

SHORT STORIES

By: Lori Dyza S. Aranas

Une. An Afternoon Decision

The warm scent of burnt sienna and Sandalwood filled the air. Rhys glanced at his wristwatch; it read 3:18 p.m. He pulled his jacket closer, looking around him, the rolling fields, and the horses running carefree in the fields, the golden flair of autumn announcing her height of time. It would have been a better day; the sight would have been welcoming, the beauty and simplicity of it, but this sight, this memory in Rhys's mind, would forever be an imprint of the eventual guilt that would consume him.

He pulled his tan jacket closer. The weather is quite warm but it wasn't the outside wind that makes him cold, the coldness comes from the inside. His thoughts were in a whirlwind; his chest and the back of his head ached with thoughts and memories that he knows he have to forget. Rhys rested his body in the door of his blue Porche. The thought weakens him, and yet, in order to fulfill her wishes, he has to do it. He has to. He just has to.

Rhys was lost in his thoughts when he saw Ellie standing in the porch. He was sure that she was looking for him but he couldn't approach her. Instead he stood there, debating inside himself if he should take her hand and lead her to her happiness. But Ellie decided for herself. She called his name.

Ellie was wearing her favorite white dress. That old-fashioned linen vintage dress they bought in a flea market in Nairobi during their honeymoon. Her lush brown hair burned red in the afternoon sun.

"Rhys?" She said, softly

He did not move.

"Rhysie?" She said again, softly yet with a tinge of exasperation, and fear.

Rhys approached her and took her hand.

"I am here." He whispered to her ear as he held her in his arms.

"I thought you left me."

"I won't do that. You know me love."

She nodded as she fumbled to hold his right hand. She squeezed it, and looked at his face, but Rhys noticed, she missed it by an inch.

"Are you sure you really want to do this?" Rhys asked. Inside him, he was craving for the word no. But he is sure that her mind was already set. No matter how hard he would try, he wouldn't be able to change her mind. He can, he can stop her. He could, but his love for her was too great, it makes him weak against her. It made him weak and he hated it. He hated himself for saying yes in the first place. But here they are already. In the starting point, and he has no way of turning back.

Ellie rested her head on his shoulder and he felt her hand squeeze his. And he knew, she was sure.

Rhys walked her to the car, as his sister Martha, went out the house with Dr. Schertz to watch them leave. Martha had helped Ellie change, help her prepare, and as Martha followed the blue Porche slowly vanish in the distance, she couldn't help but cry. Cry for everything that would be lost. Dr. Schertz couldn't help but shed a tear too. It is someone's wish, and nobody can change that. It would rouse debates, but her condition, it only makes her exemplified by the norms. "Be brave, be brave our young soldier." He whispered as he watched the blue speck vanish in the distance.

The drive to Ivory Beach was longer than expected, but for Rhys, it appeared like he never drove at all. He never felt hour long drive. For him, the whole drive seemed like those video games he used to play when he was little. It felt like he was driving, he felt the physical matter move, turn, go forward, saw the trees thinning, felt the road go smooth to beach rough, saw the passing of time, the change in the warm autumn sky to the yellowing russet and scarlet colors of the sunset. He couldn't bring himself to look at her, to glance in his right. Driving is already painful. In some moments along the way, whenever he glanced upon a boulder or a huge tree, or passed by a bridge, he was tempted to drive the car to it. End both their lives, end his sufferings and ease Ellie's pain. But again he couldn't. He did not realize that he was crying, that his tears were already falling from his eyes and that his silent moans were evident.

Ellie heard Rhys cry, but she did not look at him. She continued to stare ahead. Stare into the nothingness that had consumed her for months now. Her heart ached to hear him cry, but she has to not show weakness. Instead, she hummed Frederic Chopin's Nocturne. She knows that Rhys loves it when she was humming it. She's not good at it but it never fails to put a smile in Rhys's face. Deep inside her she knew that no matter how hard she would try, she would never be able to put a smile on Rhys's face. Not that she did not care in seeing it. She knew that only one sentence would make Rhys happy, but that, she cannot say. She had gone too far for this, she can't turn back. So she continued to hum her song. And the more she hummed, the louder she heard Rhys's cry. At last, they reached their destination.

