

Mid-Life

I walked to the hotel at 7:11 as the world was taking its first defenses against the night with the lights in the buildings around me beginning to turn on to augment then replace the retiring sun. While the lights ticked on as blossoming flowers stretching into the sky I wondered how I could have survived so long without really seeing the world around me. Beauty surrounded and penetrated me in a way that it never could have had I not been apart from it for so long. It seemed to be so much larger than what everyone I saw made it out to be, what I had made it out to be.

The world extended past all of our creations: the internet, social constructs, borders and expectations they placed on it and on each other thinking that they were expanding the scope of the world when really they seemed to only limit what they could get from it. More massive than any of them, the world was larger in fact than anything the people in it could have created. As an interloper I could see that they were trying to bind the world to them when anything they wished to do in their life was in fact bound by it. The world was their master, giving only the gift to observe. A gift I seemed to be only one of a few to appreciate as I walked through the city seeing more than I ever had in my life. The sun had long since set behind the buildings. As the last light fell behind the skyline the orphaned blues and reds of their deceased sun created the brilliant August purple of a dying dusk, suspending its cry while I sat and looked on from a waterside bench. That had been an hour earlier of which I had the afternoon to spend before our meeting and I had spent it in the world observing and nothing else. I had brought my copy of Ulysses although it sat in my lap with the store bookmark sticking out of the tenth page. The simple flow of the world had totally taken me captive for those hours eclipsing even the most compelling distractions.

Ever since my rebirth each moment had seemed to stretch into meaning before me, a phenomenon I had noticed at the beginning when even the smells of the world were foreign to me. Though everyone had told me that these intense feelings towards the world would pass like the fresh sparks of a new love, instead, I felt a fondness for the world that was growing only deeper with time. As deep and mysterious and dangerous as the sea, I savored every second like sips of a fine wine and just like a decadent meal I would have devoured every morsel if not for my will imposing upon me the restraint to enjoy each bite.

Each experience, no matter how small, lightened my life and made my days all the better. Even on days when I was stressed or depressed I found happiness in the fact I was feeling these things while free. Out of all of the things contained by the vastness of the world at large, the infinite possibilities that it offered, the most primal and most romanticized was what I sought when I set off across the tracts of the country.

Love

When I had first left Ohio, the origin of numerous US presidents and a few serial killers, I drew a sigh of relief. For as long as I could remember I had been staring at the horizon of a midwest sky wondering if I would ever see anything more. I sped past the

welcoming sign into Indiana with nothing but happiness. And though the blue of the sky was the same the weather hadn't changed. My blood type stayed the same. I felt as though I had entered a new world as a new person. I was on a quest to answer a question that had been on my mind since being in prison. It was a question I had asked on numerous nights staring into the security-lit blackness of the earliest hours before dawn.

Even the prisoner with something waiting for them when they are released will imagine the perfect situation in which everything is intact when they return to their life. Though they can be inundated with fears of everything they love falling apart they still picture stepping immediately into the world that they had left. I was no different, though my conceptions and divinations of the future were not based on something waiting on me but something that had been taken long ago and, in any case, I never thought I would have been released in this life which made my illusions all the more inadvisable. A little hope is good, a lot of hope can kill you. I think Stephen King said that, but there's little he hasn't said.

Trapped in prison, counting time on appeals and friends lost I had somehow allowed myself to view the world as a thing meant to be wondered at, thought of in the abstract but never realized. I had divined the future on countless occasions and looked back at the past with the careful probings of a practiced detective or a child over a beloved book. I had relived every moment of my life myriad times and came to a thousand different theses concerning what I remembered. My conversations and interactions over my seventeen years free constantly replayed in my head and allowed me to practice recrimination like a professional. The conversations I had with her were among the most replayed with every tone and pause analyzed for my faults. I constantly varied the circumstances wondering: Would this have made a difference? Would that?

