

Qu'est-ce une Vie

This isn't a love story nor is it a story based upon my actions labeling me a hero. I am no hero and this is no fairy-tale. This is a lesson that you must learn from. One, which you must promise yourselves you'll never try and recreate. History has a tendency to repeat itself. Don't let that happen here. The terrible happenings in the past must not recycle. Let me enlighten you.

"Gather 'round, gather 'round! All you poor lads, rich men, the fat, and the thin! Women of all wonders! Children, come forward and open your innocent eyes! All and all we gather 'round here today in the center of our beloved town. For centuries The Candle has been here for us; standing tall among the many wars, lifting our burdens, and cleaning up our streets. It has been twenty years as of today, since our last Opening!" the Mayor paused listening to his townspeople shout towards him with pride. He lifted his hands silencing the excitement. The Mayor pulled a large key from his rich black pocket. We watched in anticipation as he opened the latch on the side of The Candle. Our bodies leaned forward in unison watching as he looked inside curiously. He stood there puzzled for a brief moment before slamming it shut again.

"As you know, we only receive a letter if a sacrifice has been made within the span of twenty years. We have been passed down this tradition by our ancestors and will continue doing so. I am humbled to declare," he paused throwing a glare to someone in the crowd before continuing on, "that we have had no sacrifices since our last Opening!" People patted each other on the back as if to say, "congratulations on not killing yourself!".

"All I have is pure happiness, Peter!" Elinor swung her dainty arms around me infecting my nose with lavender. I inhaled deeply soaking up her elegance before she let go. Lost in her presence I stood there with stupidity. "Peter! Are you not happy about this?" she asked pushing her lips into a confused pout.

“We’re celebrating nothing, Elinor. No person in their right mind would go into The Candle willingly,” I stated bluntly.

“Don’t you see how that reflects on who we are as a community? On our leaders?” she spoke sweetly cocking her head to the side. I wanted to fight her on this, but instead I nodded my head and took her in my arms once more. Elinor’s look on life here was something I could never obtain. She saw joy in everything and good in everyone. And everyone loved that about her. If there was a town favorite it would be Elinor.

Elinor and I met at school as most kids do. Our class contained a maximum of twelve kids so it wasn’t hard to miss her. However, if I were in a moving crowd of five hundred people I still wouldn’t be able to miss her. With silky blonde curls, round rosy cheeks, and a permanent smile pasted on her face; she charmed us all. An adventurous spirit hung around her; she’d always challenge us boys with races, dares, endless competitions. Not only were we competing against her we were also competing each other for her. Yet, out of all the manly boys she could choose from, she chose scrawny ole me.

I’m a pretty sensitive person by nature. I’m not one to go crying every time I see a rat dead in a trap, but I am the one who will set them free if they’re still alive struggling to get out of it. I care a lot about animals if they’re still living, that is. I have no problem eating the already deceased and prepared kind. If I’m really thinking about it, I would say that is why Elinor picked to befriend me. That, and my hobby of helping people. We both have that in common. I thank Pa for that.

Growing up we were always at people’s houses or shops fixing something. Pa found such fulfillment in doing it for free. He would deny all sorts of payment; favors, money, trades, even discounts. The only things he’d happily accept was food. Especially Mrs. Cal’s fresh out of the oven corn bread. I’d braid rat tails in exchange for her corn bread. It was Elinor’s favorite, too. Since Pa is growing older by the day, we sort of took over his ‘helping people’ business. He doesn’t mind as long as we share the food we’d earned.

Pa really liked Elinor. He loved to hear the way she would tell stories of our adventures. So did I. Elinor would light up as she immersed herself into the story. I told her a few times she

should join the Entertainers, but she said she couldn't stand traveling in a stinky train with a bunch of clowns. I didn't blame her for not wanting that.

