

Dead End

Later on, he'd always refer it to the night that the moon flamed orange. The night when the sky turned pitch black at 8:48pm on the week before Halloween, and the moon had just risen over the horizon. He had let his eyes wander out the window again, and he had seen the crater-spotted full moon burn a bright orange against the blackest and darkest night sky. On the other hand, she had merely rolled her eyes like always, claiming that she'd seen this 'phenomenon' before, but his eyes had lit up, the same twinkling way she could never describe with mere words. This was another chalked-up complete opposite that she had added to her list, ever since the day they met. He was always the romantic one, finding the best in everything, everyone, even she. She, the one who knew everything about herself, but had nothing she ever wanted to reveal. In this way, she knew she was perfect; that she embodied perfection itself to a fault. And faulty she most certainly was, if perfection was the measure of how far one has to fall. And he was the only one who knew about it. The same eyes that could see so clearly through her impenetrable exterior also chose to look past every flaw that was so hard for her to ignore in herself.

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It all began in college; this part she remembers but not in absolute clarity. She was a 'teacher's pet' – forgive the overused phrase – but that was the best phrase she could use to describe her freshman self. And fresh she most certainly was; perhaps not in the usual sense one would think of (what teenager in college would describe themselves as 'fresh?'), but in the sense that she was the youngest in her entire class. No, scratch that. In the entire university. In contrast, he was in 2 of her classes. He was a 'senior in freshman clothing', and that, to her, said all. She never spoke to him. Not that it made a difference, since she hardly spoke to anyone else except out of necessity. Yes, she was perfect.

The first time they had interacted in any sort of way was in the library. She, like her usual perfect self, was researching for a paper due 9 months later. She was merely perusing the rows of titles she'd mostly memorised already when she felt the tap of someone's finger on her shoulder and a whisper of her name followed by an embarrassed plea for help. She had felt surprised that he remembered her name, but covered her face quickly with her customary civil smile. Say cheese!

She hadn't thought anything much about that encounter afterwards. Until a week later when he'd decided to deign her with his presence, this time asking for help in their other class. She had wanted to think up an excuse for distance, and she did. And she voiced it, hoping that he would leave her alone. Instead, he had persisted. Not that it was anything new to her; just something that resurfaced from her past. So she dealt with it with an ease she'd almost forgotten by now (but could never really forget), brushing him off in the most polite yet scathingly belittling way she had cultivated over the years. It was all done with the same moulded and refined smile she had carefully cultivated over years of experience, because she knew that people were lazy and she was not. She could never afford that intangible luxury, and even sleep had reduced to 4 hours per night. He had come to her with a request, but left with a large, distrustful label with the word 'lazy' written all over it. Watching him leave, she felt a sense of relief wash over her. She had found out the bitter, hard way that people, after all, were really no different from one another.

She had thought that she could safely write him out of her life forever. She had her pen poised over the thick book filled with all the other crossed-out names already, so why not? The blame lay with him, of course. It always lay with *him*, ever since the 'night the moon flamed orange'.

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It was late. It was late, she didn't care, but the library was closing. She was thrown out in the end, but she wasn't too worried because at least, she could present the fruits of her labour to her expectant parents. This included the newly checked-out 8 books, 3 of which were hefted into her backpack, the other 5 nestling in the well-defined crooks of her arms. Long gone were the days when the books left behind eggs of blue and black marks, so she strode along the sidewalk quickly, feeling a sense of reprieve at the knowledge that the black and white 'treasures' riding alongside the books in her backpack served as a perfect appeasement to her parents for returning to the house so late at night. Trudging along in the dry but sweltering heat, she began to organise each thirty-minute frame of how she would spend her time until she went to bed. She had gotten to 'study for midterm test' when someone had called out her name. Taken by complete surprise, she jerked, consequently dropping her 5 books. One particularly heavy one entitled "The Complexities of the Human Psyche" slammed on her foot with the full force of gravity and mass, causing her to cringe, but not cry out. Pain was no stranger, but she still bent over, clutching her hurt foot with one hand and trying to gather the fallen books with the other. Just when she was about to dread the conversation with the temperamental librarian (half temper, half mental), she heard the sound of a car door opening and slamming shut, and the worried voice of the one who called out to her.

Him.