Sometimes, with the darkness of days in prison pressing around me, bitterness blossomed in my mind as to what the world could possibly contain without me in it. Why should the world rotate and move when I could not measure its revolutions? I lashed out at change or instead I destroyed myself in a thousand tiny battles when I saw my loved ones grow older, my friends move on, my nieces growing into adults behind the curtain of my making. Now, looking up at the buildings I could only think with a strong sense of gratitude and a slight melancholy how wonderful it was to have the world back within my reach and how wonderful the world was that it never needed me to move. It has never needed any of us. Life is change, there is nothing else besides the entropic side from the known to the new with each thing we've known and loved being built from a thousand pieces of forgotten things other's have known and loved.

I felt outside of the world still even though I was finally freed from a sentence I thought would last forever and certainly a sentence that was meant to have at least the potential to last forever. It was as outside of my reach as it was when I was in prison. In a way I was still in a prison, I had become trapped in the most pernicious prison ever invented by man: The prison of a mind. Society seemed untenable, an obscure mirage just over the next dune. My life had been rendered by the savage jaws of justice and from

whence I had once came I would never fit perfectly. The subtle edges of my being that had belonged at one time among the free living was now scarred and could not fundamentally meet the borders of the universe I felt that I should have belonged in. The teeth the system had sunk into my flesh meant to bring justice and reform had instead created in me an eternal leper.

It wasn't only my piece not fitting into society, but also society changing itself against my attempts to be a part of it again. By all rights I should have been exactly what society wanted: I was college educated, well read, fit, young, and able to hold a variety of debates ranging from the deep to the ridiculous. And yet the moment others realized that I wasn't meant to be among them and realized that I didn't belong to the 'civilian' ranks of proper citizens they registered me as other from my mannerisms, speech, or the gaps in my employment. Wherever the thread was picked up, once pulled it would invariably leave me naked in their eyes.

They may not all have realized why I was different but simply classifying me as foreign as opposed to some brand of a dangerous outlier. In any case, it made trying to act like I never left close to impossible. I tried despite this, silently moving through the world and touching the products of the mirage attempting to be worthy to receive its sacraments. Some didn't mind, of course. The few blessed souls both theistic and secular to whom the words of forgiveness and love had not reached deaf ears. The few among them made the world for me. They made the world which had seemed to be as unfriendly as if I had truly jumped the fence in the night, a place where I could be as I had been before the inescapable vacuum known as equity and justice had swallowed me. That was the world that I had always imagined when I was laying on the rough blankets made from recycled materials, smelling eternally of the thousand souls who had once laid their weary heads to rest in them. I imagined a world of togetherness where the payment for sceles ad omnes homines would be taken as true recompense. I thought of a world where the violations of law and order were responded to with correction and education and the outcome was a person any citizen would be glad to call a neighbor. I had imagined a world where society needn't be divided so harshly that races feel like they belong to different countries as others and where a differing opinion needn't divide the country to its core. The world was perfect in my mind. After all, I wasn't under the impression that I would have been released from prison in this life and if I fantasized about my release from prison, then the world I imagined returning to could be whatever I wanted.

And with that world, her. She followed me into prison in my mind as certain, persistent, and frail as the foam on a wave. Her form coalesced atop the edges of each of my thoughts and crashed into every moment of my existence, swirling with the sediments before reaching again to the top of the salted sea of my consciousness. I could have conjured her in an instant and in fact I did even in the hours when doing so hurt more than many other things in my entire prison experience, but, that was the only way I would have ever seen her. When she disappeared from my life she had thought she was sparing both of us the heartache of longing for one another through the impassable

boundaries of my immurement when in fact forgetting her for a moment would have been as simple as the sand forgetting the surf.

She had vanished so completely and with such great efficiency that when I had tried to reach out before trial with the careful probings of letters laced with both familiarity and a need to be in contact at first I received silence. Then, just weeks before the trial and outcome that would define the better part of the rest of my life I received a journal in the mail. A red journal.

Wearing the same red the memory came to life before my eyes. She sat. When I saw her sitting with her back to me at the hotel bar I felt at once the significance and the persistence to which I had imagined this moment over years of seeming solitude. This would make the first time we had met in person in over a decade, the first time we had heard each other's voices in nearly as long. We were once on the brink of spending our lives together, though we were too scared to admit it. Fish held too firmly slip away, the simple fears of youth.

