

## CONVERSATIONS WITH THE DEAD AND DYING

What do I remember of you?

I thought I would never forget you, given the hundreds, the thousands of feelings for you that swirl around me, picking and grabbing and tapping and that push me from every side of sadness and back again. Years pass but the feelings don't. So how is it possible that I could I forget anything about you? I thought that you did too many things with your words, your body, your force of life to ever forget all the special little details that I am trying to keep. I'm not missing you any less, no, that is confirmed in my dreams, in my constant thoughts, in my gut, but I am forgetting you more and more with each passing year.

And it's not just you and what you used to do and say that I'm forgetting. It's me. I forget how I was, *who* I was when we were together, when we were good. I can't even remember what I was like or what I felt.

Did I smile after you kissed me? Did I linger at the door after you left the house, still smelling you on me, still breathing you? Did I thank you enough for the custard tarts you brought me, the tea, the songs? I think I did, I hope I did, it's what I prefer to remember, but is that what really happened?

This passing memory, it's like a twilight that looked so perfect, but the scene is growing darker. The memory is becoming remote. It's fading like words that are in a different language now, a language I'm losing. There goes a phrase ... faded, gone, what we said and how we said it and the impact it had then and should have now ... lost. Tomorrow it will be a whole discussion. Soon it will be our whole time together. It's not fair. I feel helpless to keep it from disappearing. Will it become so complete that we could pass on the street, strangers once more, the people we were before we met, we flirted, we became so very good together, we despaired, we hurt each other, we ended? Would that complete us?

What if I could keep us alive in me through pretend conversations? Talking with dead and dying memories? I can remember you all over again with new memories from conversations I wish we were having. This time I will pay attention to what I am saying, how I feel when you reply, so that nothing can slip into the dusk anymore. Pretend conversations ... I think that is something you would have liked.

"You'll make things up about what you think I would say?" you ask.

"Ya, lots of crazy shit. I have to make allowances," I say.

"Pffft. You could *\*try\** to sympathize. Yeeeeesh." you say. "Okay, why not. That sounds more interesting than just trying to remember. We can't have boring," you say, and you give me a nudge with the cup of your bubble tea. I take the first sip of mine, almost choke on the tapioca that I wasn't expecting, and you think that is hilarious and you almost snort yours out your nose in laughter.

"I wasn't ready for that," I say, and raise my eyebrows suddenly again even on my next sip. You pull a serviette to your nose which is still in danger of passing your bubble tea.

"Stop it!"

"I'm not doing it on purpose. I really wasn't expecting this."

"This?"

"Yes, us."

"Can you handle it?" you ask, shifting in the seat where all around us is quiet in the parking lot.

I nod confidently. "For sure. I would be the one to hold you down, kiss you so hard. I'll take your breath away."

"It won't be all that easy," you say, so wisely, so prophetically.

But I don't agree. "All you have to do is compartmentalize," I say, and I feel the air filled with over-confidence but I mistake it for truth. "You're here, in this compartment. My other life, it's over in another compartment. Why do you ask, are you wondering if you'll be able to handle it?"

"I don't know," you say so I put my hand so gently against your cheek and lean in and kiss you and you make a sound, a slip, unintentional, a sigh, so short that maybe you don't even notice but I do and I feel it like you screaming at me saying "I want this!" and I press the kiss longer to say "I want this too!" and I am perfect in that moment with you. That moment is perfect. Everything you don't say is perfect. I am making a note to never forget what you are silently screaming. And what I want.

Still, you hesitate. You hold back. So I tell you: "You can tell me anything, it won't matter."

"Not you, you can't tell me everything," you say. "I don't want to hear about your other life. Remember at the very beginning I told you that I would get jealous? Well I am and I don't like being jealous."

I hug you in re-assurance. It assures me too. Remember this: this sense, this ease. "Then we need to talk about our life, not the other ones. Our life now and our life one day. Sitting under a tree in Tuscany."

"Is there such a place?" you question.

"Well sure there is," I say surprised. "I've been there."

"That doesn't mean it's real."

"It is right now."