Rhys stopped the car abruptly, slightly pushing Ellie to the front. Rhys was so tired, so weak and hurt that he rested his forehead in the wheel.

Ellie fumbled to free herself from the seat belt, and she did so, she reached for Rhys.

"Ellie, no. Don't do this." Rhys voice trailed off as he buried his face in Ellie's arms.

"There's another way, there are alternatives, not only science, and there's also many other damn ways..."

"I've decided Rhysie, I can't turn back now." Now Ellie's tears flowed. If before in the drive she tried her best to stop herself, now it was as if her body just betrayed her.

Rhys continued to cry in her arms. He tried to gauge her into giving herself up. Give the whole thought up, forget it and leave it behind. Throw it out the window. He tried sweet talking her, then it turned to cajoles, then to threats, then to pleas, but in vain. When at last Ellie released him and opened the car door. "It's time." She whispered.

Ellie loved Rhys. And his weakness in her time of need hurt her. Not for selfish reasons, she loves Rhys, she cares for Rhys, and she does not blame him for his weakness. She would hurt Rhys very soon. She would inflict damage upon the man who loved her back, the very man she had sworn a lifetime with. A lifetime. The word hurt Ellie like an ice dagger struck right in her heart. Lifetime, life. Something she is deprived of, being deprived of, and soon would be gone. Where is lifetime now? Where is forever? Is forever where I can be with Rhys? Or just a vast nothingness of guilt?

Rhys took her arm and slowly walked her to the edge of the cliff. The sound of the waves lapping on the rocky shores seemed like a distance, yet an impending danger. He led her just a fair meter from the edge, just as she wanted. He could not utter a word any longer. His minds were blank; all he sees is the approaching sight of the cliff's edge. He sees but could not comprehend. It seemed to him that a metal plate was separating his idea of reality and what's inside his brain. He could not process anything, just there, approaching, following the soul's instinct.

Ellie sat down the grass. Closing her eyes, she tugged Rhys's sleeve and made him sit next to her. She settled herself in the comfort of his arms. She wouldn't cry anymore. She realized that tears are surreal. If she wants to be strong, she has to appear strong. She has to do this, because this is the only thing she can give Rhys. A consolation.

"Remember my story?" She asked her beloved.

It took a moment of forever for Rhys to answer her.

"The sunset when you were 5?"

"5 to 6, I wasn't sure remembering?"

"I remember that."

"Is it like, how I described it?"

He looked into the distance, the sun setting in the horizon. It was an ordinary sunset for somebody else, but it wasn't. There was this warm glow surrounding it. A mythical feeling, an enchanted aura being invoked by the sun itself. The warmth of the sunset made everything fiery orange. It painted the sky the color of russet, red, and yellow and gold. It was magical, and truly enthralling. It is, her sunset.

"Yes love. It is your sunset."

"Will you tell me my story?"

Rhys smiled. At last, courage. Even for a while. "You were sitting in your high chair, the Donald duck one. You were facing the window and beside you, your nanny was ironing some clothes. You were playing with the blue Max Factor loose powder you gave her for her birthday. You glanced at the door and you saw that the hallway was full of presents; you saw your favorite purple shorts with a butterfly on it. It comes with a shirt but you don't know where it is now. Then you looked back at the window, and you saw the most beautiful sunset you ever saw in your whole life."

Ellie smiled. "Rhys, thank you."

Rhys knew that this was it. But no, he would let her go. It's the only thing he can do for her, it was a sacrifice.

"You want me to leave now?"

She nodded.

He helped her stand up, and Ellie, reaching for him; she was able to look at his eyes for the very last time. He kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose, and then gently, passionately and hungrily, he bent down and kissed her. He relished the sweet honey and wine taste of her lips, the innocent sweetness of her kiss, and it hurt him like hell, to know, that this is the last time that he would be able to kiss her. The very last time.

“I love you Rhys.”

“I love you Ellie.”

Then he let go of her.