We were teenagers, the broadness of life only just opening up before us on the horizon with it's scope still not quite within grasp. To have said something so knotty with emotion surely could have spelled disaster. And then it was too late, the undertow of youth's twin pitfalls impulsion and its brother influence jerking me away from the path that was so indistinct and yet so certain to have eventually felt our joined footfalls.

Traveling through an entryway filled with robust ferns into the dim, sensual speakeasy, there were dozens of places around the bar I could have looked for her. There were other women tall and lithe with blonde hair and that sharp intelligent atmosphere education can only make attempts at emulating. But there was only one place my eyes rested because there was only one of her in the bar. There was no other place I could possibly have looked. If I were to sit and think about it with some embarrassment I would admit that I believe I already knew where she was sitting even before I walked in. Precognition of some sort, or perhaps projection, manifestation, whatever the source you can be sure ancient astronaut theorists say yes.

For years I had imagined us tangled on some greater quantum level where the molecular convergence that defines prison fences is an idea so macro that it borders on the ridiculous. She had said once that our souls had been made the same, when in the journal I reread a dozen times in prison she postulated the source of our connection. I've wondered if people can be intertwined in the same way as entangled particles, so whereas we may have held similar spins at one time now we cannot change without the other feeling it as well. In times of great pain I had wondered if we had shared it, passed it across the cosmos to where her existence was defined as a constant or from her existence to mine, causing my seemingly random swings in mood. And in that moment before entering the bar I know I knew where she was sitting before I walked in because my eyes were already trained in that direction from the entry, whether coincidence or not it is what I will believe until I die because it was that fortune which finally allowed my eyes to rest on her once again.

When we met we were attending the same survival school. Passing like ships in the night or children along the line of other's they will encounter in their lives we separated. The next year happenstance would place us at the same school again and this time for wilderness first-responder training which put us together for grueling days in the forest perfecting survival capabilities and sitting in classes. At night she and I would sit together next to the fire studying until we were forced to retire in the early hours of the morning to our respective shelters both smelling deeply of the fire and thinking deeply not of the symptoms and treatment of a tension pneumothorax or the skeletal system but instead of the thing that had began to grow between us. A force beyond us that wasn't sullied by the lustful infatuations of many youthful romances or the naiveté of younger ones. Instead we were finding that we had located our respective pairing in the dyad each of us is granted in this life, if there ever could be such a concept.

She didn't turn to watch if somebody was coming in with the breeze from the doors or look into the mirror behind the bar. She looked down into her drink untouched and turning in her hand. A hand I hadn't touched since we were standing in the dirt of a Pennsylvania forest. I stood where the lobbys mosaic met the dark stained wood of the lounge savoring with unexplainable pain the last moment we would truly be separate. I was frozen in place, unable to advance and break the moment she may not even have realized we were having. Except, she had always been beyond me. If there was something I thought would ever get by her, I was deluded.

She knew I was there from the beginning, either because of her intuition, our link, or some Sherlock Holmes combination of clues I would never comprehend. With her shoulders rising and falling in the wave of a deep sigh her eyes flickered halfway to me in the mirror then resting on the label of a Czech plum alcohol. After a beat she looked up the rest of the way and I felt the impact of her gaze like a gunshot. I feel awkward. I could feel myself grow heavy and bulbous when our eyes met and as I walked across the entry shattering the last of our severance I was expecting to come into contact with something and break it.

A thousand tiny raptures escaped me when I laid my eyes on her in that first moment. I had not fully realized the gravity of what I had lost though I had felt myself in agony for the time we had spent apart. I had expected less at our first meeting. I had in fact expected to feel some sort of disillusionment and perhaps the mourning of my fondest memories passing from me without the impetus that had been projected onto the meeting in each creation of the moment while I was in prison.

