

Forever, Always

“When do you think it ended?”

“What do you mean?”

“Was there a day, a moment?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Us. You and me. When was it over?”

“Who said it’s over?”

*

“Look at the two of them.”

She’s sitting on the grass; he’s lying down. It’s a sunny morning, but it’s not too hot. Fall. The park is packed. You can hear the sound of children playing nearby and the wind blowing in the trees. A leaf falls down unintentionally and soon enjoys floating in the air, trying to, wanting to rest by his side. He sluggishly turns his head to see what she is talking about.

“The old couple?”

“No, no. The young couple.”

He sits up next to her, so he can see them better.

“The ones eating ice cream...?”

“Yep.”

He laughs. She always does that. Things are so clear in her little head, and she thinks it’s all clear to everyone else as well. Being reticent is just so typical of her.

“You could have led with that... ‘Look at those two eating ice cream.’”

She pretends not to understand he’s mocking her and continues to watch those two.

“I can’t quite remember what ice cream tastes like,” he says. She remains silent, trying to remember it as well. “I know it was good. We used to have ice cream after mass every Sunday.”

“I’d order strawberry, and you’d have pistachio,” she suddenly recalls. That’s how it usually went: Memories took a little while to come back, but then they arrived all at the same, like mail orders. Not all of them came back, though. This time, it was the taste of strawberry ice cream inundating her taste buds.

“Strawberry ice cream is nobody’s favorite,” he usually says things like that just to annoy her.

She stops watching the couple to confront him. “So how come there’s always strawberry ice cream available in every store?”

“Because some people can’t make up their minds and go with the most obvious choice. Strawberry is the refuge of the indecisive.”

She arches an eyebrow, as if to ask *Oh, really?* He raises both his eyebrows, as if to reply, *Of course!*

She gets up and walks slowly towards the couple. With each step, she feels like she’s traveling back in time. He follows her.

“They’re about the same age we were when we first met.”

“With a whole life ahead of them.”

They’re about seventeen. They’re both wearing jeans and a plain T-shirt. He still has acne on his face; she almost looks like a woman, even though she’s just a big girl. They are eating ice cream and teasing one another, being affectionate, and kissing.

They stop walking as they get closer to the young lovers. Like looking in the mirror.

“Your father hated me.”

“Every father hates their daughter’s boyfriend,” she tries to appease him, even though she knows it was true.

“Your first boyfriend,” he adds, proudly, as if he had discovered an unknown island. She was like an island discovered and explored by him.

“My only boyfriend,” she corrects him, as if he had been a despot who had taken the island for himself and banned all other visitors.

“You were my only girlfriend, too,” he tries to remedy the situation and show her the good side of the dictatorship he had installed on the island that she became after his arrival.

She doesn’t react.

“Of course there was only you!”

“Forgiveness doesn’t erase facts, my dear,” she knows something, even though she never talks about it.

“What other girlfriends did I have then?” He pretends it never happened, since she never talks about it.

“Forgiveness only puts new labels on old feelings, so we can pretend we’re blind and keep moving forward,” she says, and he falls silent. She speaks, so he can be quiet.

The young lovers in front of them continues to act like a couple. They’re too young to grow tired of being a couple. For now.

“Do you think they’re in love?” he asks.

“They are,” she says, with her usual certainty. “Can’t you see that heat spot on her?”

“Oh, I see it on her, for sure.”

“He has a little bit of it, too. Don’t be annoying.”

“A little bit. And there’s this smell...”

“Yes! I can smell it, too. I think it’s called oxytone...”

“It’s dopamine.”

“...and serotonin. Yes. I could smell it in the end.”

“Yes, they’re in love,” he confirms her certainty.

“Of course they are,” she’s glad he corroborated it. He’s her ally. They are a duo. A couple.

“Should we get closer to them?” she summons him.

“I’ll throw his ice cream on the ground and you do the same to hers.”

“Deal.”

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“Who do you think she’s waiting for?” she asks.

This time, they’re at an almost deserted restaurant. It’s three in the afternoon. Too late for lunch; too early for dinner. It’s that time between “almost” and “nothing at all.” A woman is sitting a few tables from them, right at the center of the restaurant. She yearns to be found.

“Why do you assume she’s waiting for someone?” he likes answering her questions with a question.

“After all this time, haven’t you noticed all these little signals?”

“You always had a thing for reading people, but you can’t even remember your name.”

“You can’t remember my name either. And, just so you know, my dear, I’d be an excellent therapist.”

“Paranoid people think they’d be good therapists.”

