done it in any case, flowers are one of the most precious things to her in her life. How could she have forgotten, she always knew exactly what they needed, she was the one taking care of them all year.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll do it since you asked so nicely. Besides you are busy with your hands covered in bubbles, you could not do it right away when they need it.”

While her husband moved on to dry the dishes with a tea towel and to put the plates in neat order in the cupboard above the sink, she turns away from the window and moves out of the kitchen. The way to the basement, where they keep their watering-can, is cluttered with photos on both walls and a huge chest of drawers to the left. Each drawer contains useful tools for everyday usage: umbrellas, handkerchiefs, shopping bags, shoes and so on. Even scissors, yarn, seashells, and little pebble stones are neatly stored in those drawers – they come in handy when you least expect it.

The door to the basement does not close properly anymore; the weather changes, the temperature difference between living space and basement, and the repeated usage of the door wore out the hinges and the door’s former bright yellow varnish flakes off by now. It desperately needs a new layer of varnish and an oiling of the hinges.

Opening the creaking door, she looks down the stairway into a black abyss of nothingness. The light switch needs to be pressed hard to call for an action of the old flickering lamp that always needs a couple of seconds to give an answer to the person standing on top of the stairs.

She descends a couple of steps before bowing down to grab the handle of the can she needs for the flowers. Ascending the stairs, she does not bother to switch of the light or close the door – it will not take long to take care of the flowers. She never thinks of turning out the light, what for after all in this short time?

Moving through the kitchen to the front porch, her husband still dries the dishes and does not even look up at her having successfully – as requested – maintained the can from the basement.

When she approaches the flowers aligned on the front porch, she eventually recognizes the hotness of the day’s sun fleeting through the now slowly cooling air. A light breeze soothes her mind, eventually making her forget about the sensation of having had an odd encounter with her husband.

Gently she pours the can's fluid, life-providing content over the flowers – first their earth, then their leaves and finally a bit over their buds and blossoms. How beautifully sprinkled they appeared in the light of the setting sun mixing with the light stream coming out the kitchen window.

*It is like I provided them with a new life, and in gratitude they immediately took on a new colourful dress to celebrate,* she thought to herself while her eyes lovingly caress the flowers once more before she returns to the kitchen.

“All flowers are watered.”

“Fine, darling. Do you want to refill the watering-can right away?”

“Oh, no, there's plenty of water inside, just look how heavy the can still is.”

She places the can in the sink, next to her husband drying the last forks and knives left from washing.

“Just look outside the window at those flowery beauties. Don't you think they look splendid?”

“Yes, they absolutely do, darling.”

“Anyway, what's for dinner? I'm starving after this hot summer's day. Hopefully the tomatoes will be ripe in a couple of days.”

“Darling, we have had dinner about 30 minutes ago, remember? And in addition to tomatoes, we also had cucumbers directly from our backyard. You selected them yourself.”

She watches him place the tea towel on a hook next to the fridge, before he turns back to the sink inspecting the can in there.

“Well, of course I remember, silly. Just testing your memory, silly. None of us is getting younger after all!” she replies playfully annoyed, shrugging off the slight offense she feels at being called out. But behind her joyous mimic hides a shadow of looming darkness, readying itself to catch her the moment she lets her guard down.

“You take care of those dishes, and I will read the newspapers to you. Got to keep you up to date, old man!”

She goes back to sit in her favourite spot at the kitchen table, opens the newspaper and begins to read the sports section.

Meanwhile, her husband takes hold of the can and pours water into it. The water that runs out of the can is yellow at first but soon becomes clearer. Once the water running out is as clear as the water running in, he turns off the water tap and places the can in the bin for recycling.

Sitting down next to her, he passes the evening listening to the newspaper read out loud to him, he does not care that she picked the politics section believing she would read the sports section. Meanwhile the light bulb in the basement flickers for the last time before it burns through and the yellow paint on the flowers on the front porch dries in the cool evening breeze like statues getting settled in their new place of exhibition.

*Before: Harsh Reality*

“It just doesn’t feel right.”

“I know, Big Sis, I know.”

Today the two sisters attended a funeral near their grandmother’s house. A few years had passed by since the very first incident of their Granny forgetting where she lived. In the meantime, the two girls had grown into young women in their mid-forties, both feeling obliged to take responsibility for the woman who took loving care of them when they were children. It was not a mere return of favour, but a genuine act of loving admiration since their parents lived in another country most of the year.

Only a few people attended the funeral service, mostly family and close friends. Leading a life in seclusion left marks in the life of the deceased. The illness had received its price: at some point, socializing was out of the question.

“There were not that many people.”

“No, there weren’t. We can’t blame them. This illness is cruel. And she really did get angrier the more the illness progressed.”

