

page 1

Desaturated

-Tella-

I see him everyday.

He is heavy and real in my dreams, but as soon as I wake, all the light is gone. He appears to be washed out, as if he was somehow fading away. Everytime I see him, he looks at me with a strange, puzzling look on his face, as if trying to remember something, as if I'm the ghost instead of him.

I never want my dreams to end. When they do, it means I'd have to face reality, and the detached look on his face. I can't bear it. I only see him at a certain time in the day, but he still manages to haunt me and my thoughts. The world around him is bright. *Too* bright, but his voice sounds distant, and his clothes get less saturated by the day. It's overwhelming. Things around me are fading as well, the grass is losing its texture and color, my ability to move feels like it's getting less and less, but he seems so lightweight, it feels like the more weight he loses, the more I gain. I feel heavier, oppressed, and I'm not even sure if what I'm saying makes any sense. I have to be hallucinating.

Sometimes I try to converse whenever I see him, but all that comes out of his mouth are one-word sentences, and sometimes nothing at all. If I were to ask him where he goes when I'm awake, he would say something like 'away.' *away?! Is he allergic to speaking?* Getting a full sentence out of him was like trying to start a car with no gas. It is *so* frustrating! No matter how hard I try, he doesn't budge, doesn't say more than a word or two at a time. It makes me wish I could just fall asleep and dream and stay inside permanently.

...maybe I could.

page 2

– *Julian* –

I monitor her every move, just as the machine does, looking for a twitch, a movement, anything. At this point I'm not sure if she'll ever wake—the only thing keeping me grounded is the movement of her lips, though no sound comes out. I don't even remember how long it's been; I stopped caring. Maybe I had to accept it. Accept the fact that she may be gone forever.

I don't know if she's moving or if I'm going crazy. The memory of her laugh is forever engraved in my head. But after this, I doubt I'll ever be able to hear it again. All I could do was cling onto the small hope that she's still here, that she'd be well and awake and *alive*. But perhaps that was too much to ask for, or perhaps the lack of sleep was messing with my head. I hadn't even realized that the sun had set already. *Again*. I could use some sleep. She will still be here tomorrow.

I don't know if I'm imagining it but I could've sworn I saw a figure waiting outside the door. I *really* need to sleep. But people like me don't deserve to rest. Not after the things I did. Not after what I did to her. I just wish I could go back in time and erase the past. If she doesn't wake up, how would I apologize? How would I express my regret? This felt like some kind of torture. All I wanted to hear was her forgiveness. I could play out the scene in my head:

'I'm sorry. Do you forgive me?'

'Of course I forgive you!'

Well...more realistically. I try to shut my eyes and calm my thoughts. She would be okay...right?

page 3 and 4

## *-Tella -*

*6 months earlier*

‘Stella, wake up, you’re going to be late for school!’ I yelled for the millionth time. This child is difficult. Everytime I try to wake her up, she acts as if she is dead, or makes up some kind of excuse. Julian hasn’t been much help either. He’s been coming home late a lot recently and has adopted an ‘if-I-ignore-it-long-enough-it-will-go-away’ attitude. It’s not like he’s solving any of my problems anyway, since when he wakes up he only adds to the stressful situation. So I let him continue to pretend to be fast asleep. I don’t need him raising my stress levels.

‘Please, Stella, you are going to be late again! I already received a couple of warnings, and I’m not sure the school will tolerate this any further.’ Stella goes to an expensive private school that I had carefully chosen for her. I strongly believe in the merits of education. I loved the shiny brochure when I first laid my eyes on it. ‘Think no further, at Edmonds we create geniuses. Your child deserves the best’. Who am I to contradict such a powerful statement from such an established institution? I immediately had a mental image of Stella graduating high school, top of her class, while the other parents stared at me enviously and congratulated me on my daughter’s brilliance. Little did I know that Stella did not share my feelings at all. She literally hated this school. She hated the uniform, the strict teachers and the thousand rules applied every day. She hated to wake up early and to get her hair into ponytails. I think she took after her father who just was not a morning person.