I expected the feelings to diminish with time and unfamiliarity. The fact we couldn't remember each other's voices or the feel of the other's touch would be an indication that the feelings had passed with our other interests from our early teens. For me, they didn't. Instead, I felt inexorably drawn to her and simultaneously prepared to shatter with the moments before I would be within reach of her enervating, fortifying, paralyzingly healing grasp. Contradictions. The funny thing about love, if that's really what it was, is that it is nearly always defined by the contradictions that serve a single inalienable truth with the unerring loyalty of a bailiff to their judge.

I could feel the echos of a song by Bright Eyes in the back of my mind always creating a metaphor or a simile. My mind always draws likenesses from one to the other, creating nexuses between the most unlikely things. Connections, seeing one in the other. The song while an apt approximation of how I felt in that moment could not have done the moment itself justice. She was herself a song, a requiem of a time before and the tuning plucks of an orchestra first warming up. Beginning and end, alpha omega. Amen. The journal, red and slender and warm from sitting in my mailbox in July, was a goodbye letter. When I first read it I could only see the professions of love without the quiet goodbyes. It wasn't until I reread the libellus in prison I realized it was thirty pages showing not only her deep love for me but also the pure raw damage of my indictment. I had shattered something I had wished existed but I had never imagined could have really been there. She spoke of dreams that had crumbled I never knew she had, visions of the far future where we tried to raise kids together or the near future where we would live together and slowly discover each other in a way we had heretofore only dreamt. The woman that was shattering me as I walked towards her had suffered at least as seriously as I had when I went to prison and now she appraised me silently.

She had the tiniest smile, sarcastic and witty, so conscious of how she looked all the time. I knew I had to have the look of a dunce falling through space towards her. Languishing, I had seen only the pain my small family and I shared. I had atoned a thousand times for the pain, shame, and heartbreak I had brought them. I had assessed the damage closest to me without even considering that the person who always seemed perfectly fine had taken some of the most damage of all. The idea of the future being aborted before it could have been brought to term was almost too much to bear at the time. Instead, she had left the door of our friendship ajar and we both walked away to our own lives. For me it meant resisting the toothy maw of a truly outstanding criminal finishing school. For her it meant grasping the opportunities of the world with the strength of an Olympic wrestler.

The first thing I said to her in person in a decade, having watched her appraise me as I approached the bar and seeing behind the sarcastic half smile the light in her eyes that proved she felt the fires that still ravaged the oldest forests of my dredged soul was the truest thing I felt in the moment that I could say without writing a novel.

"I've never legally been in a bar."

"Not since you've been out? Not even to celebrate?" Her voice, so changed and so similar to the whispers of my dreams.

It was in that moment I realized when I had last heard her voice. A week before the journal had come to break my heart, she had reached out. Her voice had been soft, as if someone was sleeping next to her and she didn't want to wake them or that she was fighting the dual urges to run away or towards me. Her voice had a husky edge and I knew she had been crying. We didn't talk long and when we hung up for the night I had no idea it would be the last time I would hear her voice. If I knew, I would have told her a thousand stories if only to keep her on the phone a little longer if only to hear her breath.

Now her breath was held by a breast rising and falling with subtlety just a foot and change from me. That knowledge nearly paralyzed me.

"There wasn't time" I said "I sort of skipped town for a bit, on account of all the media coverage. I celebrated with family. But that wasn't in public."

"We can go somewhere else." Arboreal, the place her celestial roots made their impressions in the fabric of the universe. I could only imagine the ambrosial gold that flowed from flagons there. The image was ridiculous in my mind, but it seemed the longer I was near her the more I believed she came into existence from a clam in the sea. She was ascending in the moments to divine.

"No, this place is great. I've just never done it."

We shared an awkward smile. She indicated the seat next to her and I took it seeing her feet in her heels. The feet I had repaired at one time. Did she remember? I was sure.

The bartender came, a woman younger than myself with a smart suit and her hair pulled so tight I could see the strain in the skin of her hairline. She smiled and asked what I would have. I looked at my companion's drink, a multicolored mix with a complicated glass. I decided against trying to impress anyone and instead ordered an Old Fashioned, a drink I had heard of in a TV show. Half expecting to be carded or asked "an old-fashioned what?" I gave my order and the bartender went right to work, making a drink of which I had no knowledge.