You rest on me. "Okay, I'll go with that," then you laugh a little against my chest.

"You have the giggles?" I ask.

"You did that." You insist.

"Me? How?"

"It's cause there's this guy who I've admired for a while, seems to like spending time with me too, even when he's crazy busy. Kind of hard to believe sometimes. And he even thinks I'm pretty. Even more unbelievable but he seems to really think so. And he doesn't like tea as much as I do, but at the same time he *\*really\** likes tea :) So yeah I have this goofy grin on my face all the time."

So we found the time to be together more. Wednesdays. Places you were house sitting. Parking lots.

"Is it safe at your house?" I ask, sitting in your room.

"Yes," you say. Standing in front of me. "You want a fashion show?"

"As long as it includes the little black skirt. You know what that does to me!"

But instead of an array of clothes that compliment your beautiful body, you lead with the most revealing, mesh, I-don't-know-how-to-describe-this, your intent and your desire all over me.

"Just a little time," you whisper. And sounds. Softly. Intensely.

Now I remember. I remember what that was like. Every longing I have ever felt packed into those moments. The look on your face.

"No, I didn't sleep much" you say, but I don't think you look tired. You look beautiful, always so beautiful.

"Because you're in a different bed? Because we're at this hotel?"

"I'm not sure. You slept though! So, when I couldn't sleep, I watched you sleep."

Wow, you just watched me sleep. In this hotel, this one night together. I slept, forfeiting precious moments with you, and you watched me.

Then I'm dressing. "You should always wear blue. Blue really brings out your eyes." You admonish me in a way that I can't argue with and I appreciate at the same time. Tell me how you feel. Guide me. Let me rely on you. I need that, I need you.

"I don't have that in my life now," I say to you. You shrug, we have been apart for years, you don't want to talk to me. You avoid me. I'm afraid of you. I try to explain a little more. "It's one of the big things my psychologist uncovered. He asked me who in my life did I feel had really invested in me. Who had been my champion? Who advocated for me? My answer was really sad. Not my parents, not family, not coaches, teachers or partners. He called me a self-made man. Maybe so. But you invested in me. Like when you watched me sleeping, I know you were there for me." Do I have your attention? You nod. You know you invested in me. You raised me more than I deserved. "No one has ever cared for me like that. Thank you. It is a big part of why I miss you so much."

You give me a look to let me know you have a solution, and you say it firmly. "The heart does not miss what the eye does not see."

No, no, no, no, no. "But I want to miss you. I'm afraid to forget you. You still mean everything."

I lost her. I lost her. I lost her.

Grief is an awful thing. It is the worst experience I know.

Jesus, this hurts. Heartbreaks are incurable. There were days I couldn't move. This is crushing me.

Wasn't there anything I did that merited a second chance? I know you might have loved me. I know you wouldn't have wished this grief on me. But here it is. I'm wearing it. I'm still wearing it years later.

Friends say you were a flirt, unkind and hurtful.

"What are you going to have me say to that?" you asked, irritated but resigned to what I'm writing down. Then you say flatly: "They're right."

Except that you were better than me. "You weren't the bad guy here," I say, knowing that nothing I write will matter.

"No it won't," you lecture me. "You can't just argue all these reasons about why we should have stayed together and expect me to change how I feel. It doesn't work like that. I did what I had to do. I did what was necessary to protect myself."

"From what? Your feelings? Were they that strong when we were together?" I want to know. "Did you feel that much?" I look into you, trying to remember how much you felt. How much did you really care for me?

Your look tells me I'm in danger of crossing a line. "Don't do it," you say slowly and sternly.

"I want to know if you were in love with me." I've said it, ignoring your warning. Missing the signs again.

"Don't you dare write an answer for me." That hard look in your eyes, that coldness and detachment. These are not the eyes I want to remember.

"I can write anything I want. I'm inventing whatever I want it to be."

"Please don't. Don't answer that for me."

No. I can't. I won't. How could I? I don't know the answer. I never will.

What was familiar is not. There are many many ways of discerning the truth. Lying about absolutely everything is one of them. But lying about that one thing? No.

Not while trying to remember you.