‘Please just five minutes’, murmured Stella from under her cover. ‘Just let her sleep, she is too stupid for this school anyway.’ came the laughing voice of her sister Ema from the bathroom. Ema has just started her morning routine. It usually included insane amounts of make up, curled eyelashes and dark lip stick as only teenagers can deem appropriate. Next comes straightening her curled hair and choosing her outfit from a pile of clothes on the bed. Ema is a senior this year. She goes to public school, as she had religiously refused to attend any school with a uniform or dress code. Being a creative entrepreneur, Ema is more interested in making money selling her own brand of t-shirts advertised on social media. For her school meant passing time until she can get rid of all the rules and start her own business. In the meantime, torturing her little sister was her favourite way to pass time. ‘Shut up, Ema! You are the stupid one! Everyone knows that!’ shouted Stella. She reached for a plastic building block next to her bed and attempted to throw it at her sister. However the block missed its target and I was just able to duck enough to avoid it taking out my eye. It hit my head instead.

‘That is enough!’ I shouted while holding my head. I marched up to Stella’s bed, removed the covers and carried her to the bathroom, all while she was screaming, trying to free herself from

my grip. After a long 15 minutes, a lot of tears and tantrums and a quick breakfast we were finally ready to leave the house. On the way out, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. My hair looked scuffed and I had gained a lot of weight. Since I had Stella, I have been struggling to keep my weight down. The continuous stress I was having in my life didn't make that easy. I was not happy with the way I looked. In fact, I never was. But this is a problem for another day. I finally managed to get Stella into my car, that alone is an achievement for me. She had calmed down. Maybe I shouldn't give up yet. Maybe she will turn out to be a genius after all? I waited until she disappeared into the school building, trying to relax a bit before I had to drive to work. As I was driving out of the parking lot, I saw him again.. In the rear mirror. My ex husband. I can't believe it! He is still stalking me and trying to talk to me. The last thing I need is another fight. I pretended to drive away without seeing him and took the first turn right. To my surprise and relief he did not follow me. What on earth does he want? But at that moment I had no time to think about this further as I walked into my office. My work was very demanding. I used to love my job but right now I just wished I could quit everything and just relax. But this was impossible at the moment. Sighing deeply, I switched on my laptop and started to work. This is all the chaos I can take at the moment, I told myself. The rest will have to wait.

page 5 and 6

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I haven't been able to sleep since she left me. I was hoping to see the kids, leave some money, maybe even ask for advice. But she was clearly reluctant to comply. I've tried everything, but everytime, she says no. Over and over. She didn't even want to speak to me. I've been following her ever since, but she won't talk to me.

After the divorce I just couldn't get her out of my mind. It all seems a bit blurred looking back at the events. How did the divorce happen in the first place? We used to love each other and get along so well. But after a while, things just changed drastically. She was crying a lot. Doctors were talking about her having depression. I really wanted to feel for her. I really did. But it became very hard to stay supportive. The continuous crying and her constant emotional rollercoaster made it hard for me to be there for her. I started avoiding her. I knew it was wrong, but I didn't know what else to do. I feel terrible for leaving her all on her own. The house was always a mess and then she started becoming insecure about her looks.. She had gained a lot of weight and her hair always looked extremely untidy. I said some hurtful things to her. I didn't mean them, but it was all too much. At this point we just started drifting apart. We couldn't talk to each other anymore. Until one day she told me that she wanted a divorce. I was glad she had asked. I didn't think that I would regret this moment more than anything else. For seven whole years I tried to forget about her. And I nearly succeeded. But then I saw her with her new husband, Julian. He was a handsome guy. . I suddenly felt all kinds of weird feelings stirring up inside me. Tella looked happy. More happy than she ever had been with me.

One day, I followed her to a nearby cafe. Since she is a journalist, she sometimes enjoys writing away from the office. I approached her and tried talking to her. She was surprised to see me. 'What do you want?' She asked.