Ellie felt his pain. It was time. Time to go, and leave the future pain. But then, denial consumed her. Why is she doing this? Why does she have to hurt him? Hurt everyone? Time is running out for her, but it also runs out of everyone too. Only she is different. She has to do this while she can. While she still have the physical strength to speak, to hear, to walk, and to feel. To feel. She continued to walk, slowly. She is determined to take the leap. To plummet down into the ocean. It was a pain to get into this ploy, but it would be more difficult to let it pass. If she'll die, she'll die like this. She already lost her sight. She already lost part of herself. One by one, her organs, her system, and then her senses would go down. She would die, yes she would. But doesn't want to reach that. Why? Pride? Ego? Why? Rhys? No, not Rhys. He was the reason, reason she was living. If only, if only she can say his name one last time, maybe, just maybe...

When Rhys parted with her, he felt nothing but grief, pain and immense hurt. He couldn't do anything anymore. He doesn't want to do this but he has to, for her. For Ellie to be happy. When she was diagnosed of that dreaded condition, she had changed. And now, the woman he loved more than his life, decided to take her fate in her own hands. It was hopeless but the truth of all things seemed like a bad dream. A novel wrought to awe others, but this isn't fantasy, it's real. She's going to kill herself and he's there, allowing this to happen. He stood there, all the thoughts consuming him, the guilt, his conscience, he can turn back, then he remembered something, something he always wanted to hear but all she gives him was a weak smile...

“Rhys...”

“Why Ellie?” they said, at the same time.

With this, Rhys ran as fast as he could and grabbed her by the waist and carried her to a safe distance away from the edge. It did not surprise him to see that she in tears and yet she was still trying to make herself look strong.

“Dammit Ellie, don't do that again! Promise me!” He said as he shook her by the shoulders.

“I'm scared Rhys, oh Gods I'm so sorry, I'm so very sorry. I thought, I thought I could do this, but Rhys, I'm going to die! I can't die Rhys! I can't die, I don't want to!”

Rhys breathed a sigh of relief. It's all over. She's going to die soon enough, but she would still be able to spend more time with him. Perhaps, someday, with a miracle she would be able to get well, that her sickness would be gone. One day, she would be able to see again, and life would go back to normal for the both of them. Rhys led her back to the car and drove home. The sunset faded to welcome the glory of the night.

Deux. A Lord And The Dreamer

There was once a man that lived in Elizabethan England named Lord Balian Winchester. His Lordship, a handsome young man in his early thirties, unmarried, abides with the fading chivalric code, descended from a long line of nobles, with a broad chest, dark curls, dreamy face with eyes to that of a fallen angel is, by all means, a romantic poet. Now, during those times, the chief pastimes of nobles would be hunting, going to the court, going to wars, have their legs run into some foreign, undiscovered land; scheming, etcetera, etcetera. But Lord Balian would rather spend his time, sitting under the shade of the willow tree, beside the river and the bridge, on his estate in Bath. He would spend his time there, (if he is not attending stately matters, and if not rendering his service, as required, by her majesty the Queen) writing poems, drawing or painting, and most of the time, dreaming of a person way before his time.

Lord Balian's self seclusion wasn't his fault anyway. He was born to be that way; at least, that is what he says to himself and to others if they would bother to ask. He kept that statement and blurted it out whenever there is a need, and in time, he couldn't think of any more a good excuse for his conduct that the statement stuck. Therefore, he was dubbed, in the court and by his own servants and people, as the quiet, introverted noble.

'Such a waste of good looks.' According to Lady Langford, a friend of Lady Lettice Winchester, Lord Balian's mother, Countess of Bath.

But what, oh what, does Lord Balian think of anyway? What does he write with that fair hand of his? To where do his pia mater dwells?