She doesn’t want to get caught up in this game of wits. She’s really intrigued by that woman.

“Pay attention to her eyes. They’re anxious, lost in a distant point in the horizon. Searching. Waiting for something.”

“Someone,” he starts to get intrigued, too.

“That’s not their first date. She’s not wearing anything too seductive, nor is she smiling,” she analyzes the situation and jumps to conclusions while observing the woman. It isn’t a pre-packaged analysis. She’s more like a detective who is studying a body that has been recently discovered at a crime scene.

“Why would she be smiling if this were their first date?”

She takes a few milliseconds to find an answer. It’s at the tip of her tongue.

“On first dates, women put on this face to make a good first impression. We want the other person to come in and see us at our best. We always smile while waiting, so the guy can see it from a distance and have a good impression.”

“Cheating love at first sight.”

She laughs. She looks at him, trying to see it in his eyes the moment they fell in love. After such a long time, there should still be a record of that moment—if there ever was ever one. Was there one? If there was indeed, it was probably burned in his retina and she’d be able to see the scars that proved it. Before she can find it, he looks away and focuses on the woman again.

“Shall we?”

They get closer to where she is and sit on the chairs facing her. Now, it’s not only her eyes that await someone; her head is on a swivel to increase her field of vision. Her hands are sitting restlessly on her lap. Her light yellow dress looks heavier than it was minutes ago.

“Do you remember our first date?” he asks.

“No... Funny, I can’t remember certain things anymore.”

“It’s understandable. It was a long time ago,” he tries to minimize it, so she won’t feel guilty. She doesn’t feel guilty.

“Do you remember it?”

“I do. It wasn’t really a date. We already knew each other. There was no pretending.”

Once again, memories come rushing in and reach her brain cells like an overnight express package.

“Yes. I remember you once said we have several versions of ourselves. But the best thing is when someone puts on a mask on a first date.”

“Exactly. On a first date, people choose their words carefully and pay attention to every gesture of the hand.”

“So, I’ve never met the best version of you, then,” she says, point blank.

“Don’t be mean.”

She didn’t mean to be mean.

“No, I mean, according to your theory, we already knew each other before our first date, ‘cause we went to school together, so there was no use acting and I’ve never met the best version of you.”

She isn’t mean.

He doesn’t know what to say. Maybe she’s right. He wishes she was wrong.

“She stopped looking,” she notices it right away.

“Maybe it’s just a friend who’s late,” he’s optimistic.

“He’s not coming,” she’s realistic.

“You’re always so sure about everything...”

“Her eyes. She’s no longer waiting.”

He looks at the woman and sees it is true.

“She fell into the abyss.”

He simply listens, quietly. And, since he’s quiet, she looks for an answer in him, but only finds him in that abyss, too.

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Baby bananas, fifty cents each. Enjoy it while it lasts.

“You used to love coming to the grocery store,” she says, checking the price of olives. They’re more expensive than last week.

“I still do,” he walk through the aisles of a grocery store that is open late at night.

“Yeah, but we can’t buy anything.”

A grocery store open in the wee hours attracts the most interesting people in the world, as he always says.

He points at the olive oil and grimaces. It’s more expensive as well. He’ll look for a newspaper later to check if inflation is back again.

“Oh, not buying anything at all was what I enjoyed the most about it! Even when I only had two items on my list, I’d spend hours and hours walking through the aisles, just listening to the music,” he starts swaying from side to side and closes his eyes, going back in time.

Associate Karina, please come to cashier number seven. Associate Karina...

“Yep. I think that was your way of meditating.”

“It still is,” he keeps swaying with his eyes closed, dancing in the liquor aisle. It’s empty. This is probably not one of those days when interesting people leave their house late at night.

“I remember we had that fight because I was more practical. And you wanted to read the label of every single product.”

“Sodium, fat, percentages. It was like a mantra.”

The void is no more. A couple appears at the end of the aisle. Their shopping cart is still empty. They don’t seem to be in a hurry.

“There’s a couple coming. Should we do something?”

He stops swaying and opens his eyes. He sees the couple, but doesn't seem interested in them. His mind is still in the past.

"Maybe?"

"Do you want me to go at it alone? You can dwell in the days you used to come to the grocery store all by yourself."

"Thanks," he smiles and goes back to swaying, surrounded by bottles of wine.

She walks toward the couple. Two middle-aged men with a pinscher sitting in the cart. They discuss what they should buy while standing in front of the pasta shelves. One of them wants fresh pasta; the other one says they always end up with left overs and have to throw it away, so it was best to just get the pre-packaged stuff.