- I want to be able to visit the girls. I've missed them.' I said
- 'That's not going to happen,' Tella had replied. 'The kids have suffered enough and you never asked about them after all these years.'

She had a point. After the divorce I didn't want to be tied down by the burden of having to deal with kids. I agreed that she should have full custody of the children and I set out to pursue my own dreams. I travelled around the world, made many friends and enjoyed my free life. But something was always missing. I didn't know what until I saw her that afternoon.

- 'Please stay away from us and never talk to me again.' Tella said. 'I am happy now and Julian cares for me and the girls.' At least as much as he can. I don't need you in my life.'

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But I just couldn't stay away. Since that day I have been following her every morning. I knew her schedule, what time she would drive Stella to her school, her office hours and even when she goes out with friends on rare occasions. I was determined to win her back. She was just exiting her office when I approached her. I just wanted to talk.

- 'I've told you to stay away from me.' She said
- 'Please Tella, I miss the girls. They deserve to talk to me. I can make them happy. I miss them..'
- 'Are you sure this is what you want? Or is there another reason why you are suddenly following me?'

She knew me too well. There was no point in pretending further. I had recently gone into a lot of debt. My business that I tried to establish had been an epic fail and now my friends were asking for their money back. They threatened to throw me in jail. I had spent all my savings travelling around the world and living in luxury hotels. I had heard that Tella had inherited a small fortune her dad left to her after he passed away a few months ago. I was hoping she would help me out. When she found out that I was actually after her money, she got very angry. Once again she told me to stop calling or following her, but she was my only hope.

When I saw her driving away, I got into my own car and followed her. I didn't really know what I was doing. When she saw me in the rear mirror she started speeding to get rid of me. I followed her as fast as I could, but in her determination to get away from me she turned into a one way road. And that's where things went downhill. A truck driver came at her from the opposite direction. She tried to dodge the huge vehicle but lost control. Her car spinned and turned over crashing into another car parked on the pavement.

I didn't mean for any of this to happen. I was traumatized. When the ambulance arrived, all I could see was blood. And her arm hanging from the carrying mat. Was she dead? I didn't want to find out. What have I done..?

page 7

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She's been in a coma for around 6 months. Her condition is really bad. If she dies, I'll never forgive myself. I watched her through the small opening in the door, her faint heartbeat, her worsening condition...And it was all my fault. *My fault*. But this was what she wanted...right? Even so, I felt terribly guilty. I couldn't even enter the room fully. I blame myself for it all. She had already been struggling, and I had made it even worse for her. Now she is in the hospital. Because of me. Because I drove her away. Now I had to face the consequences of my actions. I couldn't bear to see her in that hospital bed with her new husband...I had to accept it. Accept that she moved on. Maybe he'd treat her better than I did. I should've asked her if we could at least be friends. If I had done that in the first place, she wouldn't be in the hospital. Though I wasn't sure if she'd even agree to that. But if she doesn't wake up, I'll never get to ask. I just want one chance to tell her I'm sorry. To tell her that I want to start over. But even if she does wake, will she give me the time of day?

My legs are starting to cramp, but I don't care. I was too busy being lost in thought. Thoughts about the breakup, what I did, where everything went wrong. I wish I could go back in time and say the things I may not have the chance to say anymore. I wondered if she'd want me there, or if she wanted me gone. If she did, I wouldn't blame her. Maybe her new husband was her one chance at happiness; a chance of happiness that I destroyed. Or...maybe he wasn't a saint. But what would I know? I just assumed that she was happier with him, that's why she tried so desperately to avoid me. It made the most sense. I then noticed that he was asleep. How does sleep come so easily for him? After all of this? I'd do anything to be able to rest. But I can't. Not when she haunts my thoughts every time I close my eyes.