She had to resist the urge to voice her complaints, because she was perfect. So she merely nodded all through the anxious apologies she received from an anxious classmate who helped her pick up one of the books she dropped. Fully expecting him to hand it to her and leave, she waited. And was caught by surprise again when he flatly refused, not until he let her make it up to her by driving her home. Perhaps it was because he saw her clutch her foot, so his apology really did sound sincere to her. But she stood up, ignoring the pain lacing across her toes and flatly refused his offer, insisting that she was fine and reached for her books, thank you very much. He jerked it from her reach.

Blinking twice in incredulousness, she frowned, repeating her demand whilst leaning a little closer.

He, again, jerked a little further backwards, his height and stubbornness dominating hers. Refusing to return her books unless she complied, she had to add the word 'annoying' to the large label. Worrying that she would dig a deeper hole for herself when she faced her parents, but even more worried of the fully-capable-of-manipulation man standing in front of her, she lurched forward as suddenly as she could towards the book whilst kneeling him with a force she didn't know she had. Unfortunately, he had seen it coming and had pulled away at the last moment possible, so she ended up bruising his hip instead before throwing herself off balance when he shifted. Intimate with the hard concrete once more, she blinked back the fierce, resentful tears before grinding out her demand and refusal, this time adding an excuse of inappropriateness and *please*. He cast her an anxious look before awkwardly offering a hand to help her up, saying that he was a married Catholic. In the fast-fading light, she caught the glint of a ring on his left hand before grumbling her consent and limping into the second-hand BMW. Now all she had to do was pray that her parents wouldn't kill her.

She sat in the backseat after telling him where to drop her off, laying her books across one of the seats and clutching her backpack in her arms. He had finally returned the last book and was trying to make small talk. If she weren't perfect, she would have laughed out loud at his pathetic attempts, but as she was, she simply 'hmm-ed' or 'oh-ed' out of society's infernal rules of civility. As for any questions thrown her way, she would reply with the most commonly used phrase in the English language, or with one-word answers. She had an entire plethora of them plus a skill to pull it off effortlessly. She would always win. Over the next few years, she would find that it would be the one and only time she had victory over him, but in that moment, she knew that the conversation was her marionette.

He ceased his attempts on the highway, falling into the space of silence that she embraced. They drove on for a few miles when he took a heart-skipping exit to the left. Her heart beating a little faster, she pointed out his mistake before starting to give him directions to correct it. But he had cut her off, saying that there was something he wanted to show her. Her fear came in waves then and there, but she tried not to show it, instead demanding hotly for her release. He sighed, looked at her wearily before replying that he wouldn't take long to show her his 'secret spot'. Goosebumps had risen all over her skin, her doubt increasing exponentially. But she couldn't stop him in fear that they would crash, and her parents would most certainly and indefinitely despise her for the rest of their lives if that happened. She tried to calm herself down from spontaneous hyperventilation, and in the process, remembered that she had a cell phone. Perfect.

If only she had remembered to charge the batteries.

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Although it seemed a lot longer, he only drove for another 10 minutes before arriving at his 'secret place'. It was in the hard shoulder of a steep, winding upward climb of a mountain, and when he finally turned off the engine, she had deliberated running off, away from this 'lazy', 'annoying' and now 'mentally deranged' man. But she couldn't walk back. It was impossible with her 8 books and backpack, and her still-smarting foot. Her parents were going to kill her anyway, and besides, she also had the smallest inkling of curiosity about this 'secret place'. It was minutely small, but it was still there. She half expected him to show her a UFO or mansion, but whatever she was expecting, she still got out and followed him with the beckoning of his hand. He led her through the hazard signs until they came to a narrow clearing that was stopped abruptly by a steep and tall cliff of the mountainside. He sat down and motioned to her to do the same. She stared at him instead before asking him whether he was crazy or not, and why he had brought her to this 'secret place' and what was so secret about it anyway. To her astonishment, he chuckled and left her questions unanswered before pointing to the now pitch-black sky and telling her to look.

There was the moon bathed in all the sun's majesty, lazily rising over the horizon to join the dotted stars. It glowed a pure orange, and she took this all into her overworked mind before telling him the truth. The truth that he was, in fact, crazy. Crazy for dragging her into this not-so-secret or wonderful place, for forcing her into this situation. Turning to leave, she caught his whisper that his wife loved this place the most, and that the moon was a miraculous orange. She turned to reply disdainfully that the reason why the moon was orange was because of the earth's atmosphere scattering the sun's light, but before she could say it, she caught the twinkle in his eyes.