She was smiling at me when I looked back to her the light in her eyes sparkling knowing that I was already out of my element. Behind her silent accusation I thought I could see unease, the same anxiety I had felt since leaving my waterside bench and starting my journey to her. We had talked in less than ten messages total in order to set up the meeting, but nothing else in years.

"What's it like out?" She asked, the question everyone always goes to. It's stock when your conversation partner has recently spent the better parts of a decade in prison and wears it on their every movement.

"Weird." I said, honestly. "Everything is different. A different tempo? No, that's no right. A different key. Like somebody changed the dance music while I was in the bathroom." She laughed at my stupid joke, a laugh which released the tension of anxiety more than a comment on the quality of my dialogue.

"What's it like being a lawyer?" I asked her, taking my drink from the bartender and tasting it. I didn't like it.

"Busy." She said, a breath escaping as if the workload itself had just stalked by, looking for somebody to take back into the office and narrowly passing her by.

"What made you do it? It wasn't what you were looking into when I knew you, before. Was it..." I trailed off, seeing she had gotten my meaning but feeling embarrassed at the thought to begin with.

"It wasn't you, at least not totally." She said. "I saw opportunity in becoming a lawyer, and when I took my first law class in undergrad I discovered I really enjoyed it. After that, my plans changed."

"They do that." I said, meaning majors.

"They do that." She said, meaning more.

"I always thought you would be in business, or modeling because of what you were doing when I got locked up. It was dumb, but I expected to see you in the Wall Street Journal either for your business or in the magazine as a model." She smiled at that. "I couldn't have been that successful that quickly, checking wouldn't have done any good."

"I didn't have a choice. And besides, if anyone could have done it it was you. After all, you graduated early from undergrad what, three years early? Law school finished at the age you should have been finishing school? You're a fucking genius. You always were." I finished and she smiled to herself, maybe thinking about the rest of her work week. I imagined in that moment that she was thinking about all of the time since we had seen each other, and how we should have been in it together. The thought was sweet, the picture tempered by a wanting nostalgia.

We should have been at the bar for an anniversary, a night out, a party. We should have been celebrating our relationship or the relationships we had found ourselves. She had been one of the best friends I had ever had and I was starting to see that what I had left was not what I had returned to. There was a gulf, a separation filled with memories of pain. I couldn't ask to be in the same place as before because doing so only made her feel the pain as before. Too late. I realized the mistake that the tender connection we still had wouldn't be broken by disillusionment but instead mired in by miscommunications and fear.

Suddenly so much I had seen in prison made sense to me. It made sense that people elected to return under flimsy pretenses. The bar to commit the crimes was lowered when the result was returning to something known. The system created a safe place where nothing was expected and everything provided. For that moment and that moment only in my life I wished I was laying in my rack thinking about the moment instead of living it. There could have been a clever stab at me being gone for too long, and a clever rejoinder from me showing that I both understood the pain of the past but wasn't crippled by it. I could show that we could move forward. Then, I would feel the stirrings that had plagued me for so long, the feelings which had led me across a

country. I would set down my glass with a smile on both of our lips, the falling sun of the last joke, and say what I thought we were there to discuss.

"Hey" I said, looking at her seriously. I set down my drink, but didn't let go. It was as if it were the only preserver holding me to the time before. She seemed not to notice how worried I was and looked at me with the quick smile and sarcastic smirk always sitting just behind her eyes. It was the same look I remembered from when we were kids, when the light of the fire illuminated her face and made demons dance across her features. That single essence was what I had been in love with for eight years. After I forgot what color her eyes were and what her voice sounded like I could picture that look in her eyes that knew she held me in her grasp, though she never really believed that was true. That look has haunted me and will remain with me until the day I die.

"Hey" she said, humoring the joke.

"I love you." I said, looking even deeper at her. She looked away, towards the entrance to the hotel where the large ferns covered most of the name of the building. She took a sigh and smiled back at me. It was a sad sort of smile, the kind I always imagined she made when she wrote the rhetorical letters, narrating our friendship.

