

# ~ Blinking Cursors ~

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Plot Warning: This is a collection of brief snapshots, not a real story, so there is no overall plot. The link between the snapshots is that they are all from a writer's perspective and deal with the theme of inspiration (sometimes in a roundabout way).

Content Warning: There are warnings for the majority of these snapshots, since they at times deal or have a theme that may disturb some (I find at least one of them quite disturbing myself). I thought to give them all in the beginning. *A Few Words* deals with bereavement and loss. *Ten Years On* deals with drug-abuse. *In your Arms* deals with physical abuse. *Heroes* and *Twenty Minutes* include graphic depictions of violence. *Five o'clock Shadow* has a transgender theme. *Weakness* has an S/M-D/s theme (no sex, though). I have to point out here that I don't agree with, consider funny or in any way condone either drug-abuse or physical abuse against women (or men for that matter) and I want to apologise in advance for anything that may be disturbing.

Another Warning: The beginning of *A story's story* and a large part of *Heroes* deal with story themes and characters. This is not a criticism of anyone or anyone's work (a friend pointed out that it might look that way, so I thought to mention this in the beginning) but part of the inspiration theme of the snapshots.

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## A story's story

Sometimes I want to write a story with no anguish and no heroes, no blood, no sweat, no tears. Just a simple story. But that's not the way it works, is it? Who wants to read a story about an unknown, not anyone important, not anyone interesting? Who wants to read a story about the ordinary, with no real humour, with no real passion, with no real issues or desires even? Well, that's the funny bit, isn't it? There is someone out there who would like to read that story. Who?, you are thinking. Hah! Me, of course.

I want a story with no heroes and no villains, with no half-ass improbable hurdles, no rapists coming out of the night, no weird girlfriends deciding on revenge ten years on, no secret agents and mighty cops, no incredibly rich women, no journalists out on the field, no abused children and, in the name of every god in creation, no angst and no women that are afraid to speak or accept or forgive. Shit happens, sure I know. But I don't want that. I don't want adversity and fear and blood and bullets and knives flying and all of that.

I want a simple story. About coming home from work tired. About going out and maybe seeing someone. And no funny stuff; no, she is not married or divorced or with an abusive boyfriend, none of that. Just ordinary people. And no she doesn't need to be saved, and, infamy to every

story, I don't either. And for gods' sake we are not soul mates and we were not together in any past life or anything even remotely like that. I just love her and she loves me. Period.

It sounds boring, doesn't it? Yeah it is, I know. But comforting still, isn't it? To read a story with no suspense, no great heights and no mighty falls. To read a story, just a simple story, with no heroes of mighty deeds and no mad villains.

"Hey... hey", her voice is a caress against the top of my head and I smile, "What are you writing? New story?". As my fingertips hit the keys, my smile widens and I mumble almost incoherently, "Nah...". Her laughter is a rain of silver droplets in my ears and I can't help but chuckle in reflex. She always makes me laugh, even if there is no joke. "Let me read", she pleads; she is not expecting me to allow it, I never do until I have finished. I gesture negligently at the screen and I can feel her gasp in delighted surprise. My grin feels like it would split my face. In a small way, I have made her happy.

It still bothers her, even after all this time, that I never let her read the stories before they finish, that I never ask her advice, that I never ask her to beta for me. She does it for others but never for me. Hungry eyes read the few words I have typed and her fingers drum a tattoo on my shoulder as she leans over me. I can feel the laughter leaving her and her hand grips my shoulder. "What's wrong? Have you blocked again?", she asks, the worry bell-like in her soft tone. I shake my head negatively even before the words have left her mouth.

Her breath is deep and I can almost hear the thoughts chasing each other in her head. "I like your stories...heroes and villains", her words soothing. I almost laugh but I don't, I don't want to hurt her. It's not her fault, it's the job that always makes her analyse every word, every movement, every glance. I don't mind really. She understands me better than I ever care to put into words and that suits me fine. It suits her too. Spending all day listening to other people, she likes my silence.

"Baby, what's wrong?", she asks quietly, carefully. She knows I hate it when she worries. I have my ups and downs, she knows it well. But this is no depression, merely thought. I shrug, trying to comfort her. Her hands start kneading my shoulders carefully; long minutes pass as I relax into her ministrations. Finally she speaks again, in soft tones and gentle words, "Whatever it is, I'm here. You know that". I nod silently. More minutes pass and I close my eyes letting my mind feel only her strong caresses.

When I clear my throat, she stops, waiting to hear my words. "Just thinking", I say quietly. I can feel the tension leaving her and she leans in until her lips are next to my ear. Her words are softer than my breath, "I'd like to read that story, too". I lean my head a fraction towards her, silent invitation. Her lips are soft against my temple and I smile. When she kisses me, I always smile.

I watch her hands as she takes the laptop off my lap, depositing it carefully on the table, next to my cigarettes and coke. Her fingertips touch my cheek fleetingly, her own silent invitation. I stand slowly, never looking toward her. I only take her hand when it enters my field of vision. As she gathers me in, I let her hold me and guide me away from my chair and the table with my things and the blinking cursor that occupies my evenings.

Just as we reach the stairs, she stops. Her low voice caresses my hearing, "I like living that story". I smile and let her lead me to our inner sanctum and the embrace that will hold me through the night. I don't have to tell her, she knows already. I like living that story, too.

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## **Heroes**

You look at me as I sit in front of the screen and you smile. It is that small lazy smile that only I ever see. Others see you angry or serious or excited, sometimes with your brow furrowing in sudden anger, sometimes with a smile on your lips. But only I ever see this, your shoulders relaxed, your eyes twinkling with some thought, your small smile. It is the image of contentment. It is an image I love.

