Alive, not Living

By Clare Lauren Kelly

Killian wasn't sure how he got here. One moment he was sitting out under the branches of a great willow tree, enjoying the time spent relaxing in the shade and the cover it provided from the harsh heat of the sun. Then the next the feeling of shade and sun on his face was gone, replaced by the light with very little heat that made it through the clean sheets of glass and around thick dry drapes, inside a strange room sitting on a low seat with a soft cushion.

There is no time to think much about what happened, but the room is familiar in some way with its light brown wooden walls covered in framed pictures, paintings, and pieces of paper that could be awards of some kind. What you might expect to see on the walls of someone's office or a home study of some kind. Or at least what he expected to see on the walls of an office or home study from the few good memories of proud parents and little achievements that have managed to stay with Killian all these years later. A part of him is calm, relaxed in a way he hadn't been before, not for some time at least. He knows this place.

From Killian's position sitting on the lowered high backed chair, there are parts of the room he is not able to see that are hidden by the nearly black chair back he was pressed against moments before. A few uncomfortable looking chairs are off to one side, positioned around a low wooden table covered in a clean white cloth that has a simple and short grey bowl placed in the middle. Whatever is in the bowl Killian can't quite see, but from the slight smell of butterscotch he assumes it is a candy bowl much like the one that had always been set on the low table at his grandmothers house. A candy bowl that was always noticeably emptier when he was around to

visit. But it's as Killian is looking around what he can see of the room he now finds himself in, breathing in the hints of butterscotch, that he sees the man sitting in a high backed and throne like chair barely six feet away from him.

The raven haired man is relaxed in his seat, legs out in front of him with one crossed over the other at the leather boot covered ankles, his arms resting on the thick wooden arms of the chair. Despite the relaxed and open posture, the mans steel grey eyes fixed unblinkingly on Killian, very clearly taking in every detail of his face. They both stay in their seats saying nothing and simply watching the other for some time before the man sits up straighter in the high backed chair, and gives Killian a strange smile that could never be described as comforting. A chill runs down Killian's spine as he watches the smiling stranger, but something is telling him to stay where he is in the low seat and to just wait, that this familiar and slightly disheveled looking man in this tidy room will talk when he wants to talk.

And after a few minutes the stranger breaks the silence, the unsettling grin never seeming to leave his face while the tone of his voice goes up and down in what would normally have been considered a playful manner for anyone, but never could be seen as such for this man. "Killian, it is really good you were able to join me here today. I thought there might be a chance you wouldn't want to come with how nice the weather is outside at the moment, and how at ease you seemed to be relaxing in the shade under that old willow."

Killian freezes as soon as it registers the man has just said his name without either of them having been introduced, and that this stranger also knew where Killian had been before he came to be sitting in this room. This tidy room he still doesn't remember entering, but must have walked into, after all the plain looking door is just there in the wall off to one side behind the

strangers chair. Maybe Killian just needs to make sure he drinks more water in the future if he's going to be outside for longer than it takes to walk to and from one place to the next. But that was not the problem he needed to be focused on right then. The problem that needed to be solved first, was figuring out how this familiar, rumpled looking stranger knew his name, and why he was feeling so uneasy yet unbothered at the same time.

“How do you know my name? Who are you? I don't think we have ever met before, but you’ll have to forgive me if we have, my memory isn’t always the best when it comes to people I've met in passing. Something I know I need to work on, but unfortunately it isn’t the easiest thing to improve, memory is like that it seems.” Killian’s voice comes out stronger and more even than he thought it would, but he can't take the time to appreciate that with how the disconcerting grin has not left the strangers face or dropped for even a moment. If anything, it seems like the smile has only gotten bigger and more unsettlingly unnatural. Almost too many glistening white teeth that are bared like a snarling wolf in a type of smile, make the stranger seem threatening despite the openness of his posture. And the relaxed way in which the man is calmly lounging in the chair with the top three buttons of his dress shirt undone in a clear disregard for propriety.

“You do not need to worry Killian I am not offended you don't remember me, can't expect someone to remember every person they have met, after all that wouldn’t be fair and it has been a long time by your standards. You have a good name Killian, an Irish name whether or not you have family from there, it means “little church” or “bright headed” if you didn’t know. Now as for my name, telling you my true name would just end up being fairly distressing for you, for good reason, but please, simply call me Tod. Like all names, the one I tend to go by has many

meanings, all depending on your culture of course, and Tod is a perfectly reasonable name for me to use even if it's only the German's who really understand. But that isn't important, you are not German so I'm assuming that would not interest you very much and I don't hold that against you. That's enough talk about that now, you aren't here to talk about names, and you didn't come here for a discussion on the hidden meanings most all names possesses."