In reality, she was the one who was caught by them, and from that moment onwards, she knew that no matter what she said or did, her words could not affect him in any way.

Thanks to his insisting, she had spent the next few weeks in hell. Her parents' form of punishment. The first few days were the hardest, and she thought that from hereon after, she would never taste any sliver of freedom ever again. What with her parents' expectations and iron fists, she thought she had no space to squeeze anything in between anyway. But somehow, squeeze he did with his lithe frame of amiability, wedging into her life that, unbeknownst to her, was actually covered in miniscule cracks. He found them one by one, the first being a week after their little road trip.

It was after their class, when all the other students had filed out already and she was still busy organising her notes. Occupied with thoughts of her parents, she was quite startled when he spoke to her, telling her to 'liven up'. Unsure of the expression on her face, she decided to reply him with a smile and a nod of okay-ness, but instead of leaving her alone like she fully expected him to do, he poked her. In between the eyes. In utter disbelief now, she couldn't do anything except gape at him, though in her mind, she knew he was crazy. She knew he was even crazier when he said that the reason he had brought up to his secret place was to make that look on her face vanish with the rising of the moon; to get rid of the expression that plagued her mind so constantly. She knew then and there that he was unpredictably crazy, but that also, this was his first victory.

The second crack was discovered on campus, amongst the vast grassland with scattered trees, tables and seats provided for the students' leisure. Although neither of them lived on campus, she secretly liked to sit under an old maple tree and study, especially during autumn when the leaves would blanket her world in gold. This was something he would say as he came up to her, his admiration for nature far more poetic than hers. She had tried to ignore him at first, but it was impossible. It was impossible because he sat there, silent before her, gazing into a world she could never see. She had been contemplating to escape as silently as she could, but that was before she caught the glint of something on his hand. It was his wedding ring...at least, that was what it seemed like. Or rather, they, as plurals go. A double-band of white gold, one thinner and distinctly more feminine than the other greeted her eyes, and before she knew it, she was blurting out a question. This time it was his turn to be surprised, but then, a sombre look engulfed his features, and to her horror, he looked as if he were on the verge of crying. She had to avoid it. She had to like every other time she would come across a crying person, because tears were the only weapons that could erode her own 1000 feet dam that she was constructing. And it was getting taller with every passing year, and no, she couldn't afford its breakage anytime in the near future. Nor in the far future. So, she did the only thing she could do in that situation. She fled.

Since that day, the sight of him made her nervous beyond all reason, so she avoided him like a repelling magnet. She didn't want him to become her weakness, so it was all too natural for her to endure everything until the day she graduated. She had a pair of extremely tight and ugly shoes, but they were her shoes and she was used to them. Perhaps he did notice, or maybe he saw the danger she was in, but for whatever reason he brewed in his heart, he persisted. It wasn't until Christmastime when he finally caught her half-blinded and wrestling with the bladed winter wind while he was driving his way home. He had bundled her half-frozen body into the backseat and driven her to his apartment, worrying about her blue lips and pale fingers all the while. She hardly noticed until she found herself in front of a blasting radiator and her damp library books, which is when her mind froze.

When a mind freezes, it means that the heart can do whatever it wants to do.

In any case, after a frenzy of screaming and shouting, consoling and explaining, they finally ended up with one exposed soul, and one worried man. She felt sick. In the many, many years she had lived, not once had she ever shown nor sought to possess any weakness whatsoever. She had nothing to gain, so had nothing to lose. This was the principle of perfection that she had built her life around since the day she lost everything, so to have one man destroy it all was something she absolutely could not allow. She heard him apologise again before he left, only to return with two steaming cups. After mumbling an automatic ‘thanks’, she fell silent, embarrassed to the core.

Awkward silence.

She stared at the wooden floor, listening to the soft sips spilling into the spaces in between. Quite, quite uncomfortable, she shifted in her seat, desperately trying to think of some way to free herself from his invisible grasp. No, it was not even him – he didn’t know it himself, but there was something else...something else threatening her world to change. And she feared the feeling. She was startled out of her reverie when he spoke, asking her the one question she did not want him to ask. She couldn’t reply. She shrugged, hoping that it would suffice and that he wouldn’t bring it up anymore, so that neither of them would have to follow along the pattern of consequences that led to her breakdown. Then, without warning, he picked up where he left off from the last conversation.