My eyes caress the scar on the side of your face, just millimetres from your eye as it goes down the side of your cheek almost to your throat. You are watching the TV, some sport or other, even after all this time I cannot help but smile; how is it that you like every sport ever invented on this earth? You watch TV and your eyes slip from the players onto me and that small smile plays on your lips. I can feel your contentment as you watch me chasing the cursor across the page, my fingers holding their own intricate dance over the keyboard. I would never have thought that my writing would make you content. Not happy, happiness you find in the other parts of our days and our nights, but contentment.

The feeling that everything is as it should be.

It brings me happiness to know you don't resent the time I spend in front of the computer, my mind in the lives of others, falling in love with women that exist only in my mind, loving them, even hurting them at times, saving them and being saved in turns.

You love my stories, even if you seldom read them yourself. It is one of your little quirks; you like your stories told, not read. I read to you sometimes before we go to bed. My stories but mostly the stories of others. Once you asked me why I prefer the stories of others to my own for your amusement. I did not answer. How could I? With every word written, every character revealed, I betray you. I love them, not as much as you, but I do love them. Yet that love is not what makes me look out into the night beyond the windows of our home and cry in my heart of hearts from guilt at my betrayal. It is the knowledge that deep inside I am writing as much for myself as for others. The expectations of others, Katherine, my beta, once called it.

Some of my stories I don't want you to hear, I don't want you to read. I fear you will recognise too much of yourself in them. Your gentle hands that I gift to my lovers. The flashing anger you keep inside that I steal for my strong silent types. The insecurity, the fear you hide behind your bouts of self-destruction that I burden my tortured souls. The rage of your revenge that I give to my dark-hearted villains. The bravery you never acknowledge and always dismiss that I imbue my heroes.

I made the mistake once of telling a friend, a friend of mine, not of yours, that you are the blueprint, the prototype, the real thing. She laughed in my face. I was a hairsbreadth away from breaking my promise. But I didn't. I didn't. They don't like you, these friends of mine. Even after all this time, I can still see it in their eyes every time you come into the room. In the beginning they told me all the time, now finally, thankfully, they merely send me their silent disapproval in the gazes that slid off of you.

You are not good enough for me, certainly out of my league. You are not smart, you are not educated, you can barely speak in polite company, you are not for me. You live off me, you are a loser, just a bum off the street. You are not beautiful or even handsome enough to be a trophy on my arm.

I try to ignore them. Once it hurt me but now I just ignore them. I want to rub you in their faces. I want to crow my pride in you from the roof of our house. But I won't break my promise to you. I won't. They are my friends, the people that are my past and its reminder in my present. Some of them are even in my present, in my job, in the things that I do outside our home. I keep your trust, your confidence in my heart. I let their gazes slid off you and allow you the Cheshire-cat smile that never reaches your lips. I know it's there, I can see it in your eyes but you never let them know. You know what they think of you; there have been too many snide little comments, too many dismissals, too many loud silences in your hearing.

You made me promise and that promise I keep no matter what my pride demands. I will never tell where or when or how I met you. I will never tell of the scars that you carry on your body or in your soul. I will never tell the tale, neither with my mouth nor with my hands, of that alley, smelling of piss and vomit and sour beer. I will never tell of my fear, my despair, of that prayer that I sent to a god I don't believe in. Not to be saved, I had no hope for salvation, just for it all to end quickly. I will never tell of the sound of your voice, slurred from exhaustion, trembling from the night's bitter cold, as you stood in the mouth of the alley.

I will never tell of your headlong rush into the murky depths, too dark for you to see if there were only two of them, if they had weapons, if the body on the ground was still alive. I will never tell of the sound of your fists against cloth and flesh, of your grunts filled with pain, of your whimper when the knife cut you, of the cut-off scream as your flailing fist collapsed a man's windpipe leaving him to choke to death. I will never tell of the mobile phone left on the mouth of the alley that brought the police there long minutes later, of the officers coming in, of their bright flash-lights that blinded me, of their distant voices as they told me it would all be alright.

I will never tell of my first sight of you through eyes blurry and sore, kneeling in the dirty sludge, blood darkening your clothes and face, still desperately holding the man's broken arm behind his back as the officers tried to pry your grip away. I will never tell of the ambulance doors closing, the paramedics working in controlled panic as dark blood seeped from you onto the floor. I will never tell of the moment you opened your eyes, still groggy from the drugs, of the question that shone through them as you struggled to remember who I was.

I will never tell of the two weeks that I came by each evening as you slowly, painfully, recovered from the puncture wound that had collapsed your lung. I will never tell of the months of courting I had to put in just to make you see that this was not merely misplaced gratitude or some form of hero worship. I will never tell of the happiest moment of my life when you looked at me with something akin to fear in your eyes before you took my hand and kissed it tenderly. I will never tell how I could see you waiting for my rejection, how the tears fell from your eyes when I kissed you.

I look at you now and I can see the worry in your eyes. I know you can see remembered pain in my eyes and it scares you. As always you want to somehow make it better but you are not certain whether it is me that's hurting or one of my characters as I chase the cursor across the screen with words. I send you a smile and a relieved grin appears on your face as I turn back to the screen.

I look at this newest story of mine and I can't help but feel a twinge of guilt. Here you are again in the characters I weave from words and feelings. I re-read my words, my fanciful description of yet another hero and I cringe with guilt. Here she is, strong and fit and beautiful, with thick marvellous hair and eyes the colour of the brilliant summer seas. She is articulate and smart with a great job that everyone will envy and knows both how to love and fight. A hero like all heroes, because heroes look like heroes and behave like heroes and live charmed lives.