Tod stays how he has been lounging like a king on a throne, the teeth filled grin that had been stretching his face is gone now, but the loss of the unsettling smile does nothing to make Killian feel more at ease with the man. He isn't sure what is wrong, doesn't even know if something is wrong, but nothing feels right, everything is jumbled and confusing. It takes Killian a moment to realize that Tod is once again watching him unblinkingly, clearly waiting for some answer to a question Killian didn't hear within the talk of the meanings of names.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude Tod, but I am not sure what I am doing here, to be honest I don't even remember making my way here in the first place. Did you call me here for some reason? Where am I exactly? This doesn't look like any office or other normal public meeting place, so I am assuming this is the office room of your house or something else of that sort. You said that it was good of me to join you, and that you weren't sure I would come with how nice it was outside, so could you kindly tell me what it is you wanted me here to talk about? Again, I don't mean to be rude Tod, I am just a bit confused."

Somehow Killian is able to keep his voice strong, steady and polite sounding, and Killian just hopes that his face doesn't show just how unsettled and uncomfortable he is here in this room with the other man. Tod just looks at Killian for a moment with no emotion clear on his pale blank face, but after a minute of deafening silence Tod lets out a soft chuckle that makes

Killian sit rigidly on the soft cushion with the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. The chuckle feels powerful, which makes no sense, and it's like every nerve and muscle in Killian is tensing up and getting ready to propel him out the door.

“Oh don't worry, not rude at all not at all, very understandable your confusion, so it is not something I hold against you in the slightest. Telling you what I asked you here to talk about is not the easiest of things, after all there is nothing specific that **I** wanted to talk to you about, rather there is something I wanted to hear **you** talk about. A question that I am hoping you would be willing to answer, something I like to ask those I come across in different situations because the answers are always most entertaining, and I do hope you’ll humor me.” Tod’s tone rises and falls in a teasing manner once more, but the lack of emotion in his dead, flat eyes, and the return of the smile with teeth bared only serves to further unsettle Killian.

Killian watches Tod for a moment waiting for him to continue, but when it becomes clear that Tod is waiting for Killian to talk, he shifts on the low seat before leaning away from Tod just barely to create a small distance between them, hoping Tod won’t notice. Unfortunately for Killian, Tod does notice the slight movement, but does not seem to be insulted by it in any way. Instead, his nearly sinister grin simply stretches his face a little wider as if Killian shifting away from him is extremely amusing.

“Well if it is something that I am able to answer I am happy to Tod, just ask and I will do my best to give you an answer you might be looking for or find amusing. I do want to apologize now in case I am not able to answer whatever this question is, the knowledge that I have is limited to a few specific areas related to my work and a few other random topics, so there is a limit to what I can be considered a source for.”

Tod just smiles even wider which shouldn't be possible and straightens in the chair, sitting more like he is at attention, straight spine pressed flat against the high back of the chair. With Tod now fully upright and his gaze unfalteringly fixed on Killian, the silence in the room grows as shadows shift across the floor. The silence is only there for a few seconds but it feels much longer, an eternity passing in those seconds Killian sits frozen, stuck under a spotlight. "Oh don't worry Killian it isn't a question of that sort at all, it is a personal kind of question and it is very simple. What is your biggest regret in life, what is the choice you made, that will stay with you until the day you die?"

The silence is back. Silence filling the room while Tod does not look away from Killian who wants nothing more than to be outside of this room under the willow, with his skin being burned by the sun. The biggest regret in his life. The choice that will stay with Killian until he dies. But as he thinks, Killian realizes he has no answer to give to Tod, the life he's lived has been simple, repetitive, so uninteresting and uneventful that Killian can not even think of what he might consider to be the happiest moment of his life. The shadows continue to shift across the floor, but neither Tod nor Killian make any attempt to move from their seats. Killian does not want to move, is afraid of what might happen should he twitch even the littlest bit, and Tod's stiff posture doesn't falter while he stares unblinking at Killian. Each waiting for something to happen, to prompt them into moving.

"It isn't a trick question Killian, there is no right or wrong answer and there isn't an answer that I want to hear from you, nothing that I am expecting. What is the biggest regret you have, the mistake or decision you made that will forever haunt you no matter what you may do in repentance. You might think that it needs to be something dramatic, it definitely sounds like the

sort of question that would require a dramatic answer, but people all have their own opinions and their own moral codes. What you might think is the biggest regret of your life might not seem so bad to another, but all humans have experiences that shape them in specific ways. So think Killian, there is something that is haunting you, something that you do not think could ever be made up for now, no matter how long you live." Tod's voice is serious, all traces of teasing gone along with the smile that had unsettled Killian so much, the smile that Killian now found himself wishing to return for a reason he could not fully put together.