"Hard and dry like him," he says, after she whispers in his year.

Mission accomplished. She walks away from them.

"Are they fighting?" he asks as soon as she gets closer to him.

"Yes," she confirms, satisfied. She loves doing her part.

"What did you say?"

"Something silly. They always argue over silly things."

He's so turned off he stops swaying with his eyes closed. He doesn't like it when she does that, especially inside his temple.

"You could have said something nice. I don't know why you enjoy creating so much intrigue."

"I'm sure others once did the same to us," she says, this time less certain, despite saying she's sure about it. "You picked fights because it was in your nature. I suppose you didn't need anyone whispering in your ear," he says, and this time he was more certain, despite saying it was only a supposition.

He walks towards the couple and whispers to one of them. One man says something, and the other one smiles. Both of them smile and they settle for fresh pasta.

“What did you say to them?” she asks, in all seriousness, because she doesn’t like being the bad guy. She’s not the bad guy. She isn’t mean. She’s only bitter.

“Something silly,” he replies, and she starts walking.

They look through some products. They compare prices. Things are more expensive nowadays. The aisles are more deserted each day.

Buy five pounds of top sirloin for a chance to win a cutlery set.

She walks out of the front doors and waits for him outside the grocery store. The sun shows signs of rising in the horizon. There are a few cars driving around. When he walks out and sees her, he notices the couple is leaving the parking lot. They wave, but the two men do not wave back. They just keep smiling.

“It’s funny how you were always the appeasing one. With other people, that is. You saved your thorns for me.”

“It’s because you can only remember the thorns. You like remembering the worst in things.”

The first rays of sun warm her face. Then his face, seconds later.

“Do you think, back in our day, there were some of us whispering in our ear?”

“I don’t know. We’ve never seen others like us. Maybe there’s just the two of us. I don’t know.”

They start walking away from the grocery store. They walk in the middle of the deserted road.

“I like it that way.”

“Like what?”

“That it’s just the two of us.”

“Why?”

“So it’s not unfair to you.”

*

“Oh, I hate it so much!” she is really irritable.

“What?” he asks, even though he knew the answer.

“She’s not the wife.”

“Of course she is.”

The two of them are at a corner of the room, watching a couple. The apartment is plain, but welcoming. The woman who lives there is young and has good taste. Few pieces of furniture, clean color scheme. The lighting is strategically placed, so as not to show more than it is necessary. In the bedroom, the mattress is on the floor. It’s not like she didn’t have money to buy a bed frame. It was her choice. A ceiling fan moves slowly, as if to encourage them not to hurry.

On the mattress, she’s already naked as she undresses him. First his shoes, then his pants. After sucking his dick for a few minutes, she tries to take his shirt off. He chuckles at the difficulty she’s having unbuttoning his shirt and decides to help. Once he is completely naked, he lies on top of her.

“Looks like your beer belly.”

“Oh, he’s looking much better than me at his age.”

“How old do you think he is? Fifty?”

“Forty-six.”

She laughs at his specificity. He’s usually not that specific.

“And she’s thirty-five.”

“And she’s not the wife.”

“There you go again...”

She remembers she's irritable. He doesn't care about this sort of thing—the sort of thing that makes her sick.

“Signs. You don't see the signs.”

The woman is on top now. He cups her breasts with his hands and she moves slowly and carefully, so he doesn't cum too fast. The longer he takes to cum, the longer he gets to spend time with her in that apartment.

He watches as she leaves their corner of the room. She motions to do something. He hates it when she is so irritable that she loses control.

“You're the one who wanted to come into this apartment.”

She's no longer listening. Anger is running through her non-existent veins. She starts pacing around the room, as if she were the host of a cop show.

“There are no pictures of them anywhere,” she points at the walls and furniture.

“We have all those other apartments to go into, if you want to leave.”

“He took his ring off before coming through that door,” she found new evidence in each corner of the room.

“What if he really loves her?”

“It doesn't matter.” She came upon new evidence of the crime with each step. The man on that mattress is guilty. The woman in the room with him is an accomplice.

“Of course it matters!”

She no longer answers. She's deciding what to do next.

“You don't know his wife. That is, if he has one.”

The smile on her face indicates that she found what she was looking for. She knows what to do. She knocks a glass on the ground.

“The wife could be a bitch,” he tries to discourage her, already knowing it was an impossible feat. He follows her around the room, talking and talking, as she looks for something else to knock down.

In the living room, she knocks down a picture, which smashes on the ground with a big bang.