Unless they are of the tortured variety, when they have a dark secret or a dark time in their past or once they did bad things. But, as all stories must be, through love and smart words they will get over it all and be the heroes they should be and act like heroes and look like heroes and live charmed lives. I can just picture it all in my mind and I know in my heart that this is what everyone expects, that's what I expect when I read other people's stories.

Modern fairytales where heroes are heroes and villains are villains. Even if there are twists and turns, the heroes always act like heroes and look like heroes and live charmed lives. I glance at you and immediately turn my eyes to the screen when I see you are still looking at me. You say it is your favourite thing to do, watching me write. Ironically enough I believe you, how could I not, I can see it in the small smile that plays on your lips.

I look once more at this hero I have conjured from stereotypes and people's expectations and the hazy recollections of childhood fairytales. I hit the backspace and start again. Maybe no-one will ever see this story, maybe they will all hate it. But this hero will be mine.

Short with scarred hands from a job that she neither loves nor hates, a job that's just a job. With frizzy hair cropped close for convenience. With a face like any other face, everyday and ordinary and brown eyes with no marvellous spark in them. With a brain like any other brain that managed to struggle through school and could have even managed some mediocre college if the money had not been that tight. A hero that would laugh at your face to be called a hero and no amount of love or smart words would change that. A hero that will walk away from any fight that comes along but will habitually take the side of the pavement near the street when we walk just in case some drunk driver loses control.

I look up as I feel you near me and I watch you deposit a mug of sweet tea at my elbow before you silently make your way back to the couch. It is my evening beverage and you never forget it but you don't want to interrupt my muse, so you neither speak nor touch me. I re-read through this new character of mine. I can't help the small smile that turns my lips upwards. That's more like it. A hero that doesn't look like a hero, doesn't act like a hero and lives no charmed life. A real-life hero. My hero. You.

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## **Weakness**

The bed is narrow, the needle in my arm hurts and I want out. I want out now. The doctors have not come on their rounds yet. Every sound from the corridor seems the toll of doom. The laptop is warm on my thighs and every new line that appears from my cramped fingers seems more nonsensical than the previous one. I hit the backspace listlessly. I haven't been able to write a single line worth keeping in all my time here. The hand on my upper arm is warm and I flinch in reflex. I turn to look but there are no blue-grey eyes to look at, merely a very respectfully bowed head. I can feel a small stirring of anger in my belly. What is she thinking? This is not the time for this, or the place. Can't she see that I don't need this now? All I want is my lover.

"What?", I can hear my voice snapping. The sound surprises me for a second; I don't think I've spoken in anything louder than a whisper in all my time here. The answer is delivered in the habitual low tones, "Would my mistre...ah... would you like some water?". Anger stirs once more. What is this? She doesn't do rookie mistakes. She didn't do them when she was a bloody rookie for fuck's sake. She's never embarrassed me like that in public. "No", I snap again as I turn my eyes to the screen. I feel more than hear the quiet retreat. My fingers hit the keyboard but all my mind can feel is the sound of wheels from the corridor. Are they coming for me? I try to keep my eyes on the screen but they dart to the door. What have they found? Why are they keeping me here longer? Is it a gurney? My heart speeds up and I can feel the blood leaving my head in a rush. What could it be? What if...

The clearing of a throat and a hand on my arm make me turn. What does she want now? Again she does not look at me. It takes me a moment to realise that she is actually bowing. Bowing! In public! "What are you doing?", I can hear the anger in my voice. "Would my lad... would you like some juice?", again the low tones. I breathe deep to keep from exploding in the anger that engulfs me, my voice is harsh, "NO!". The blood is pounding in my temples. What the fuck is she thinking? Could she be more obvious? Can she not see what I need right now?

The sound of the door opening makes me turn my head; I know I am still flushed in anger as Doctor Johnson comes in, followed by her white-robed entourage. I almost panic as I look at her but she is standing casually at my side, her face expressionless. Thank every goddess in existence; they did not see. Even so, my anger has not subsidised. How could it? She never makes these kinds of mistakes.

The doctor's voice is calm as always, "I see you are perkier today. How are you feeling?". I know I should answer calmly and evenly as always but it is hard when blood is rushing through me and

my anger has been so thoroughly aroused. I cannot keep the harshness from my voice no matter how hard I try, "How do you think I am feeling shut up in here, doctor? It's been two extra days and no explanation. Just tell what is wrong with me and be done with it". My anger finds a target and I can see the doctor's eyes widening. She does not know me at all this doctor that Mark suggested as his replacement. Doctors! Ha!

"Ah... Miss Cartledge... We just needed to do some more tests. You were so listless when you came. The tests are fine of course but this fatigue worries me", the doctor stammers out. Fatigue? What fatigue? I am well and they have been keeping me here? As I take breath to give this doctor a piece of my mind, she speaks again, "But I can see now that the vitamins from the IV have done their work. You are certainly perkier than before. Maybe all you needed was a boost. The weather has been so dreadful this winter. And all your tests are fine. You can go home but you will have to take your supplements. Something must be missing from your diet". She is blabbing now and I know it is because my eyes flash in anger. Is she an idiot? What vitamins? I am fine, you idiot, I don't need supplements. I am just angry.