At first, it was only missed doctor’s appointments or the keys of the car she could not find anymore. Nothing suspicious, she was not the best at remembering where she wanted to meet with friends and ran a little late all lifelong. It was part of her character. But the illness sneaked up on her, unnoticed by her, expected but feared by everyone. Memory loss grew more severe, she got lost in her own hometown, asked to meet up with long deceased people, mixed up days and years. Towards the end it became immensely difficult to take her home from the police station where she was taken when eventually found on her way across the highway. She did not want to go anywhere she did not feel at home. The loss of sensation of having a place to call home came simultaneously with the retreat into solitude. Only occasionally she recognized someone of her family, when not, she got angry and accused everyone of trying to rob an old defenceless lady. She could defend herself very well.

But there was one person whom she relied on. Her childhood friend, her best friend, her neighbour, the love of her life – the one person she spent her own life with for more than

eighty years. Her husband was always able to calm her down, to make her laugh, to return home with him. No matter in which time she stuck, she always recognized some characteristic trait about him that made her feel accepted and at ease. And he had the most wonderful stories to tell her so she would believe being in a dungeon rather than a police station.

“Everything will be different from now on.” The older woman had a longing look on her face. She longed for her grandparents to have had a different life with a happier ending. She longed to be able to change the past, and not few nights had passed in which she imagined another development of the disease.

“Yes, it will be different. But we will still be able to look into her confident face and Grandpa wouldn’t have wished for anything else. We might even ask him how he gets along with Granny’s illness.”

“It won’t be the same. Grandpa is dead.”

“Only his body. His mind lives on. He still loves her. Like he said: he loves her no matter what, even when she is no more, and he dies.”

“How do you know? It is just a robot in the disguise of Grandpa.”

The slowly intensely burning sun ridiculed their serious topic of discussion and the wind whispered mockingly through the branches they stood below. Both of them knew that this discussion was not appropriate to be held on a graveyard. Especially, as they just buried their grandfather’s bodily remains. It brought a sense of surrealism with it – burying only the body when the mind was not gone into the afterlife but transferred to another body, another manner of containment.

“The technique is sufficient, and doctors and lawyers share the same opinion: to ensure our Granny with a healthy and sociable life outside of a hospital, uploading Grandpa’s mind into a humanoid has been the best option. I wouldn’t have liked to visit Granny in a hospital, possibly drugged and confused. In the long run, I probably would’ve felt guilty taking her there against her will.”

Despite being the younger of the two of them, she took care of the legal aspects of this new method to elevate patients’ pains while forgetting their loved ones. Like her older sister she has had her concerns about the method and the possibility about her grandfather experiencing any pain. But the method had promised to take small steps copying the mind without effecting the original mind. And in the end, their Grandpa was in favour of this method; he could not even bear the imagination of leaving behind the love of his life alone in the hands of nurses and caregivers, who sure did an excellent job but did not know what he knew. He wated for his darling to life a happy life.

“You’re probably right. After all, she forgets everything and everyone in the blink of an eye. But no matter what the doctors say, it does feel uncanny. Grandpa died three days ago and still I will be able to see his face and witness his demeanour like he just came back from a business trip.”

“It is not really him, it’s just a humanoid. And you saw it yourself last week, it takes good care of Granny. It is patient and non-accusing and makes sure she doesn’t get lost and leads a regular life within the means she is able to. And once Granny dies, Grandpa’s memories will persevere only for a short period of time. It’s like a time capsule; but with time it deletes itself. Or we can decide to erase everything on the spot. It’s not meant to be a permanent container for memories, you know. Grandpa confined to this method for medical reasons and in favour of Granny’s mental health. This is the only reason to have a humanoid, it’s not meant to last.”

“How can you be so sure? It is an exact copy of Grandpa. It can even eat and drink and have empathy and collects data and updates Granny’s doctors without them even seeing her in person. It does everything Grandpa did for Granny. And it has his memories, adapted his character. It might even be relatable for this thing to demand to life on, based on how Grandpa acted. Where is the difference between Grandpa and this... this imposter?”

Her younger sister gazed across the graveyard. It was a wonderful day, the heat of the summer already in the air but too early in the morning to call the temperatures hot. In the shadow of the church stood a group of people together in a small huddle, easily chatting with muffled voices and grave faces. Three children around the age of eight to twelve were crouched down next to the adults and played with the pebble stones the ways were laid out.

They did not tell their children about their Grandpa’s decision. Being mothers – having to protect their children from any kind of dangers the world may hold and to explain basic facts of life to them – made this a heart-breaking predicament to choose the ‘right’ way for their children’s life. But still they did not want their children to get involved in ethical debates so early, so unprepared. For their children, their Grandpa died, once and for all. They knew about their Granny’s condition and that it was not safe for them to meet her. They would not ask for permission to see her, they barely got to know her anyway.

Watching those children, her heart sank a little deeper into the endless realms of her chest. The gap between her reality and the secret she would be hiding her entire life for the sake of the people she loved the most widened into endlessness. She made her decision. There was no turning back from it.

She took a deep breath before turning to her older sister who was so sceptical about the fine line between fiction and reality, between life and death, real and artificial.

The two sisters looked into each other's eyes, holding back their tears that longed to be let go, longed to be shed in the memory of their beloved Grandpa and his sacrifice for their Granny.

“We know the humanoid is not Grandpa. Because Grandpa is dead. And because our kids will never ask to visit him again.”

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