Elinor's mother, Lana, died during childbirth, which is why Elinor never had the chance of knowing her mother. Pa tells me Elinor is a spitting image of her; personality and all. I think that is really why Pa likes Elinor so much. I believe he and Lana were good friends. He has this book (which is the only book he owns) filled with his swirly handwriting. I've read a few of the entries when he wasn't home. I don't know if he wants me to know about it, so I don't tell him I read it. Lana is mentioned in the several pages I've read. He wrote about how they used to work in the fields all day together and then go swimming in the lake afterwards. For a few pages I thought maybe Pa and Lana were falling in love, but after a several pages of Pa's experience in the war, he had a page about my mother. She was Lana's best friend. After Lana married some other soldier she introduced them and they eventually got married. At least that's what I can summarize from his entry. He didn't write much about my mother, the most I read about her was the entry about my birth.

"Ruth gave birth to a son today. We named him Peter after my father. He looks to be healthy. Lana came to meet my boy. She said he looks like me. Ruth took a nap and Lana and I talked while she held Peter. She told me she had never seen anything more beautiful than Peter. I agree, he really is something special. Lana told me how she wanted to have a baby. Her husband, Vern, wasn't sure if he was ready for that kind of commitment. I reassured her that he would come around soon enough."

"They're keeping Ruth in the hospital for a few extra days. She's caught some kind of virus. They don't want Peter to get it therefore he and I are home. Lana goes between checking on Ruth at the hospital and Peter and I at home."

"Ruth died of yellow fever".

The last line haunts me. The most eerie entry Pa's ever submitted, it even surpasses his bloody details from the war. Perhaps he was too broken to write anything heartfelt. The pain probably wasn't worth the words. His very last entry in his book was also about death.

“Lana died giving birth to her daughter, Elinor. Heaven received its first true angel.”

After that there were only scribbles of notes along a single page. Nothing meaningful or interesting. Some of the notes were about me; most were things he needed to fix around the house and *AWIC?* was circled in the corner of the page. Pa was one of the men picked by the Council to be on the AWIC. It’s a team designated for ‘Assuring Wellness in the Candle’, AWIC for short.

If a person were ever to sacrifice themselves into The Candle, the team was called to make sure it wasn’t contaminated with evil spirits or anything taboo like that. Pa was recruited when he was younger. Back then he used to sell his wood workings for money. He was rather good with a knife and that’s why the Mayor enlisted him.

The Mayor needed Pa to carve the sacrifices name onto the outside of The Candle for everyone to see. People would make a gathering out of that, too. They would come and yell ugly things to the person’s name Pa was carving. When he was done, they lined up and spat on the name. The Mayor found immense pleasure in this and made a festival out of it. Pa said he would open up The Candle for people to throw in notes of hate or the person’s belongings. Pa doesn’t come to any of the gatherings anymore, unless it was mandatory, like this one.

“Silence!” the Mayor bellowed capturing our attention once more. “I have called you all here today to announce our new proposition for The Candle. Myself and my colleagues have come up with a new way to make our lives more *enjoyable*,” I turned to find Pa in the crowd. I couldn’t locate his face in the sea of anxious people.

“If any person feels they have something they need to put into The Candle, he or she may do so upon permission from the Council. He or she must provide reasoning to their desired item and must do so between such hours that will be determined on a later date. Children under eighteen years of age may not submit any requests,” noises of all emotions chimed from the crowd. I looked over at an expressionless Elinor. I grabbed her hand in exchange for her attention. She stood motionless staring at The Candle.

“However, if any one should put a request into The Candle without my permission, they will be publicly executed. I trust that each of you will abide by the law in order to keep our community filled with everlasting peace. A great day is here. Let the celebrating commence!” the Mayor applauded enthusiastically watching as the crowd cheered for his brilliance.

“Bonjour, Elinor!” Alice greeted twirling her skirt.

“Hello, Alice,” Elinor smiled gracefully.

“Did you hear the news?! Oh, c’est fantastique!” Alice pulled Elinor into a hug as many people were doing around them. She blew a kiss in my direction then skipped merrily away.