The couple leaves the room, naked, trying to figure out what made so much noise. The woman closes the window. It must have been the wind. The man takes advantage of the situation, bends her over and penetrates her from behind.

“He may love his wife, even though he’s cheating on her.”

She stops in her tracks as he utters that sentence. That sentence was so typical of him. It was just so typical of him. Something he would certainly do himself. That man fucking that woman by the window was he himself. But she wasn’t the woman bending over and being penetrated by the window.

“Love is...”

She doesn’t even wait for him to finish his thought. She no longer wants to listen to him. It’s time to go.

*

He’s sitting on a tomb. A bird’s view shows the entire cemetery. It’s a cold, cloudy day. Gloomy. Sitting on a tomb at the cemetery on a cold cloudy day is as gloomy as it gets. He looks amused. She appears, and he flashes smiles. He motions for her to sit next to him.

“Did I miss anything?”

“No, no. The priest hasn’t spoken yet.”

There are about twenty people below them, gathered in silence. A few of them are crying discreetly. Most of them are wearing black and holding an umbrella, even though it’s not raining. It’s as if it were raining.

“I hate priests.”

“So do I.”

Their hands find each other in a tight squeeze. Hating something in common is proof of love, after all.

The priest says something they can't understand because of the distance and the wind. It's all for the better, anyway.

“Do you know who died?”

“I think it was the father of those three over there.”

“No widow?” she asks, as he searches the faces for an answer.

He enjoys this guessing game that she plays so well.

“He was a widower.”

“I see. That's why you're waiting?”

He nods in agreement. Yes, when he noticed that was a burial at the cemetery, he decided to stop and watch. Maybe, this time...

They look at everyone present. The sky that is getting darker and heavier, and the cemetery is empty. They search for words, but only find silence. They search for words again. He manages to find something to say.

“Did you try to go farther this time around?”

“Yep. As I always do.”

“Nothing different?”

“Nothing. I try to go farther away in the opposite direction of where you are, but I always end up finding you. I try to hide, so you won't see me.”

One of the children of the deceased man starts to talk. Another one, who looks like the youngest, is holding his older sister. Only one of the siblings seems detached from everything. For a split second, the man seems to have spotted them. But nobody can see them.

“Did you see me this morning?”

“At the coffee shop.”

“Yep.”

She was glad he noticed her.

“I saw you made a couple fight.”

“I knew you would have smiled if you were there.”

She is happy he knows her so well.

They realize they’re still holding hands. Once they notice it, should they let go? After so many years, they no longer know how to act, where to put their hands, where to fit in the words.

“His children don’t look that upset.”

“Maybe he wasn’t a good father.”

“No parent is a good mother or father. We just love our children out of habit.”

“My parents were good.” She disagrees and lets go of his hand. She was back. They were back.

“Your mom was particularly evil,” he laughs, waiting for her to follow suit.

She doesn’t laugh. He stops laughing and she chuckles inside.

“This place is funny.”

He looks around to find out what’s so funny about it. Everything is gray.

“The cemetery?”

“No, no. This place where we are now.”

“Yes. Even though we don’t want to, we’ll always be together.”

“Like magnets.”

“Or a cage.”

Below them, people start to disperse. A parade of umbrellas makes their way out of the cemetery.

“Yeah, it’s all over and she didn’t show up.”

“Neither did he.”

They start to leave as well. He helps her down the tomb.

“Maybe it’s not supposed to happen right away...”

“Maybe. When, then?”

He stops, trying to remember. If he stands still, he might recover his memory.

“I don’t know. I can’t remember when it happened.”

“Neither do I.”

“I can only remember you were with me.”

“I was.”

He brings his body closer to her and, as she’s walking, she rests her head on his shoulder. Standing before the cemetery gates, they watch the parade of umbrellas moving away in the distance. A new group is approaching, carrying another coffin.

“Maybe it’s just us.”

“Maybe.”

He motions for them to go back inside. A new coffin... Maybe this time someone will show up. She nods.

“You’ve never disappeared,” she says before they go in.

“Neither have you.”

“No, I mean, you’ve never tried to walk away and disappear. You’ve never wanted to leave me wandering around all alone, scaring couples all by myself,” she thinks she’s correcting him.

“Yes, I know what you’re saying. Neither have you. You never truly wanted to disappear.”

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“I don’t know why you bring me to these places.”

“I know you like it.”

And she does. This time, she wouldn’t complain, though. The couple having sex in front of them was actually married. Their children were at school and they were making the most of their time to spice things up. The two of them were waiting, sitting on chairs in front of the bed, as if they were inside a 3D theater.