As soon as the thought crosses my mind, my thoughts screech to a sudden halt. I close my eyes for long moments and when I open them again all anger has left them. My voice is cold but I don't care, this doctor is history, I'll have to get another recommendation from Mark, "Fine. Then, Doctor Johnson, I suggest you get my release papers ready. I want to have dinner in my own house". The doctor is nodding, "Of course, Miss Cartledge. They will be ready within the hour and you can go home. I'll leave the prescription with the nurse and you can get your supplements from the dispensary downstairs". I nod in acknowledgement but I have already dismissed her from my mind. I am out of here. I want to get up and jump around like a small child in glee.

I barely register the doctors' exit; my eyes are already seeking grey ones. "Come here", I order without hesitation. With small hesitant steps, she comes to stand beside me from her spot next to the window. I try to keep my touch gentle as I raise a strong chin to look at me. Happiness mixes with fear in the eyes that hold my heart even if I will never admit it aloud. "Manipulation? You will regret this", I growl. The whisper is almost too low for me to hear, "I know". A part of me as always wants to hold back but I cannot listen to it now.

My hand is strong as I pull her toward me and as always she obeys my wish without hesitation. As I swoop down on her lips, I pour everything into the contact, my love, my affection, my desire. All the things I cannot say in words, not to her; all the things I secretly say to her in the words I give to my characters. I don't pull back until my lungs start to spasm from lack of air. Her breathing is ragged and I smile, mine is ragged too. Grey eyes glance at me for permission and I nod silently. As the familiar weight settles against my chest, I tighten my arms around strong shoulders.

I should have known, she never makes mistakes. And she knows me so well, sometimes I think too well. A part of me cringes at the knowledge that she knows my fears, even if I have never voiced them. I feel her burrowing against me and my hand caresses a tense back without thought. The tenseness that slowly recedes under my fingers finally makes its way to the forefront of my mind.

Guilt floods me; I have been blind, foolish, inconsiderate once again. Images kaleidoscope in my memory. Eyes red from exhaustion as I wake up in the middle of night. A trembling hand tossing back two pills swallowed dry, brow scrunched in pain. A voice gruff and scratchy just before dawn, cutting words berating the nurse for turning on the light disturbing my exhausted sleep. I want to cry out from the leaden pain that crushes my heart. I want to beg for forgiveness but the words never reach my lips. Such words never leave my mouth.

For the millionth time, I wish I were not such a coward. But fear constricts my throat. Weakness is a fatal flaw. No-one likes weakness. Certainly no-one loves weakness. I can't expect her to stay with a weakling, a coward. I can't lose her. If she leaves me, I'd be gone too. You can't live without a heart.

I don't realise I have tightened my grip on her until I see my white knuckles against her shoulder. I slowly release her, maybe she will think it anger rather than need. She straightens slowly until I can see grey eyes looking at me. They search my face full of worry and I can feel my pulse jump. Her whisper is tentative, "Lover?". I want to close my eyes and curl up in pain. She never uses that code unless it's important, unless the world takes her away from me.

It is our special code for the codicil of our contract, for when we need to be equals. I nod silently, I want to deny her permission but I can't. Our contract will not allow it and my heart will not stand it, I've never been able to deny her even when my heart bleeds. I steel myself for what is to come. Will she leave me? Is it something for her job? Gods, I pray desperately, make it something for the job. But the fear that clutches my heart in claws of fire is the one that always accompanies me, night and day. Has she found out? Has she seen? Has she discovered what I have been so desperately hiding all these years? Will this be it? Will she leave me now?

Her touch pulls me away from the screaming in my heart as she takes my hand and kisses it gently. I clench my other fist, the needle sending a stab of pain into my brain. She never does this, she knows, oh my god, she knows. She leans in next to me until her lips are next to my ear. "I love you. All of you", the words softly caress the soft skin and fine hairs of my neck. Panic grips me; what does that mean? A hand is placed squarely on my chest and I know she feels my speeding heartbeat. "All of you, Eve. Fear included", the words make my mind swim and my stomach roil. She knows, a part of me screams in panic. She knows, a part of me sighs in relief.

For the first time in all these years, I am not the one to raise gently a trembling chin. The eyes that hold my own are full of fire and power; I have seen them before but always turned to others, never to me. My throat is closed from fear, I cannot say a word, I can barely breathe. The kiss on my lips is velvet soft but the eyes that pin me are hard agates and the hand that grips my own is strong. The tone of the words murmured against my lips is the one I have only heard in the inauguration of our contracts, all three of them, "All of you".

This is the first time that grey eyes look at me as she speaks in that tone and I want to howl at my blindness. I had always thought it was conviction and need that I heard as she knelt in front of me in the presence of others, her low voice declaring my mastery over her body and mind. But her eyes, dark now almost to the colour of slate, speak neither of need nor of conviction but of trust and, oh gods, dare I even think it, love. Not the love of passion or affection but that deep-



seated feeling of completion that has taken residence in the heart and cannot be evicted by either argument or act. I know that feeling, I know it well as it has rend my heart asunder for long years and has guided so many unbidden prayers to my lips in the deep of night as I hold her in my arms.

I look deep into her eyes as my lips mouth the words against hers, even if my voice refuses to give them volume for ears to hear, "I love you". I know she has heard even if there has been no sound because her eyes flood with sudden tears. Not tears of pain or those wordlessly begging for release, I know those tears, I have seen them many times. These tears are tears of the heart, tears born of emotion, tears that have nothing to do with the body's needs. For once I don't think, I make neither calculation nor plan, as I simply gather my lover in my arms, feeling her against me, her tears wetting my skin. There is nowhere I would rather be than right here.

