

Time After Time

Some time ago you asked if I remember the first time we met. I couldn't tell you much then, as you were never around long enough to hear it. Each time we met was like a blip in the timeline of my existence; I'd blink and you'd be gone, and I would have to wait for you all over again. But there is time for the story now, I suppose.

You and I first met three centuries ago, give or take. I'd ask you for the exact number, as I have forgotten it. Though if you had an answer, we wouldn't be in this situation now, would we?

I remember the flickering shadows in the dusk light, the flames of the lamps wavering in the wind, the scent of horses and fog and petrichor sitting heavy in my nose. It had rained earlier that evening, see. But the rain was so fine it almost blended in with the fog. You'd inhale and the insides of your lungs would be coated in a fine film of water. And it would feel wonderfully cool, like springtime grass in a cemetery. Or like the first breath of air after being born again.

You're right, I'm getting off-track. Apologies.

I had a terrible tailor in those days. I swear he didn't actually know how to take anyone's measurements. God only knew how he stayed in business for as long as he did. But he was cheap, and I was nearly destitute. Cheap tailors who knew their craft were in short supply back then, so I had to make do. Needless to say I remember feeling quite constrained by my suit jacket that night, which I had gotten made for a party my friend was throwing for his daughter. The carriages had ceased running for whatever reason, and I had to walk home, a little tipsy and moderately uncomfortable.

I remember the way my steps echoed on the cobblestones of the road as I stumbled my way through the fog and mist. I even remember what I was thinking of at that moment: the gold jangling in my pockets, my winnings from the races we had bet on earlier in the day. I had forgotten to take them out of my pocket before the party, and in my less than optimal state, I wondered if someone had helped themselves to search my pockets in that crowded space. Even the most meager change was important to me, back then. If I had something, regardless of how small it was, that meant I could make something more out of it.

The same can be said of us, I suppose.

As I passed a tavern whose name I must admit I have also forgotten, the sound of laughter and celebration drew my attention. And that is when you stumbled out of the doorway, onto the street, a smile hanging loose and careless off of your mouth as you drunkenly called

back inside to someone. Good-natured shouts floated out the door to you, which you waved away. For what reason, I suppose I will never know. But as I gazed at you, you looked back at me. Perhaps you felt my eyes on you. Or perhaps it was movement that caught your eye. But I do not recall being in motion during that first glance.

I wasn't terribly great with people back then. The only friends I had were either through my parents, or who felt obligated to give me some kind of attention due to my heritage. Even the friend whose party I had attended was selected for me when we were children. After I was disowned, he stuck around likely out of pity. I had grown used to being ignored or passed by. And I fully expected you to do the same. I was already beginning to move onward. But I will admit, when we locked eyes, something about you intrigued me. Something so oddly radiant shone about you. Perhaps it was the stars in the sky, the clouds just barely pulling away to reveal them. Or it could have been the liquor in your bloodstream, or within my own. But I swear, in your eyes lay infinite cosmos. You appeared before me like some kind of angel, or spirit, full of youth and joy.

You approached me then, as I stood fixed to the street in something that might have been overwhelming awe. I could smell the liquor on you, but I was not afraid. I didn't even think. You took my hand and, drawing something from your own jacket, pressed a small object into my palm, then folded my fingers over it and departed. I watched you go, something weighing me down and sobering me up. If ever I am so unfortunate as to forget this meeting, I can only hope that I remember one thing: the look in your eye as you took my hand. I can only describe it as halfway between jovial, likely residual from your time in the tavern, and knowing. Like you and I, strangers at that point in time, shared a secret. A good one at that. And that feeling, being in the loop, or being able to share in the emotions written on your face, was more intoxicating than the alcohol coursing through my bloodstream.

I looked down to see what you had bestowed upon me, fingers slowly unfurling like a cautious lover. It was a dried sage flower. You had probably pressed it between the pages of some book, preserving it forever, for no other reason than to give it to someone. I doubt I had been your intended recipient, but nonetheless, it was a thought to entertain. When I was a child, my mother taught me some of the language of flowers. I have to admit, I did chuckle when I realized the message you had given me was, whether you meant it or not. I briefly wondered if

you somehow knew, when you bestowed the sage upon me. But the notion was a silly one. Easily dismissed.

The second time we met was a shock. Nearly a century had passed by then, and the world was vastly changed. It was filled with artificial light at all hours of the day, passerby wearing bright colors and loose clothing, automobiles replacing horses and carriages. I had just quit my job minutes before, and not in the best mood. I was about to open the door to my car, but then I saw you on the sidewalk.

I will admit, I didn't have the most graceful reaction ever. I believe I dropped the can of soda I held. But that didn't matter. I hadn't seen you since that night a century prior, but I hadn't forgotten you. You looked the same age as you had been when we first met. I played it cautious, not wanting to come across as strange or unsettling in saying we had met before, a century prior. Your gaze held no recognition, not even a hint or a spark of something you'd try to hide. You didn't remember me, but by God, I could never forget that odd radiance.