“I wouldn’t if I were alive. You know I’ve never been much of a voyeur,” she lies.

“You never liked sex that much,” it was true.

“She’s too submissive. Look at that!”

“She’s on all fours. No big deal.”

“I think it’s humiliating.”

“You only liked missionary.”

“Sideways, too.”

“Yeah, sideways felt good.”

On the bed in front of them, the woman barely moaned. They couldn’t tell if she was bored, or just really focused.

“I like positions we can kiss.”

“You used to.”

“Yes, I used to.”

Sometimes she forgets she’s dead.

“There you go, he flipped her around. You’ll hate him even more now.”

The man is thrusting deeply now. With each thrust, one stronger than the other, he seems to be begging for the woman to start moaning—or at least show any signs that she’s alive. There’s a sense of urgency now. It’s almost noon and the children should be back home any time now.

“He hasn’t kissed her yet.”

“They’re married already…”

She glances at him to make sure he has actually uttered such bullshit.

“So, there’s no need for kissing anymore?”

“Things have to get a little dirtier after some time.”

She sighs. She should be surprised, but it isn’t surprising at all. She focuses on the couple once again. The woman moans a little—she seems to be awoken. Or maybe she just remembered the kids are coming.

“Yep. You always had a weakness for filthy things.”

“And you always turned them down.”

“And here we are, watching strangers having sex.”

He chuckles, and this time she chuckles, too.

She likes it when they don’t need to scare couples, just watch them. It takes her back to when they were a couple themselves—even though they still are a couple, albeit an incomplete one.

“We should give it a try one of these days.”

“We have tried. You know it doesn’t quite work here,” she elbows him.

“We can try again.”

“Yep. If we can do it, I’ll even let you try a new position.”

They look at each other. They’re a couple, even though they can’t do any coupling. Before they kiss, something happening on the bed gets their attention. He is the one who notices it first.

“No!”

“No?”

“We better not do it now.”

“Take your hands off my eyes.” And so he did.

“You asked me to.” Yes, she had asked him to do it.

“No!”

“Oh, well...”

“Really, is she really doing that on top of him? She looked so...”

“I told you.”

“Shhhhhhit!”

*

“What’s your name?”

“I wanted to remember.”

“I’d tell you if I knew it.”

*

“Do you think we ever had children?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I don’t think so, either.”

“We wouldn’t forget something so important, right?”

“Maybe.”

“It’s okay that we don’t remember our own names, but forgetting our own children?”

“It’s better if we don’t remember we had any.”

“Yep. We’d spend all our lives looking for them.”

“All our lives.”

*

She washed her hair, lathering it up, letting the warm water run down her body. The water was like a scolding river running through the dry creases of her skin. Standing in front of the mirror, she dried and brushed her hair, throwing away the strands that came loose. She applied different types of cream under her eyes, around her wrinkles, and on her neck, as well as moisturizing lotion throughout her body. So many wrinkles. So many years. She brushed her teeth and used alcohol-free mouthwash before she took her pills. She smiled at the mirror and her reflection smiled back at her.

Once she left the bathroom, she put on the nightgown she had bought the day before and turned off the light. It was late in the evening and the night would soon fall. He was already in bed. The orange glow in the bedroom showed the contour of his old body. He opened his eyes as soon as she turned off the machines that helped him to breathe.

She lied down in bed to next to him. She pulled the same sheet that was covering him. She had planned to remain silent. After all, he had spent years and years complaining about how much she talked. After a few minutes staring at the ceiling, she gave up trying to be quiet.

“When do you think it ended?”

He took his time answering. She thought he’d never answer. She turned her head to face him and check if he were still alive. She saw his eyes were also fixed on the ceiling. She had already closed her eyes and given up waiting for an answer when he finally heard her.

“What do you mean?”

She opened her eyes again. He was staring at her. They locked eyes. His face also looked old and full of wrinkles. He looked as handsome as ever.

“Was there a day, a moment?”

She asked it right away, afraid she wouldn’t get an answer before he left. Before they both left.

“What are you talking about?”

Until the very end, he was still him. He pretended he didn’t understand her, just to test her. Just to make her question her own certainties.

His breathing was shallow. He wouldn’t last much longer.

“Us. You and me. When was it over?”

He tried to smile and looked at her affectionately. He looked at the ceiling again and closed his eyes. That was it. It was time to rest. She did the same—she closed her eyes and laid on her back.

She felt it when his hand found hers, which was slightly shaking under the sheet. They held on tightly. And her hand stopped shaking.

“Who said it’s over?”

“...”

“Anna?”