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### **Five o'clock shadow**

I laugh. How can I persist in my blues if you insist on making one outrageous joke after another? I should be sad, probably even crying. But you will not let me. I can see it in the twinkle in your eyes. Every time I turn to look at the blinking cursor and the empty page, you have another outrageous story or joke to tell me. I watch you like a child watches a conjuror as you gesture making shapes on the air and your words boom in the small living room we share. You know how unhappy I am. It always gets me like this, my periodic encounters with writer's block. And all these years, since my first year of college and my first story, you have been there to keep me company and help me somehow find the train of my thoughts and the spring of inspiration.

You stand up suddenly and with a smile, you move to the kitchen. I turn a bit from my seat to watch you. You are making fresh coffee. I cannot help but smile. How do you always know when my cup is empty? I watch your sure movements, born of memory and endless repetition, as you move around our kitchen. I can bring to mind a thousand scenes, all the same, from the first time you made me coffee here to today. It is like a ritual and you never rush. At least I have never seen you rush. Maybe you rush in the mornings before you leave for work but I have never seen it. All I know is your gentle touch as you wake me and the smell of fresh coffee that is always there waiting for me. You execute an almost perfect half-turn and I can see your profile. A part of me smiles; another still looks on with mild confusion.

It took me months, almost a year to convince you that I don't mind if you don't shave when you come home from work. The five o'clock shadow that darkens your cheeks brings no shadow to my soul even if still, at times, my fingers send messages of alarm to my brain when I touch you. Anyone who looks through the window will see a man, a strong man in his mid-thirties, making coffee. Sometimes my eyes play tricks on me still and I have to observe you for long moments before I see you as you are.

You have not changed that much, not truly. The woman I fell in love with and the man that is my life-partner are there. Both of them, two halves of one undivided whole. There is still shyness between us at times, my fault not yours. It took me longer than I had ever imagined to get used to

the changes. You gave me space and time and too many little sacrifices in the years it took you to make yourself in your image. I still cringe at times to think that you had turned your back to your dream, to the self you call your own, because of my stupid throw-away comment. Now I watch you as you inhabit the space around you and I can only find it amazing that nothing has changed. It is only the way that you inhabit your skin that has changed. And I love that change, there is no more forlorn look in your eyes when you think I am not watching, no more late night walks when you think I am sleeping, no more pain that you have to bury deep inside.

I don't even realise what I'm doing until you step in front of me, the cup of coffee smelling divine from where it sits on the coffee table. Your kiss is tender and loving with just a hint of desire underneath and I smile as your stubble scratches my cheek. My fingers have continued their tap-dancing on the keyboard throughout our kiss and they go on heedlessly as you step away with a wide smile on your face. I smile back at you before turning my eyes to the screen and the words my muse wrote with my hands. I don't have to look at you to feel the love you have for me. As my mind sinks into this new story, I feel your loving embrace of my heart.

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### **A few words...**

I love you. I love you so much. And I miss you. I miss you more than my conscious mind can comprehend or anyone can readily believe. I sit here, on the armchair that still holds your scent. My eyes stray to the desk that is mine but I cannot sit there anymore. This armchair has become my home. Here where your scent and your essence still linger. My fingers move over the keyboard listlessly as my eyes roam the living room of our house. Supposedly, I am writing. I am writing the few words that I have been asked to deliver at the ceremony. I don't need to look at the screen to know that it is empty, full of nonsense words and scattered letters.

They asked me for a few words only. Not that they don't want me to speak. But they don't want to pressure me. They asked for a few words in the hope that it would bring me closure. Like the ceremony supposedly will give me closure. I heard their hushed voices the other day when they thought I had fallen asleep. I almost let my bitter laugh escape. I had not fallen asleep. How could I? I never sleep anymore knowing that your side of the bed will be cold and empty, knowing that your arms will never gather me in again. Sleep eludes me and I avoid Morpheus' embrace. It cannot replace yours and I have no wish to try. A few words, they were saying. If we can get her to writing once again, maybe she will get away from this spiral of depression. They said depression but I know what they meant; they meant destruction, self-destruction.

Nick's words were the closest to my heart. She was her inspiration. Writing is not easy now. It may never be. For a moment, I had thought they understood; that maybe they would finally leave me alone. Sarah's voice shattered that illusion. Don't say that. She is so young, for gods' sake, she has a life to live. Someone will come along, you'll see. At that I had opened my eyes. Not to protest, there would be no use in that, merely to stop their conversation. I had no wish to hear more. I have no wish to hear more. A life to live. More like a lie to live.

For some reason I cannot fathom my eyes stray to the screen. Nonsense words and scattered letters look back at me in stark black against snowy white. I can't even care enough to shake my head. My fingers are quick to select the whole ugly lot of them and hit delete. I wouldn't want you to see something like this. Not you. Of all people, never you. Never you that had once found my secret scribbles. The words I kept hidden from the world. You were the one who had pushed me all the way. When the others blanched and tried to dissuade me, you were the one to stand at my back, your will kept my instincts of retreat at bay. You were the one to hold me after each rejection. You were the one to convince me to try once again. You were the one whose smile made me believe that it was true, the first time I succeeded. You. Always you.

A sound from the kitchen almost makes me turn before I remember that Nick is here, keeping me company. He came by earlier and like most days he has stayed. I can see the fear and worry in his eyes but it seems that I have lost my ability to care. I can almost see the disappointment in your eyes. He is our friend, you would say, he is here because he cares. I know you are right, the silent shadowy words that you can only utter in my mind. But still I cannot find it in me to care. I know they fear for me and worry. I have tried to explain that it is no use. They should not fear and they should not worry. You worry and fear for the living, not the dead. And I am dead. As dead as you are. Or at least I will be soon.