Your being there confused me greatly. I had heard news of your passing, back then. I attended your funeral. Have you ever attended the funeral of someone you had never met, but knew you couldn't be without after just one encounter? I didn't know anyone there. Many asked who I was, what I was doing there, the like. Apparently you had gained a reputation among your family and friends. A... not so pleasant one. They associated me with that reputation, and I had to take my leave. The grief weighed on my soul for months. Not grief of something lost, however. It was more so a grief of something that never was. That could have been.

Anyway, oblivious to my current plight, you approached me once more, just as you did that first time. You wore the same easy smile, eyes green as grass glittering in time with the golden chain around your throat. You wore a red polo shirt so bright it nearly blinded me. In all of the vibrancy of the age of the second meeting, you stood out the most. You took my hand, same as before, and pressed something into it. This time I opened my hand immediately after your touch departed from my skin, though I had an inkling of what would lie there in my palm. I looked anyway.

True to form, it was a second dried, pressed flower. A morning glory that time, its meaning jumping straight to my mind. I hadn't meant to retain the knowledge my mother bestowed upon me. In fact, I had been actively trying to forget it. Nothing to do with you of course; attached to those lessons were memories that I was better off forgetting. But it seemed that I didn't try hard enough to forget.

Maybe it was a good thing in the end. I looked up to say something to you, to thank you perhaps, but all that I meant to say died on my tongue when I realized you had gone.

The third time, I resolved that I would do things differently. I had learned from the past. If we were ever to cross paths again, it would happen with my knowledge. Not, to say, that I would plan out a meeting. You know I have never been the type to make plans such as that, with forethought and precision. No, I would work to make sure you weren't like me. That whatever was happening could either be a fluke of fate, or the universe's way of laughing at my immortality, my long memory.

Finding you again was no simple task. If I didn't have contacts within police and forensic departments, I would not have found you again. But I did. I checked in on you here and there, taking great care that you didn't see me. I watched you age, flowing along time, just to be certain that you were mortal, that you hadn't faked your death all those years ago.

You age beautifully by the way, my dear. I know of your grievances with age, as you had complained to me of wrinkles and spots and aches these past few years. But worry not—you wear the markings of a lived human life wonderfully.

Before I knew it, the news reached me that you have passed away again. Another funeral, and I was confident that you had not faked your death this time. I had witnessed your body change as mine does not; I knew that this was a natural conclusion to your life.

And yet.

Another century passed, and that one may have been the most lonely group of years over the course of my long life. I felt every second of it. There were times when I wished Death would take me in her swift and loving embrace, but if there was an easy way out of that lonesome existence, it was not meant for me. Another century passed, and you stumbled back

into my life as you had done twice before. There was nothing graceful about it, nothing playful, but this chance encounter, something I was beginning to suspect may not be chance at all, was likely my favorite of each one that came before.

There have been many technological advancements over the past century. Things have come into being that I never thought possible within my first lifetime. But now, in my third, I have seen many remarkable things. Many dangerous things, as well. With all that has come, nothing can surpass the experience one derives from a club. Bright lights flashing from every possible angle, the amplified bass of the music thudding hard in your chest, every sense amplified by alcohol, the feeling of belonging you receive when walking into a hot, dark, cramped room with strangers.

You know how this story begins, I believe. It ends with us, here. Sitting where we are now. Surely it hasn't been long enough to where you've forgotten.

I was at the bar, drinking something or other, taking a break from the overwhelming atmosphere when someone bumped into me, making me spill my drink all over the counter. I turned, and there you were. At first I wasn't certain if it was you. The lights were in my eyes, and the alcohol in my veins wasn't helping. But then you smiled and apologized, and I received two separate shocks, one more profound than the other.

The first one being that you were alive and well. Young again, as I had seen you twice before during our encounters. That was the lesser shock. Some part of me had known that despite making sure you lived and died like any other mortal, I'd see you again somehow. The second shock was your voice. You had spoken to me! I had heard your voice before, two hundred years ago. But you had been quite intoxicated, your speech slurred. It was a wholly different experience to hear you speak in the modern setting, and even more so speaking directly to me. Your voice was like manna from Heaven to my hungry ears. The room around us had been deafening, but I still heard your voice clearly. Like some part of me recognized it, was intimately familiar with it, though I hadn't really heard it before.

I must have sat there with a dumbfounded expression on my face for several seconds. Too long for comfort, I suppose. So you took the now-empty glass from my hand, set it on the counter, pulled me to my feet and led me to the dance floor.

Now, I've always considered myself to be an excellent dancer. But dancing with you made me feel like a child again: inexperienced, unsure of myself in every aspect. And you... you

were beautiful. The lights hit your face just right, highlighting every perfection and imperfection you possessed and turning them into something ethereal. I couldn't keep my eyes off you and the cosmos in your eyes.

Later into the night I drew you into the alley behind the club. I pulled from my pocket the two dried flowers you had given me. Because they were ancient, and thus fragile, I had them cast in resin to retain their dull beauty. In the most ineloquent speech I've ever produced, I tried to explain to you where these had come from. But you didn't want to hear it. You thought I was insane, or delusional. So I stopped trying.

Which was all right by me. Somehow, you still let me take you home. And we haven't left each other's sides since.

I must admit, dear, I think this gravestone is better than your last two.

Until we meet again.