"There is no answer that I can give you Tod, I am afraid that you will be disappointed and would do better finding another person to ask that. My life has been very steady and there is no answer I can give you, and I am sorry that I don't have a better response for you. Office work is not known for being the most exciting which is why some people decide it is what they want to do, they aren't interested in drama and all that. I guess I could be considered one of those kinds of people, never cared much for drama or for much of anything really outside of the work or task that needed to get done." Killian keeps his tone as friendly as he can manage, but there is nothing he can do to keep his feelings from showing on his face a plain as day. Nothing Killian can do to hide the fear and uncertainty bubbling up from deep within him as he answers Tod while trying to figure out why he feels compelled to answer in the first place.

"Oh now now, don't be insulting Killian because to say that you don't have an answer to my little question when I know you do, now that really is insulting. Everyone has an answer to that question, no one is free from regret as it is the burden all humans carry no matter their age, their gender or their profession, even little ones have regrets they carry, those regrets simply would not be considered serious by one such as yourself. So you think Killian, you think about

your life, about choices you've made, places you've been or haven't been, people you've known, opportunities you had but did not take, think about your life and you will find the regret you say does not exist. There is no rush, I can stay here as long as it takes for you to find the answer and there was nothing else you needed to do today, it's why you were laying under that nice old willow in the first place."

Killian doesn't move from where he is sitting, but he isn't able to look at Tod any longer so he lowers his head and keeps his eyes fixed on the dark wooden boards of the floor, while his mind spins in circles, trying to find an answer to the question. The room is filled with silence once again with Tod watching Killian intently, who in turn has not looked away from the floorboards in a deliberate effort to not meet Tods piercing gaze. A gaze that seems to become heavier as each second passes, the weight of it pressing down on Killian steadily.

If Killian's life had been so uneventful, nothing happening to divert him from what had become his normal everyday routine for the past thirty years, how could there be some secrete regret deep down somewhere? Killian was happy, happy with the routine he found in the job that had become his life after the first one that had taken over his time for five years had not been what he needed. Killian was content with the set routine that filled his waking hours, there had never been many reasons to deviate from it, so he never had.

A steady routine to keep him busy, a job to give him money, and a sense of stability that hadn't been always present when he was younger was all Killian could have thought to ask for before Tod had come around and asked a question that seemed to turned things upside-down. After some time, Killian gathers all the courage he has left to raise his head and meet the unwavering eyes of the one sitting across from him.

“I still do not think that I have a proper answer for you Tod, I apologize and truly mean no disrespect. My deepest regret, I have not done enough in my life, have not really lived you could say, enough to have anything to regret other than the the fact that I have not really lived. I regret not having any regrets I guess you could say, if that makes any sort of sense. I was alive, but never really lived, never had a reason to.” Killian is surprised at how tired and defeated his voice sounds, the voice he would imagine belonging to a person who had lived too much for too long, not one who had not lived almost at all.

But the anger and annoyance Killian was expecting from Tod at the lack of a real answer never comes, and for a reason he does not understand, Killian is comforted by the silence and the unblinking light grey eyes that are fixed on his own dulled blue ones. Surprising Killian even further, is how Tods paper pale face shows a mix of understanding and sadness instead of the annoyance and anger he had been expecting. The annoyance and anger Killian had been preparing himself for from this unusual man, from this familiar stranger who unsettles and comforts him at the same time.

Tod stands swiftly and smoothly from the high backed chair with more grace than Killian would have expected from this confusing companion he has found himself with, then with a stiff spine and straight back, Tod takes the two steps needed to bring him barely a foot away. Killian knows he should be uncomfortable with this sudden and unexpected closeness, had never been one to enjoy being surrounded by a crowd or standing closely with others, but that feeling does not come. Instead, Killian feels a strange peace settle over him, how he would imagine it felt to finally arrive in a place you were welcome, a place you were wanted, to arrive somewhere that was home and had been waiting patiently to be found.

When a glove covered hand is settled gently on his shoulder, Killian does not startle, does not try to draw back and away from the touch that would normally be unwanted and avoided as much as possible. Instead Killian feels something crumbling, there is no other way to describe the feeling of whatever was built up inside falling away, and letting out all that had been trapped behind a wall that Killian hadn't know he was missing. All the emotion and more that he had never thought existed or was missing from the supposedly happy, stable and steady life Killian had built for himself.

"That is a good answer Killian. A good answer. The best I have gotten. Come on with me now Killian, I'll help you get back to that strong willow tree you were laying under to enjoy the day and the sun, the light has not yet faded so there is still plenty of time for you to enjoy it, for you to live. Come now Killian, it's time for you to live." Tod removes the heavy hand from Killian's shoulder and holds it out to him, palm up and fingers open. Without hesitation, Killian reaches out and takes it.