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## **Twenty minutes**

The dark is not complete as I sit here. The walls are full of strange shadows birthed of the screen's glow. I can hear her steps, her soft singing, next door. She keeps me company once again this night as my fingertips dance against shadowed keys and my eyes track words across the glowing screen. The walls are thin, too thin sometimes. Her soft singing makes me mellow and I write of love, affection and slow-burning desire. I can tell from my stories what she is doing. But the thinness of the walls torments me too. The scenes of senseless violence, when blood floods my pages and death appears like the shadow of doom at my shoulder. With knives, pistols and even bare hands I kill across the screen to ease my torment at her loud moans and soft cries of passion.

The heavier steps do not register in my conscious mind but I can read their result in the abrupt change in the scene I am writing. An evening in front of the fire sitting content in a loving embrace becomes sinister as strange sounds float from the outside and the mob arrives out of the darkness ready to destroy. It is a period piece and I knew that this would not be a happy-end feel-good story from the beginning. Still the abrupt change takes even me by surprise. I glance at the wall and the sound of the soft heavy voice reaches my ears. My heart clenches and thrown stones rattle against the hovel's shutters on my screen. With clenched teeth, I return my eyes to the words on the screen and I imbue the fear, rage and disappointment that battle in my heart on my hapless characters.

For a moment, silence reigns on the other side of the wall and my fingers still in their dance on the keys. Will this be a time of respite from my nightly torment? In the recesses of my mind, my characters wait with baited breath hoping for a final night in each other's arms before their

certain doom. The soft laughter laden with desire and the husky voice too low for me to make out words bring a fire to my fingertips and the mob screams and hollers as torches sail through the air to hit the straw on the hovel's roof. The fires of their passion translate into moans and cries almost silenced by soft lips and tongues entwining that I try not to hear.

But I do hear them, I know as I read them in the door bursting open, the lungs starved of air and the certain knowledge of death that makes trembling hands find each other before the mob's cruel hatred. I read them in the men's painful grips and the women's cruel taunts as difference is made into evil and witchcraft. I read them in the hasty knot of the noose and the haphazardly made pyre. I read them in eyes that make the promise of tomorrow, the promise of eternity in the realms of the greatest sleep of all as the noose tightens and the flames lick exposed skin.

As the flames die down in embers and the morning drizzle hisses on heated wood, as the crows find their morning meal in sightless staring eyes, the sun rises through the tall windows to send stabs of pain through my bloodshot eyes. I shake my head to clear it, another night spent in front of the screen chasing the black worms of letters across the white pages.

The soft knock on my door makes me turn but no-one enters. I have twenty minutes before breakfast it tells me as it tells me every morning. Twenty minutes to shower, dress and bury the anger and hurt in my heart. Twenty minutes before I tell my best friend that I have finished another story. Twenty minutes before I see the joy and pride in her eyes at my work, at me. Twenty minutes before she turns her laughing eyes to her wife to tell her of my latest accomplishment. Twenty minutes before green eyes turn to her with love and to me with pride born of friendship. Twenty minutes.

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## **Ten years on**

Here I am, sitting at your bedside, ten years on. I look at you, I trace the lines of your face with my eyes. The full mouth, high cheekbones, strong chin. The crow's feet that start around your eyes. The lines hard, if faint, on your cheeks. Even in deathly repose you look older. It has been minutes, hours, days, who knows anymore, that I have been sitting here, an open notepad on my lap, the cursor blinking, the page blank. I don't know why I even turned it on in the first place. Yet it is my one comfort, its warmth in the cold sterile room.

My world is a world of sounds, light thumping, faint pulsing, steady whirring. The machines that surround you, the air in your lungs, the blood in your heart, the thoughts in your mind. My eyes trace the lines of your face looking for answers, the flutter of an eyelid, an imperceptible movement of your lips. My ears attuned to you, to the machines that keep you alive. How did I end up here? How did you? My hand strays to the light blanket covering you and the piece of heavy paper lying there, on top of your unmoving, unfeeling legs.

They told me it's my decision. The doctor looked at me full of expectation; the nurse's eyes were tinged with pity. They don't know me, they don't even know you, all they know is who you are. I think he wants me to sign it, I think she doesn't. But it's not their decision, it's mine. And I don't

know what to decide. Part of me wonders what you'd like me to do. But I don't know. How could I know? I haven't spoken to you in a decade. I haven't known you for even more than that. What possessed you to keep my name as your emergency contact all these years? What were you thinking to make me the executor of your wishes? It should have been someone else, not me. One of your entourage, your friends, your bandmates, your lovers. Not me.

But you put down my name, my address, my phone number. Mine. Why? Do you hate me so much? I tried at first to do this logically. I tried to speak to your friends, your mates, even this girl that they told me is your lover. Your friends leaked it to the press, to the crows swarming around this hospital ward, besieging me every time I dare to leave your side. Your bandmates I found in a hotel suite bickering over rights to your songs. The girl they said is your lover threw me out of the house they tell me is yours, her pupils dilated, her body reeking of sex and booze and the scent of the woman that I glimpsed through the closing door.

I tried to shift the blame, the responsibility. But I found no-one. No-one worthy, no-one I can trust. No-one I can trust to know your wishes. What have you been doing all these years? Who are all these people that surround you? What are they to you? What are you to them? I don't know. So many questions I cannot answer. Too many. So here I sit watching you, hoping. Hoping for inspiration, for knowledge, for the tiniest inkling of what you want me to do. Why me? That is the question that never leaves my thoughts. Why me? Is this your revenge upon me? Did you know this would happen? My thoughts churn and run in circles. Some times I cry thinking it is all merely a terrible coincidence, others I curse you believing that you planned this.

