SHORT STORY

Before and After

by Andrea Färber

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Before, the world was golden, drenched in sunlight or drenched in rain as long as she was by his side. Her laughter had the power to chase storm clouds away, and her touch felt like a soft breeze on his skin.

Her blonde hair reminded him of sunrises and sunsets, and her voice of birds sitting in trees, having conversations on high branches that only the leaves could understand.

Now the world is gray, even on the brightest days. When the sun shines he wishes for rain, and when the rain knocks against his window, he wishes for the raindrops to come inside and wash him away.

Whenever he sees long golden hair on the street he feels as if it wraps itself around his throat and pulls tight, a noose that robs him of his last breath. He no longer hears birds singing in trees.

Before, the bed felt warm and soft and was a sanctuary. Her arms around his torso. Her breath against his skin. Soft and heated kisses, hours of cuddling and hours of passionate love making. Getting out of bed was hard with her by his side, but getting out of bed was easy when he could hear her tinkering around in the kitchen and the sound of the coffee machine.

Now the bed is made out of nails the way her coffin is, and the blanket a cave that collapses over him, burying him in stones. It is cold, and hard. Nightmares plague his mind. There is no one to hold, and no one to hold him anymore. He misses her body pressed against his in the middle of the night that spent comfort and made the bed a home. It’s hard to go to sleep and it’s hard to get out of bed, because he knows that each morning there’s no one waiting for him in the kitchen anymore with a fresh cup of coffee and a soft peck on the lips. He hates the loneliness of his bed, but he dreads the emptiness of the rest of his flat even more.

Before, he was down on one knee, his hands shaking along with his voice as he presented the black box lined with satin to her. He had never thought that she’d say no, but he had feared it nonetheless. When she finally said yes, he felt as if he was the luckiest man on planet Earth. The ring fit her finger perfectly, and her eyes were glistening with unshed tears of happiness, and he had never seen anything more beautiful.

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Now the ring lies on the kitchen table, on the blue coaster where she always used to place her mug. The ruby in it still glistens the way it did when he had gathered his courage and kneeled down, but now it only seems to mock him. A reminder of her last hours. Her last minutes. Her last second. She wore it when the car skittered off the road and crashed into a tree. And although he still has all her clothes and her makeup and her perfume and that ugly abstract painting that she swore resembled a tree in the park and that she loved so much on the wall above the couch, the ring is the only thing that really connects him to her these days.

Before, they always went out together. Museums. Galleries. Coffee shops. The park. Long walks together. Laughing together. Evenings with friends at the cinema or at their flat, watching movies or playing board games. There was always something going on somewhere and they always tried to be present. Yet, his favourite nights were the ones that they spent curled up on the couch, just the two of them. Talking about everything, and nothing important — their dreams and hopes and fears, and the family they wished to have someday.

Now their friends are only his, and they try to help, but they can never understand his pain. There's a hole where his heart once was. She had made him whole, and now half of him is missing. Their, no, his friends try to engage him. Take him out for dinner. Make him talk, offer a strong shoulder to cry on. But all he wants is to be left alone in their flat, his flat, and grieve. He does not take down their pictures. He does not throw away her clothes. And he does not go outside unless he really has to.

It's in a grocery store that he first meets her. He's looking but not really paying attention to the seemingly fake world around him. He stumbles through the aisle. How can all that be real if she's not real anymore? If he believes in it long enough, maybe it will be a dream that he eventually wakes up from.

So, he's browsing but also not, and then he bumps into her. She turns out to be an employee who had her hands full of canned peaches that are now on the floor, one of the cans slowly rolling further and further away from them. They watch it, in silence, for a few seconds. Then, it finally comes to a stop.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, voice hoarse.

Before, he used to talk all the time. About everything. She'd always listen, even if he talked about things that she couldn't bring herself to care about. Whenever she listened, she tilted

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her head slightly to the left. A habit that made him figure out soon enough when she listened and when she just pretended that she did. Something he loved to tease her about, especially when he caught her pretending at her father's speech at his 60th birthday party.