"I don't think we love each other." She said, shifting in her seat and looking at me with the slightest tilt of her head, the slightest bit of condescension. Or was it pity? I couldn't tell, but I suppose I assumed it was an act in any case.

"I've always loved you" I said, "and it's not fair to me to say you don't feel the same way when I know that's not true."

"You're lonely." She said, touching her glass but not moving it. She seemed to have considered buffering herself from reality and instead realized it would instead dull her reserve from wherever inside it had come from. "How long has it been since you've been in a real relationship?"

I didn't answer, I knew that she didn't want a debate. She wanted a forum. Still, I listened and told myself that I would persist. The love I felt, I still feel, overshadowed any minor ability to accept the facial logic of her arguments. She continued, gaining her legs in a way I knew she must in the court room when she feels the tenor of the audience shifting in her favor.

"You've gone through something truly terrible, we both have. When you were first indicted I felt a deep depression that I'm sure pales in comparison to what you or your family felt. But nonetheless it took me a long time to get to a place where I could move past that. I think the part of me that's still a little girl wanted this to happen because maybe that part of me thinks it would change the past. But you can't change the past, and we aren't the same people. We would be grasping at smoke."

"We wouldn't" I said, a little petulant. I could tell that she heard it too from the face she made.

"We were friends. She said, smiling again but not looking at me anymore, instead looking forward into the mirror behind the bar past herself, past this moment to one where she would be alone again. As she talked she was already regretting meeting me in the first place. "How many times did you picture that we would meet and it would be love at long last? You thought we would spark something that's been gone for a decade? You thought we would have sex tonight and it would make everything else go away?"

"I just wanted to see you. I wanted to reconnect. I didn't want to put you in this position."

"Patrick, you just told me that you love me! What am I supposed to do with that? Can we just keep making polite conversation about old times and hearing stories of each other's lives while ignoring that?"

"I'm sorry, I just-"

She put her hand up to stop me, and it did. I stopped in my sentence and looked at her imploring her to understand. I felt everything wiping away. Worse, with her sarcastic smile gone and the pain filling her eyes I realized I had struck the wrong chord. It was never about if we had loved each other, I was just too much of a child to realize I was eight years too late. The years she secretly wanted me to walk into any room at that exact moment were gone. Seeing me had only affirmed what she already knew. The conversation was over though we sat for another full hour sipping drinks and making light dialogue that could have been silence for its substance. At the end of our meeting she stood and left the bar, asking me not to come with her. She walked out without looking back, I watched in the bar's mirror. When she reached the doors, I saw her partially obscured form reach a hand up to her eye, wiping from it a single tear, the last she would ever carry for me.

I couldn't tell you the weather that night as I walked through the streets away from the hotel bar. Raining, snowing, a light wind blowing from the very lips of the ether, the air could have just as easily been sucked from the city itself and I wouldn't have recalled. There have been different outcomes each time we've met, there still are. There will never be a lack of settings or varieties of dialogue between her and I, because there will never be a limit to what I can create in my mind. I loved her, perhaps I still do, and though we haven't talked outside of my prison fantasies in nearly a decade I think of her often. I think of the pain, the loss, I think about what could have been found. I think of the recriminating that would take place, and how I would flagellate myself for the opportunity to take back a day of any of her suffering. In that way she's a totem of everything that's happened, the face of the pain I hold myself accountable for every day of my life.

She never will talk to me again, and though that still haunts me after every cell of my body has changed since we last spoke, I have to live with that. I can understand why she wouldn't even though she may have a thought to contact me from time to time. She will likely never read my books where one of the characters is always her incarnate. I don't do it with an intent. As I said, with every wave of my mind, she rides its crest. She is the thunder on the rocks. When characters emerge from my mind they become her because I still long to know what she's been doing, and the characters give me a glimpse.

She will never read these words you are now, the account of one of our thousands of meetings. She never will, as surely as I will never be able to stop myself from conjuring them for the rest of my life, this potentially endless prison sentence. She is a piece of me, more so than anyone I've ever met. Eventually I hope to lay my eyes on her, though if I do I doubt it will be across a bar, where she's wearing the exact shade of the last words she ever wrote to me.

But for now she does