They told me you overdosed. I would have believed them if not for the lack of tracks on your arms. I have examined every inch of your body. You have been clean for a while. I can recognise the signs. I may not have been able to do anything for you but I have been there for others, countless others, in the ten years since I walked out of your life. Our life. Or the lie that had become our life. I don't know. Even my memories can't tell me the truth any more. I can remember walking out, the single duffel bag on my shoulder, my steps heavy, my heart dead. I can remember walking in to see you, your eyes closed, your mouth open in your passion, your body shuddering in release. I can remember the kneeling form between your thighs. I can't remember her name or her face, though once I knew both. I can remember bits and pieces, scenes and flashes of the road to that afternoon, the road that led me out of your life.

But the reasons escape me. Here, looking at your still form on the crisp white sheets, the reasons escape me. How did we end up here? You, older, with new scars on your body, fighting for your life. Me, older too but with the same scars I have carried for longer than I care to acknowledge or remember, deciding for your life. What do you want me to do? What do you expect me to do? I don't know. I honestly don't. Please wake up, wake up and tell me. I know you can. The nurse answered my question and I could see the honesty in her eyes. Of the myriad monitors I cannot read, there is one that always draws my eyes. It is a mesh of lines and colours but ugly as it looks it is my hope, my salvation. Your mind still works, not merely the pulses of the animal in you but the mind of the soul behind your eyes.

If not for that I would have signed without thought, without guilt. Yet you are in too deep for them to tell. Will you wake up? Ever? I don't know. They don't know either. So here I am, sitting

by your side, ten years on. The notebook on my lap sits blank, empty of the words that make my living. The heavy paper is waiting for my signature and there is a pen in my pocket. So here I am. Waiting. For the monitor to lose its chaotic lines and colours. Or for you to wake. I trace the lines of your face with my eyes. The chant continues undeterred in the heart in my chest, the heart that I thought dead and buried a decade ago. Wake up. Please, wake up. I am here. Waiting.

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### **In your arms**

I don't turn to look at you. I keep my eyes on the screen and the blank page in front of me. I don't want to look at you right now. My stomach churns and bile rises in my throat; I swallow convulsively trying to keep it from spewing forth. I feel you as you step near to me, your hand hovering over my shoulder. Thankfully you don't touch me. I don't know what I'll do if you touch me. Finally, you retreat once more and resume your pacing. You are trying to find the words but you won't find them. What words are there to undo what you have done? I hit space a few times, my fingers as always restless on the keyboard but there is nothing in me to fill the blank page. I want to curl up and cry forever. I want to stand up and beat you within an inch of your life. I want you to leave and never see you again. I want to close my eyes and wake up from this nightmare. How could you do it? How?

I feel you more than hear you as you come to my side. I refuse to acknowledge you. The thud of your knees on the carpet is heavy. I almost turn to make sure you have not hurt yourself but I catch myself at the last moment. Your voice is low and raspy, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me". The entreaty in your voice is too much for me to keep my countenance. I turn to look at you and I can see the tears in your eyes. You look down as soon as I turn to you but I have seen the shame in your eyes. I don't speak. I can find no words to tell you. Your shame fans my anger and I have to clench my fists to keep it inside, where it belongs.

I don't know what's worse. That you did not tell me or the scattered photos on the living-room of our home. Photos of you with her. The images flash through my mind once more and I can barely keep the bile from my mouth. How could you do this? How? I can feel you reaching out to me and I flinch away without thought. How can I let you touch me knowing you have touched another? How? I want you never to touch me again. I want to scourge your body of her memory. My fists clench involuntarily and I have to grip my seat to stop from hitting you. Why did you have to do this? Why?

Your hand on mine is cold and I try to flinch away but you hold on to me. I turn snarling to make you let me go but you don't comply with my unspoken wishes. I jerk my hand away with more strength than I thought I had. You lounge to grip it again and I slap your hand away warning you to stop with a growl. You disregard my warning and try to grab me again. My grip on your hand is bruising, I can feel your bones crunching under my fingers. I expect you to stop, to retreat but you don't. With your hand still in my grip you try to grasp my shoulder. I tighten my hold and you whimper but you don't desist. I try to warn you with my gaze. You are pushing me. You are pushing me where I don't want to go. Where I don't want us to go. I made you a vow from the beginning that you would never have to see this side of me. Don't make me do this.

You don't stop. I can see the pain in your eyes. I don't know if it is pain from your soul or my crushing grip on your hand. I can see your pallor and the tears that appear in your eyes but you don't stop. You try to grab me, wrestle my grip. I can feel my anger coiling tighter and tighter in my gut and I try desperately to force it down. The feel of your hand on my shoulder is too much. I cannot hold it any longer. My anger floods me and with it all the hurt that I never thought I'd feel again. A voice inside of me screams to stop, to remember my promise, my vows to you.

I can't. I have lost this battle. I can only watch as my body takes control. You don't make a sound, not a single sound. All that can be heard is the thud of my fists against your flesh. You don't make a sound. Not a cry, not a whimper, not a moan. I stand above you panting; my fists clench and unclench sending needles of pain to my brain from my bruised knuckles. You make a heavy sound as you slowly rise to your knees. Slowly, ever so slowly, you raise your face to look at me. Your face, your beautiful face, a mask of blood from the cut above your eye. I watch the blood dripping from your chin on the carpet and my knees will hold me no more. As I fall down, I feel your arms around me, holding me securely against you. How can you hold me now? How? Can't you see what I am? Can't you see the monster I vowed to you never to become?

