

To Say Goodbye

She was waiting for him, under the green canopy of the willow tree. Far far beyond, past the boundary that separated the innocence of childhood to the grim realities of the world, guns rolled like thunder; an endless salute to the fallen of today; a bitter warning for the heroes of tomorrow.

Shrouded in the uniform that he wore like a penance; his personal atonement for the years that he had stolen from himself, living shrouded in the curse of fear, tainted by shame, he spoke.

“I have to go, Allie. I can’t live with myself any longer.”

Her voice was low, and trembled with a passion that bordered desperation. “How can you fight - march to your own death for something you don’t believe in?”

“To set myself free.”

The white feather had seemed heavy between his fingers, which shook and trembled like the coward that he was. Crushing it against his sweat laced palm, it stuck, as if taunting him... reminding him that that title would be his, until the day he died. “Coward.”

Maybe it was a selfish desire that made him enlist; a need, to prove himself worthy of Death. So long, had he feared that grim shadow, seeing it stalk him day and night, haunting his dreams, which, crimson tinted, only seemed to foreshadow one inevitable ending.

It was only recently, as again and again, he cheated Death, that he wondered, if maybe the only person he was cheating was himself.

His breathing was hard and uneven, creating misty clouds, which danced before his eyes; not a frond whispered in the still night. “All it should take, is one clean shot to kill a man.” He whispered. “Yet, here, I feel like I’ve died a thousand deaths.”

The accusing stares in the street felt like knives, piercing into the very shadows of his soul. “Coward...” they seemed to whisper. Those nameless strangers tormented him, burrowing

under his flesh to pump like poison into his heart. "Why should you stay, whilst our boys march to massacre. Coward..."

He knew they were running out of time. And, as bravely she sailed through the shattering smoke of death, the smile of the moon had never seemed more beautiful.

Allie looked at him, her eyes too grave, too sad in her young face, as she studied the boy she had fallen in love with all those years ago.

Just a lad and a lass in springtime, when the only sound was the birdsong. Before the roar of the guns broke the harmony of life, sending them spiralling in the black abyss.

In her words, she clung to the final vestige of those sunny days; where on the riverbank, together they had penned their poetry, and dreamed of forever.

"The moon would be so lonely; if all the stars died away."

The beginning line of their first little effort, written in the careless dawn of another day now seemed like a premonition; a thin glimpse where perhaps the veil that hid the future had drifted...blown by the slightest breeze; catching them between what had been, and what was to become.

"Even a star can't see the light of the others. She just shines in the hope, that somewhere, someone will see her light." He whispered back; understanding caressing his tone, masking the dreadful terror that dwelled deep within him. "Everyone is alone, Allie. What can we do - but hold out our hands in the dark. And hope someone will catch hold."

Her fingers were cold around his, trembling like a leaf under an onslaught of rain. "I don't want you to go."

The curtain he had pulled around his shattered heart was lifting, like fragile petals his memories were tumbling out from the deepest corners of his mind.

A ring, sparking in the golden sunlight.

Stolen kisses, her bright smile, warm cheeks pressed against his own.

Allie, reaching for a leaf, that fell in the dying twilight.

“Don’t go,” she’d begged him. “Please.”

It had been his smokescreen for so many years; vain comfort on the dark nights - that he was staying for her. When all the time he knew. He was staying because he was afraid.

The first ray of the peeping sun fell tenderly upon their faces, illuminating them together, for the final time. Marching orders were at dawn.

He’d had so many dreams. So much hope for the future. As a candle, snuffed by a gust of wind, he felt them waver, slipping away into the everlasting tide of time.

“We could have been happy, Allie.”

“And yet, today you must go.”

“Yes.” Because now he knew. He would exchange one honourable death for a hundred cringing cowardly years. Bearing witness to sunsets painting the skies in rivers of blood, days he knew he would never deserve to see.

He couldn’t bear to see the tears in her eyes; couldn’t bear her to see the tears in his. “If I should go West - please don’t grieve for me. I want you to live - to enjoy the life I wish I could have lived with you.”

She trembled, slim fingers clutching desperately around his, as if she would anchor him. Hold on to him forever; and never let him go.

“I would never stop grieving for you, Denver Harland. Because I will never stop loving you.” Her voice was like summer’s gentle breeze against his face, and he closed his eyes against the wave of regret, for what his life could have been. “But -” her voice shook slightly, as she

made her promise. “Should that happen, I will live for you. And for what you believe in. And maybe someday; the world will come to believe in it too.”

The old church bell was crying the hour of six, it’s dreary note striking a death knell in their hearts. He turned to her, as they stood, hand clasped under the fronds, eyes meeting in the first rosy blush of daybreak, reflecting the love of a thousand stars.

“‘Til death, do us part.”

Tears were streaming freely down her cheeks, as, by one unspoken accord, they leaned in and kissed: their lips touching for the final time.

“I’ll always love you, Denny.”

His fingers were slipping through hers, and then they were gone, leaving her standing alone under the weeping willow, ice creeping along the edges of her heart, a shuddering sob breaking the still silence.

She had heard so many final words. But of the boy she loved; she would never know.

Death would steal him; her love, in days to come, only weeks after he turned his back on the half-life he felt doomed to; staring fate in the face, as he took his future into his own hands. Greater men than she, would write glowing words of his heroism under fire, his unfailing courage in the face of the death he had so feared.

But that night, as she reached out helplessly in the dark, knowing there were no fingers waiting to catch hers on the other side, she cried bitterly, adrift in the lonely land of tears.

“It takes a lifetime to die,” he had told her, in the summer days, when forever stretched infinitely before them, and death sung only as a name in a poem. “But it’s very beautiful on the other side of the stars.”

She couldn’t see beyond the silvery twinkle; she would never make out his beloved face in the patterns they would form. But for the rest of her life, she would believe it was there.

And for all those heroes; she hoped it was beautiful.

THE END