Alice Fromage had just moved to town earlier this fall. Nobody knew where her family was from nor did they care. We just knew they were different. For awhile we all kept our distance from the new family, but their mouth-watering pastries kept us going back. Although, the Fromage’s weren’t the friendliest people they sure did know how to bake. Until they showed up, all we had was a little bakery owned by Vern, Elinor’s father. The bakery produced plain bread nothing fancy like the Fromage’s. People still bought bread from Vern though, mostly because of Elinor.

“Peter. Do you think this will be a good thing?” Elinor looked up at me with glassy eyes. I wanted to lie to her, but I couldn’t.

“No. No, I don’t” I shook my head keeping my eyes fixed on hers.

“I don’t either,” she closed her eyes letting a few tears escape down her rosy cheeks. I wanted to wipe them away. I wanted to tell her everything was going to be okay. I couldn’t find the words in me to do so.

“Elinor. Peter. Would you like to come with father and me to the Council?” Alice returned beaming with excitement.

“You are putting something in The Candle?” Elinor’s face screamed with terror.

“Not me, silly. My father is! He’s going to put that grim bakery into it!” her lucid accent stung as it made its way to my ears.

“NO! You can’t! Alice please don’t do this!” Elinor took Alice’s shoulders into her hands shaking her with desperation.

“No? Je suis désolé, Elinor,” Alice snapped pushing Elinor to the ground. I debated between hunting down Alice or comforting Elinor.

“She can’t do it, Peter. She just can’t. It means everything to him,” I picked up the heartbroken Elinor off the musty bricks and carried her away from the maddening crowd into her father’s arms. He seemed to have heard the news because he wore the same face as Elinor.

The new law was in full swing. Everyone felt that they had something to put into The Candle. Many people wanted to put spouses into The Candle, or worse children. Three requests were being considered for approval. The first was from Tommy, he wanted the roach infestation in his shop to go away. Many people were for this. Mary Jo’s request for her husband’s ghost to leave her alone is also under consideration. I think the Mayor only has placed it under consideration because he believes in that sort of thing. In reality, Mary Jo is just plain nuts. The Fromage’s request is the third one up for review. This one has people talking. Rumor has it the Mayor and Mr. Fromage are making some kind of deal. Pa won’t say much on the matter, but I think he agrees with the rumors.

That night I stopped by Vern’s to see Elinor. She was sifting flour with shaky hands. I knocked lightly on the window causing her to look up. A soft smile swept across her face as she made her way to the door letting me in. I helped them clean up and shop while Vern told us stories of when he used to help his father clean up this exact shop.

“I want to be in your position one day. I want to be telling stories to my children about how you and I ran this shop. We have to fight, father,” she pushed her eyebrows together and was tightly clenching her jaw.

“Elinor. Not this again. Nothing you do is going to change an already made up mind,” Vern sat down on a stool and rested his head in his hands.

“They haven’t decided anything yet! How can you give up?” she yelled pounding her fist on the counter, “I’m going to talk to Alice. I’ll change their minds!” she slapped her hands together sending white dust into my eyes.

“Elinor! Elinor come back!” Vern hollered after her. I wiped my eyes clear and ran after her.

“Peter. I have to do this. Please let me,” she grabbed my face and held it in her hands as she pleaded. I started mumbling disapproving words shaking my head, but she pressed her lips against mine stopping my rant. Everything around me seemed to fade. It was just Elinor and I. She pulled away from me opening up reality.

“I have to do this, Peter,” she whispered. I nodded my head and wrapped my arms around her tightly. I didn’t want to let go and I probably shouldn’t have.

The next morning I awoke to complete and utter chaos. Through my bedroom window I could see people running towards The Candle. I hustled downstairs putting clothes on along the way. I shouted for Pa searching the first floor. He wasn’t anywhere to be seen. He never left home without saying goodbye in some form. I scratched my head with frustration as my lungs began to shrink. With a deep inhale I ran out the door straight to Vern’s Bakery.

My foot caught the lip of a brick launching me forward onto the ground. I stretched my arms out home to break part of my fall. My jaw dropped the instant I looked up. “La Boulangerie du Fromage” was painted across a window where Vern’s name used to be. How could this happen overnight? Where did Vern and Elinor go? Why didn’t she tell me? Does my father know? My heart beat increased knowing that the two people I care about most in my life weren’t where they were supposed to be.