Now he never really talks anymore, except when his mother calls or his what-should-have-been mother-in-law, or other family members or friends that care but he really doesn't want to hear from them.

"It's okay," the employee says and bends forward to pick up the cans. He wants to help her, but the woman shakes her head and tells him that it's really okay and he should just continue his shopping.

So he does, and then returns to the silence of the empty apartment, a silence so ear-splitting that it's suffocating him.

Before, they would always take long walks in autumn, because she loved when the leaves changed colours. He knew every path in Kensington Garden and Hyde Park and all the other beautiful parks in London. He had walked them so many times with her. She'd pick up the prettiest leaves from the floor and put them between thin pages of heavy books at home. She dried them and used them for Halloween decorations. He loved the way she loved nature. But then again there was nothing that he didn't love about her.

Now he loathes that the days are getting shorter and the leaves are starting to change, because she can't see them from her grave. He doesn't go to any parks. It's hard that the trees on the sides of the streets are red and yellow and brown and green, and laugh in his face as the wind rushes through them.

He keeps his head down and eyes glued to the street as he walks home as fast as he can, until he bumps into someone.

"Is knocking things out of people's hands your hobby or are you just an asshole?"

The face isn't familiar but the voice is. He just ran into the employee of the grocery store again.

There's annoyance flickering in brown eyes. Quickly, he looks down at the pavement, which is now adorned by a white Starbucks cup, its contents spilled.

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“I’m so sorry,” he says, embarrassed. If he wasn’t so occupied with trying to apologize he would have noticed that this is the first time he’s feeling something other than grief in a long time: embarrassment.

Before, his cheeks were red and his heart was hammering in his chest. Of course he had to knock over the glass full of red wine. He ruined the beautiful white table cloth in the elegant restaurant and surely must have blown his chances with the stunning woman sitting across from him.

“Oh, God, I’m so sorry,” he stammered as he tried to soak up the red liquid from the tablecloth with the equally expensive looking napkin. “I’m just really clumsy. Oh no.”

He had feared that this was the end of their already stagnant date, and he wanted to kick himself. They had met at a party, and it took him a week to overcome his fears and ask her to go out with him, and another one to actually convince her that an evening with him would be as enjoyable as pizza and some late night TV show alone at home. But once on the date, conversation hadn’t been flowing smoothly at all and they both seemed uncomfortable in the setting, and after he had been so stupid to knock over the glass he was sure that she wouldn’t even stay for dessert.

But she giggled and suggested with a mischievous grin that he should just hide the stain below the napkin so their waiter wouldn’t notice until they had left. That was the moment they started trading embarrassing stories of their pasts with each other. He was right in assuming that she wouldn’t stay for dessert, but that was only because they went to an ice cream shop instead, their stomachs hurting from too much food and laughter by the end of their date. The kiss goodbye they shared made his lips tingle and stretch into a smile for days afterwards whenever he thought of it.

Now his cheeks are red and he’s horrified at having crashed into the same person twice.

“I’m just really clumsy. I’ll buy you a new one,” he offers, cringing as he hears the stranger sigh.

“It’s okay, I don’t have time for another one. But maybe you should pay a bit more attention to your surroundings from now on.”

With those words he is left behind, staring at the cup on the floor with reddened cheeks. He bends to pick it up and throw it in the trash. In messy handwriting the words “Happier days will come,” “PSL,” and what he takes for her name are written on the cup with a black

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Sharpie. With the cup in his hand, he looks after her with a frown until she vanishes around the next corner.

“Happier days will come,” he murmurs to himself. The wind rushes through the colourful autumn leaves and plucks some from their branches. One leaf skilfully swirls through the air and elegantly lands in the cup.

Happier days will come. He clutches the cup tightly, his thumb blackening as he absent-mindedly wipes along her name. Happier days will come, Violet.

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