He told her about his wife, how they fell in love at the tender age of 20 and 22, the magnificent wedding followed by one-sided love and one-sided regret, and in a flurry of misunderstandings mixed in with a third party, it led to her throwing her ring at him and demanding an annulment. He was the one who could not forget her betrayal, and because his love for her was so great, his hatred for her was equally as great. But because he loved his wife so much, in the end, he forgave her.

All through his quiet story, she had vowed, chanted to herself to not look at his facial expression again. She did, but his haunting voice...all it took was one glance in a fit of temptation and she was fixated. All she saw were his eyes. They were drawn to his rings and how a finger snaked around them; caressed them with a heartbreaking fondness. And in his eyes were everything that she had never wanted to feel again. The pain of betrayal and forgiveness marred his eyes, and she knew how it felt. This was what threatened her world – that he would become a mirror of her past, despite all the efforts he clearly made that she had never considered. That doing all the ‘good things’ that she could not bring herself to do would not have changed her in any way or bring her any more joy or peace of mind which she so fearfully denied for so long was now becoming reality right in front of her. All her ‘what ifs’ and reasons to strive for a better life seemed to be taken away by this one man who still had hope. And on that cold winter evening, he won the war.

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She had labelled it as a kidnapping. Despite all his protests of good intentions, she couldn’t admit that he had helped her, because perfect people don’t need help. But secretly, and during the afternoons after when he’d drive her home, she considered the one kidnapping as a rescue. He had become a weakness, and she had become a denied lie.

The rush of events in between, events that she could not remember so clearly came next. On the surface, he was still a social romantic, and she an unapproachable perfectionist, but something was a little different. They would escape the prying eyes of others, two hurt and one hopeful soul together on the edge of the world; the brink of death and life which was not so secret really, and sat in the comfort of the knowledge that they were not alone.

Finally, one late summer afternoon, before her time was up and she had to return to the reality of her parents' restrictions, they sat on the heated ground of their familiar meeting place. The sunset had licked the sky into flames, and he, for once, had nothing romantic to say. She had thought that he was just speechless in awe and wonder, so decided to leave him in his thoughts, but when he did speak, he spoke in such a low and soft voice that she would have missed it if the day wasn't so calm.

"I'm leaving."

Stunned, she spent a few moments gathering her emotions before she could reply with a question. He repeated this devastating phrase again, before rambling on about a life opportunity in a different place, but all she heard that it was somewhere far away. And that he was leaving. He teetered on until he had nothing left to say. Silence spoke to their hearts instead, whispering the many things they had come to share. She wanted to yell at him, to say that he was running away, that he was leaving both of them alone, but she had never had the fire to do so. After all, he was a weakness.

The moment passed. Time was pressing in, but all she could do was to hug her knees tightly and burn the memory into her mind. He noticed. He noticed, and, shifting his body closer to hers, he touched her cheek and with a worried voice, told her that she did not have to smile.

She did not want to smile. No, she had wanted to cry, cry her fears that flowed into the years to come, to do something she was never brave enough to do, all to show him that he had touched her life. But she couldn't. Not with the terrified smile plastered on her face. He looked at her, and understood (something that he should have a long time ago). Sighing, he stood up before helping her to her feet like he always did, and in a cheesy, Arnold Swarzenegger yet strangely nostalgic way, said 'I'll be back'. She laughed in pain, and followed his retreating back to the car.

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Looking back now, it had all seemed so foolish. Her weakness had become another wound, this one being the deepest and the freshest. With him gone, everything reverted back to the way it was. She thought that she would be satisfied. She thought that she would finally be rid of her weakness, but it didn't turn out quite the way she thought it would. Nothing did, not when it concerned him.

Leaning back in the car she stole from her parents, she looks upwards, through the sunroof and at the pollution-enhanced sunset. Like the dying day, she couldn't ask for a clearer reflection of her soul. And it had been difficult, hanging onto a promise that she had no hope of him keeping. So she had come here today, to the spot where she centred her weakness on, parking her car in between two trees that looked over the beautiful horizon. She sighs. She was never one to be patient, and a promise to the one who waits fades with every sunset.

She feels tired now, a weariness that penetrated every corner of her spirit. She wants to be perfect forever, but he made her realise how far she truly was from her dream. And yes, it is a dream, not a wish anymore. She realises it and laughs long and painfully, just like the day he had left. And she smiles all the more because of it.

With that thought, she shifted the gear into Drive, and waited for the moment when she would freefall, the keyword being 'free'.