

ANOTHER LIFE

My heart is broken beyond repair. The fractured pieces of it are so small that they seem like dust in a stray line of afternoon sunlight, and I can do nothing but watch them hang motionless in the air.

I didn't believe in magic. Not really. And in a way, I suppose it wasn't magic the way a lot of people imagine it. Magic leads to happy endings. Magic is rainbows and pixies and the handsome prince.

Those are *lies*.

I'll show you what magic really is.

I'll help you see it.

All I need you to do is imagine something for me.

I want you to imagine you're travelling, and you decide to break your journey in a major city. Let's say you spend the afternoon there. You buy coffee, you see the sights. Then, for no real reason, you feel sleepy. You lean back on the little park bench where you're feeding pigeons while you sit and look at some random sculptures. A woman pushing a pram down the gravelled pathway yawns and just sits on the floor. The kid over there on his bike fights it too long and topples sideways onto the ground.

You don't hear his skull crack as he hits the floor.

You're already asleep.

If you dream, you don't remember it. It can't be more than a nap though, surely? You blink and it's over. The pigeons pick themselves up and peck blearily at the space between your feet where the breadcrumbs used to be. The woman with the pram stands up and checks her child with a confused look on her face. There's a faint smell of rot in the air, and somehow the sculptures have tarnished while you slept. Then the father of the little boy on the bike calls his son's name. There's the pounding of feet, and voices raised in panic. Faintly, outside the park, you can hear people start to scream as they realise the impact of an entire city falling asleep in an instant.

Your phone battery has died, so you have no signal to receive the four hundred and six missed calls and messages, or the countless social media notifications (so many that your handset would no longer register them anyway) from your family and friends, who don't know where you've gone. Some are frightened, some are angry, some are choked with tears.

What you don't know yet, what you will find out soon enough, is that everyone you ever met, every soul you ever connected to, every person who touched your life with theirs, is now dead.

And what you'll never know (and really, you wouldn't believe it if someone told you), that it's all because a sixteen year old girl cut her finger on a sewing machine.

That's magic.

Sleeping Beauty pricked her finger on a spindle, and her entire kingdom slept for a hundred years. We laugh at the curses of fairy stories, but really curses are nothing laugh at. For Sleeping Beauty, one angry witch's curse caused an infant barely developed enough to focus on anything outside of its own body to helplessly follow the path of pre-destiny to the point where an entire culture was forced into a magical sleep for a century. Still, as adored as Maleficent became as a villain, and as many retellings as there have been of that story, we should never forget that she wasn't the bad guy. Three *good* witches, who decided to save one life, *just one life*, inadvertently doomed everyone around them to helplessness and potential misery. No one ever asks what happened to the people in the city. The bad guys aren't always obvious.

The witch that cursed me was a little easier to spot.

I was fourteen years old. She was older than time itself, and uglier than human cruelty. She lived in the last house in the village like witches are supposed to, although I suppose it was the first house if you were walking in the opposite direction. She had a cat with one eye, too; Bobby Holmes had shot it out with a BB gun when I was six, and it had screamed like a banshee. It wasn't a black cat, it was a ginger tom with a bad attitude and a justifiable hatred of everything human that wasn't the old woman. The neighbourhood kids treated her like a joke, and she just ignored us. We dared each other to run up and knock on her door, to chase her cat and try to kick it (more than one of us ended up in hospital with stitches for that stunt). We became bolder, believing that nothing could stop us, that there was no consequence to our tormenting another human being.

We were so very, very wrong.

Eight weeks after my fourteenth birthday, with my friends huddled behind a hedgerow on the opposite side of the

road, I found myself stood in her living room with the spare key from the flowerpot by the front door pressed hard into the flesh of one hand, staring down at the framed picture I'd first knocked onto the floor with one inadvertent gangling elbow, and then accidentally trodden on with one worn heel of a faded trainer. The glass had ground into the sepia photograph with a sickening crunch at the same time as the door had opened to let her back in. I expected her to yell at me. To demand to know what I was doing in her house, or to insist I explain what I thought I was doing. But she didn't. She stooped to the floor while I just stood there mutely, waiting for the normalcy of an angry response. Old fingers worn like wrinkled leather brushed aside glass to pick up the photograph. Her joints clicked and scraped as she straightened. We were the same height. I glanced at the scored groove that I'd driven into the picture, a man's face once painted in gentle honey tones now disfigured by childish clumsiness. In the dull silence of her living room, we looked at each other, and she changed my life.