I look into your eyes and see your tears as they mingle with the blood still flowing freely down your face. I cannot face you anymore and I turn away, away from you. My stomach rebels and I have no strength to hold the bile from spewing forth to mix with the blood on the carpet. You hold me as I retch, your hands gently cradling my head. Finally my stomach has emptied and I try to move away but you don't let me. Your words hold tears in them, "Please...don't go. Don't leave me". I turn to you without thought and I cannot help my anger. The words leave my mouth before I can think, "Don't be an idiot. You should leave me now. No-one should treat you this way. You should leave and call the police and have me arrested". I am shouting at the end, my hand gripping your shirt. You shake your head mutely, your eyes telling me the words you will not utter.

I curl up from the pain that wells in my heart. I want to die. I want to die painfully. I deserve it. The acceptance in your eyes is more painful than any torture man can invent. Your words are daggers in my heart, "It's ok, love. I can take it". Of course you can take it. You have been the punching bag before. And I vowed you'd never be again. I vowed never to let anyone hurt you again. I vowed to be your protector, your lover, your haven. I curl up tighter, tears flowing down my face. I feel your arms tightening around me, your voice telling me it's all gonna be ok, asking me to forgive you.

I can only cry harder. I cry for my broken vows. I cry for your lover that you betrayed with your body. I cry for your protector that betrayed you on your body. I cry for the haven that surrounds me in the circle of your arms. I cry for you, my lover, my beloved. I cry for the betrayal you don't feel. I cry for the pain you don't even recognise. I can only cry as your blood drips on my face. I can only cry as you whisper your love for me. I can only cry as you hold me safe in your arms.

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**Fear**

The sun is falling and with it the heat of the day. I am looking forward to the night and holding you in my arms. The heat irritates me and the notebook on my lap feels like a furnace. I turn a bit and look at you as you sit next to me. Usually we would be touching but with the heat we have to keep some space between us. The sweat is already running down your back, you will shower again before we go to bed. This heat that the weathermen did not predict is tiring you more than anything else. You hate it when you sweat and it is sweltering even out here with the sun falling. My hand instinctively finds the beer by my knee and I take a long swing directly from the bottle. We haven't done this for a long time. I watch you and I can't help but smile when you drink from your bottle. I don't mind that it's rootbeer; I've been over that for years.

Your eyes are searching the horizon and my eyes search your profile. I wish I knew what you are looking for. As always you have that faraway look in your eyes, like there is something in the horizon, something you are expecting. I have asked you once or twice but you always turn to me surprised and shrug. I can see the ignorance in your eyes. If you are looking for something, you don't even realise it. Once I let it get to me. Not anymore. It's taken me years but now I know that there is a piece of you missing. You don't know what it is, I am certain you don't even realise that it's missing. Even so, I can see it. That missing part of your soul, that part of your soul you don't find when you look at me intently as we cuddle on our bed. In some ways, it is amusing; how I always seem to write about people finding their missing half. It didn't happen for us. Or at least the myth is wrong and I have found what I am looking for but you have not seen in me what your soul desperately desires.

I love you with all my heart; your laughter sings in my soul. And I know you love me; I can see it in your eyes when you look at me, I can feel it in all the little things you do without thinking for my comfort. And as the days pass and they merge into long months and longer years, our love grows like the oak tree we planted in our yard when we first moved out here. Yet still it torments me the nights that you can't sleep and you toss and turn before finally leaving our bed to look sightlessly out of the window. It torments me the knowledge that somewhere out there, there is someone who is the other half of your soul. Someone you have not found; someone you are not even looking for. You love me too much to even think of such things.

Once I had dared ask you what you would do if you fell in love with someone else. You looked at me with such incomprehension and hurt in your eyes that my heart almost stopped beating. It took me hours to convince you that I had not found someone, that I was not in love with someone else. Not for a moment did you consider that such a thing could happen to you. Yet as the years pass and I love you more and more, my fear grows. I think it will never go away, not until one of us is no longer in this world. I fear that you will leave me, that you will find the other part of your soul. I fear that you will find the other half of your soul but will not leave me.

Your touch tears me from my thoughts and I turn to look at you, at your eyes that hold my heart in their depths. Your soft kiss on my shoulder makes a shudder pass through me and as soon as you feel it, desire ignites in your eyes. I can't help my speeding heartbeat or the tightening in my groin as I watch your eyes darken and you lick your lips. I can only watch as you carefully take the notebook from my lap depositing it gently at your side before you stand abruptly, your hand extending in silent offering. I cannot refuse you; I never have been able. I take your hand and allow you to pull me gently until I stand and then silently lead me inside. As the door closes



behind us and your gentle grip on my hand leads me down the narrow corridor to our bedroom, I return your grip with a stronger one of my own. You don't stop but you turn to look at me over your shoulder.

There is love in your eyes, affection, desire. I know my eyes mirror yours. Your grip tightens and you stop abruptly. I almost run into you and as you turn, your arms find their place around my shoulders. I lean into you until I can hear the beat of your heart and feel your breath against my cheek. You hold me tight as if you are afraid I'll go away. We stand there immobile for long moments before your whisper reaches my ears, "I love you, you know". I nod against your chest blinking rapidly to keep the tears from falling. The spectre of my fear is there at the edge of sight, the edge of hearing; it never goes away. But here in the circle of your arms, it dare not enter, you don't allow it to enter. Here, in the circle of your arms, there is no fear.

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Thanks for reading. Any comments, good or bad, are welcome at [rh.black@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:rh.black@hotmail.co.uk) ~RB.

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