Sir Henry Norrington, a boisterous cuckolding pillycock, and exact opposite of Lord Balian literally and figuratively, with a taste of picking on our poor hero, who also happens to be Lord Balian Winchester's sworn enemy, came across one of his manuscripts and declared, in the court of Queen Elizabeth I, that Lord Balian's writings, are (here I would quote his exact words, for 'tis so awful) 'I dare say, my dear lords and ladies, that Lord Balian's words sustain no countenance. Such a nerve to write! No talent at all! Nay, upon my word! His writings are so bad it would make Chaucer, Donne... and egad! Shakespeare! Renounce their English heritage!' Oh and let us not forget, the very words of Norrington that incurred the poor introvert into abysmal seclusion: 'Such words! What exaggeration! No woman with such views is a woman! Dear Balian, such a shame! So much affection for a woman not of noble bearing! And a Creole! Such, such effrontery! Clearly, Winchester, you have no mind, no eyes, no ears, what happened to them? Eaten by the Devourer that your dream woman is interested with? Ha ha ha! You are sir, are desperate, blind and plain dumb!' When Lord Balian heard this, he was almost ready to strike Sir Henry with his sword, but his loyal friends (and very few of them) intervened, and if not for the gracious queen, to break the fight and impending duel, and sent both of them, in house arrest for a few months.

So here we find the dreamy Lord Balian Winchester, sitting under the shade of the willow tree by the river and the bridge in his estate in Bath. Now his mind dwells, reliving the

memory, of a dream that had visited him years ago. It was so long ago that Lord Balian can't remember exactly when (and he has excellent memory). Now, Balian is sure of the fact that the dream first came to him before he learned reason, came to him even before light. Thus, he had been living with that dream, for the past three decades, secretly joining it under Selene's cloak.

The dream was simple, yet so eloquent and intricate, that Lord Balian is also sure, that he is not supposed to live in this lifetime. It was of a woman, a girl. Yes, a girl indeed. She's a mixture of both the East and the west. A pretty little girl, with dark brown hair and light brown eyes, sometimes of Amber and of crystalline grey. She had beautiful, exotic features. She had the kind of face that the longer you stare at her, the more beautiful she becomes. It's like she had no same face, for it was forever changing but then it's not. She is quite small though, no, not that small but of fair height and the curves on her body shows even if she does not try to let them show anyway. She would wake up, gently open her eyes, listen to the birds that chirp outside her window, smile and get up, stretch, without wiping the smile on her face. Then she would go down, eat breakfast (with such weird arrangement and food, having to be prepared with such ease and short notice, the same would go with luncheon, tea, snacks, dinner, supper...), then she would rise, go up again and take a bath (what a woman! Taking a bath every day, and such... what is that metal thing that sprays... water?) She would sing, and even dance, while she's taking a bath, then afterwards, she would go dress (such a shame, she doesn't wear skirts and a petticoat! Balian thought that since she belong to a weird, dysfunctional, peasant family he would, if he ever finds her, he would marry her, teach her proper ways, get her everything that she needs, wants...). Afterwards, she would ride her red carriage (and what a weird horseless carriage it is!), and then go to a dull building with lots of women and men in strange clothes (the women were all in their underclothes... must be a brothel, but it's not!). Now the girl, with the lovely smile, would wave at some whores, must be her friends mayhap and enter another dull room with hard looking and strange looking chairs, if they are chairs anyway, and sit there. Then an old person would come across... I think dear reader, that I should skip this part, I would now jump to what captivated Lord Balian's heart to his strange little dream girl. What captivated Lord Balian, is not the girl's smiles, her looks, he would watch her, in his dreams, the girl, sitting in the afternoons, whether in the beach or her country house, staring at the sunset, and strangely, Balian knew, that she too, was dreaming with her eyes open. And as he looks at her, he could enter her thoughts, her soul. It was as if he could the very thing that her mind, heart and soul see. He was her fantasy and she his. It was a transcendent mutual agreement between the two of them.

A certain connection stretches from the bonds and confines of Time, Space, and strangely, Truth. It was as if, the girl, sitting in her sanctuary in the afternoon and at night, staring at the sky, Balian, sitting under the shade of the willow tree by the river and the bridge in his estate in Bath. Would be staring at each other, be with each other, feel each other's presence, have their heart's souls intertwined. It is, that deep, meaningful nothingness, that both Balian, and the girl, Elizabeth (which was her name, in which Balian doesn't know, a girl who lives in the 21st century, also a dreamer, and shared a reputation similar to Lord Balian.) unknowingly, and knowingly shared.