page 8

## *-Tella -*

I've been trying to find ways to linger in my dreams for longer periods of time. Anything that works. I feel like waking up has since long ago not been part of my agenda. I don't really know what's happening to me. I feel like I'm in a different space altogether. The washed out world around me is fading more and more. Right now I can't really make out the outlines of the pictures anymore. But it's an oddly calm feeling. As if I am finally returning home. A feeling that all the suffering I have been through is finally coming to an end. I can see a ray of sunshine through all the grey. A beautiful singing voice is rising from within me. It's almost an angelic voice. I can't make out what it says, but it has a calming effect on me. In the far distance I could see the washed out outline of the boy. He had a bigger effect on me than I'd like to admit. I liked him in my dreams even though he seemed grey and dull. But he also appeared to be very sad. Why is that, I wonder? Who am I to judge, though? I was sad as well. I had never really figured out why I felt so strangely attached to this man, I can hardly remember anything.. But seeing anyone sad did things to me. It felt like a reflection of myself. I still don't know why everything is so faded and gloomy, but I'm not sure I want to find out.

page 9

– *Julian* –

She was getting worse and worse by the day. I was trying desperately to cling to the little hope I had of her surviving, hoping that by some miracle something happens and her condition gets better and that she'd wake up healthy. I could have sworn that I saw a faded smile cross her lips. But the doctors said that was impossible. What do they know? Or perhaps I'm going crazy. She looked much calmer today, as if she was wandering through some magic fantasy land. Slowly, I reached over to hold her hand. Oh, how much have I missed sitting next to her holding her hand while she told me about her day and about the kids. She would often get up and grab us some snacks, while I kept flipping through the tv channels in search of the latest comedy show. These were the hours where we would be the most relaxed. I miss the fuzzy feeling I used to get when she leans her tired head against my shoulder. I have missed her so much it hurts. Come on, Tella, wake up...But her hands were getting colder. And then it happened. I looked up in horror at the heart monitor. A beeping sound started to deafen my ears.. No, it can't be, I screamed.

She flatlined.

page 10

## *-Tella -*

The sky didn't just fade—it shattered. The world around me was collapsing. Before, I hadn't wanted to live life. But now it felt wrong to just...leave. Or maybe I was gone from the start. But now? Now it's too late. Too late to sort my life out. Too late for anything. And suddenly, it made me wish I was back home with my family. This isn't what I want anymore, but what say do I have in this? Maybe I should've been more patient and less reckless. Maybe I should've given my ex a chance to explain himself. But I can't do that anymore, can I? This is the end...My legs feel numb. My vision is blurry. Maybe I just had to accept my fate. Accept the fact that I was dying. I don't even remember how it happened. One moment, everything was fine—well, except for the boy I've been trying to figure out for ages. I remembered now. The boy was Julian. When I looked up, he was there just like every day, only this time he wasn't washed out. He was okay, more than okay. He was *screaming*. But it wasn't loud; it was muted. I couldn't hear him over my vision—no—everything going black.

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page 11

– *Julian* –

**N***o, no, no!* I wouldn't let her die on my watch, I couldn't. I can't even count the amount of doctors and nurses I've called in to check on her condition. I reluctantly left the room, deciding it was better to give them space. All I could think about was her, about how I could possibly move on if she didn't make it. There were so many things I wanted to say to her, like how much I missed her and how much guilt I had been feeling ever since she went into a coma. But if she doesn't make it?.. I didn't even want to think about that. But all I could do was wait. Wait for some kind of sign, some kind of miracle. But I doubt there is any saving her now. She had gone too deep into sorrow, into depression, and it's eating her alive; Literally. I should've been there when she needed me most. I should've been right there by her side. But I wasn't, was I? How could I have been so selfish and stupid? And what would I tell the children if she passes? I know seeing the sad look on their faces will make me feel ten times guiltier. Maybe I deserved it. Now? Now all I could do was hope.

page 12

– *Julian* –

‘Is she alright, doc?’

He paused for a moment, then quietly uttered two words, the very words I’ve been dreading to hear:

‘...she’s gone.’

TO BE CONTINUED