I launched whatever sat in my stomach out onto the bricks below me. I lay there panting in my own sweat and vomit while tears swelled up in my eyes. My arms grew weak as my body weight increased. I was shaking all over unable to pick myself up. And why should I?

“Get up boy! The Mayor called a mandatory gathering. You don’t get up now you’ll be doing this the rest of your life in a cell. Come on!” a man gripped the back of my shirt pulling me to my feet. I held onto his arm until I regained my balance.

“What’s going on?” I stammered.

“Something’s happened. Something bad. People have been saying the Mayor is keeping secrets from us. Damn bastard. We gotta go before we are seen here” he kept his hold on my shirt leading me like a stray dog.

“Attention! Attention!” I could hear the Mayor’s voice booming through our brick walls. I followed it closer leaving behind the man who brought me here. The whole town was huddled in front of The Candle. I climbed up onto a dumpster trying to get a better view scanning the crowd for Elinor and Pa.

“I am sad to inform you that we have had a sacrifice,” shock infiltrated our bodies with this news, “it hurts my heart to say that Elinor Spring is no longer living in our town,” his words echoed in my head causing the world around me to spin faster and faster. How is this possible? Was this her plan? My thoughts took over bringing me to my knees. Tears filled my eyes as my heart began to break.

“You liar! Elinor would never do such a thing!” a man angrily yelled. I looked up just as the crowd began chanting with him.

“Are you suggesting, sir, that somebody put Elinor into The Candle without permission and blew it out themselves?” the Mayor looked around at his colleagues and chuckled.

“Not just somebody. You!” another man just below The Candle yelled. It was Pa! He threw down the tools in his hands, “I will not carve her name onto The Candle until we hear the deserved truth,” he snapped.

“You have no right to question me,” the Mayor waved his hand at one of his men who then began arresting my Pa.

“No! Pa!” I climbed down from the dumpster pushing my way through the crowd. It was useless.

“We may thank The Candle for this lesson,” he applauded as they hauled my father away. The mob stood silent watching in horror.

“Thank The Candle? The Candle that is said to have kept peace for centuries, that keeps us hoping, that ensures our trust in *you?*” someone screamed from deep inside the crowd.

“We are promised by the Council and our ancestors that as long as we follow the law, The Candle will provide peace,” they Mayor calmly replied

“Yet, in order for The Candle to do so, we had to give up everything and live like pigs! Where is the peace in that? Angry chants followed one after another. Things like “you’ve been making deals!” “You corrupt bastard!” And after every one the crowd all shouted “ya!” in agreement. The Mayor waved his hand to the angry mob and dismissed himself from the boo’s and the furious.

I inhaled all the air my lungs could take and shot it out before running full speed through the crowd. I climbed up the brick made border that separated us from The Candle. On my way up somebody tugged at my leg. I looked down to see Vern. He stuck a pack of matches in my pocket and said, “I’ll blow it out,” We exchanged a brief nod and then I pulled myself up onto the platform with Vern behind me. The crowd watched as I fumbled with the matches trying desperately to strike a spark. Within seconds a flame appeared. The crisp sound made the Mayor turn around. Before he could do anything I lit The Candle and jumped in.

A rush of wind threw my body downwards violently. Walls of white appeared all around me blinding me. I closed my eyes and tried to remember how to breathe. What did I just do? I left Pa without saying goodbye. Hell, I left him in the hands of the Council. Who knows what they're going to do him! I left the only life I've ever known for what?

And just then, I wasn't falling anymore. I wiggled my fingers making sure I was alive. Then, with that confirmation, I opened my eyes. A clear sky hung above me with dancing clouds. I pushed myself up where familiar faces walked cheerfully down paths, across streets, through shops, onto bridges. To my left were children jumping into piles of leaves. Their laughter was ringing mildly in my head. I turned to my right only to see Elinor sitting on the greenest grass I had ever seen.

"I've been waiting for you," she whispered.