"You have robbed me of this last part of him." She whispered. Her voice seemed full of rushing autumn wind, like crackling leaves driven before a storm. "And I will show you what that means."

I couldn't move, couldn't step back. I used to wonder if that was something she'd done to me, but I think perhaps it was just fear. Still, there was the storm in her words, and the trembling of her ancient mouth.

"You will *know* this. You will endure the agony of possibility, and live without the ecstasy of choice. You will be alone as I have been, and there will be no succour to the pain of it, even at the end of your path."

The storm broke. The first drops of real autumn rain began to fall against the clouded glass of her windows. Then she turned away, photograph still clutched in her hand. I bolted out into the rain and the hissed giggling of my friends, and I never told them what had happened.

People think rage has power.

Believe me when I tell you that a broken heart is a far stronger thing than rage could ever be.

If I was like her, I could rule the world with what she did to me.

Eventually, I came to believe that her words had meant nothing. Nightmares faded into the pleasant dreams of adolescence, and the surety that I was the queen of my own destiny. Aurora must have felt the same.

Then, in the burning heat of summer, I met David.

We were both just beyond being children; still possessed of childishness, still eager for the bright and glowing glories of adulthood. We wrapped our lives around each other until we tumbled, laughing and excited, into the joy of each other's bodies.

I woke up when the sun crept across my eyelids. Early morning still, and the birds were singing. The room smelt faintly like pot and sex. Clothes were scattered across the floor, beer cans at jaunty angles and discarded pizza boxes still open with the remains of last night's dinner now cold and shrivelled. I breathed gently; more comfortable and at ease than I remembered being in all the years that had passed before. David lay next to me on his front, one arm across my stomach, long and clever guitarist's fingers twitching to some dreaming rhythm that only he could hear. His hair was ruffled and the skin of his neck creased. He was so imperfect, so human and so flawed. And I knew in that moment that I loved him.

A cloud passed in front of the sun. David stirred, turning and opening one drowsy eye.

"Morning," I said, voice still fogged with sleep.

His face turned to alarm and he sat up, yanking the covers around his waist.

I smiled. "You alright, babe?"

"I, uh... yeah, yeah fine. Listen, did we... did we, uh..."

I nodded happily.

"Shit."

"What's wrong?" I couldn't keep the start of concern out of my voice.

"Oh no, no don't worry. I've not *got* anything. I just... I don't even know your *name*."

I laughed.

He stared at me.

I stopped laughing.

He didn't know me. Not at all. It was as if the last six months had been a dream, some lucid imagining existing only within my own mind, or another life that I had for a moment been a joyous participant in. In the instant that I had realised what he meant to me, it had been stolen away.

I didn't understand what was happening to me; I railed against it, I fought it so hard that my weeping threatened to turn me to a husk, and my fists seemed to break where I beat them against his chest, the bed, the walls of my room.

I moved away, leaving David and all of my life behind me (and he was relieved, although he tried not to be; he never could hide anything from me).

He was the first.

He wasn't the last.

There was Jack, on one knee on New Year's Eve, suddenly asking where he was, thanking me for helping him up because strangers weren't always so nice, even on a night like this.

Then Katy, framed in golden sunlight on the beach, smiling distantly as though I were a stranger, turning to walk away and never speak to me again.

Then Aaron, who I tried again for. Aaron, who forgot me four times before I finally gave up.

And now you.

You're asleep. You don't know I'm writing this, sitting in the bed beside you. When you wake up I'll be gone. Your life will go on as though I'd never been in it, all because of a broken picture frame on the floor of an old lady's house. A memory of love destroyed, and the memory of me given up as payment. I could try again, like I have before. Maybe it'll get better this time. Maybe I'll stop loving you and you'll remember me one day. Maybe I could stay nearby and wait for that to happen. Maybe I could bear that.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

So do I live with the agony of possibility, and without the ecstasy of choice.

So do I live without you.

And *that's* magic.