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The Threads of Time

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The Threads of Time

Author Bio

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The Threads of Time

Rebecca Johnson

The beeping of the machines that were keeping her alive seemed to rip into Shelby's soul. Her eyes fluttered back and forth in the darkness as she tried to gather the energy to open her eyelids. She heard her mother's voice calling to her.

"Good morning, baby. We're right here beside you. We love you, Shelby girl."

She wanted to acknowledge her parents so desperately, but all she could manage to do was open her eyes and nod slightly in their general direction. The lights were off in the room and she could hear the deep, even breathing of her hospital roommate, a young girl with leukemia, coming from the other side of the curtain. A nurse came into the room to give Shelby some water and to adjust the machines.

She had been in the hospital since her diagnosis in January, a few days after her seventeenth birthday. When the tumor was first discovered, deep in her brain, the doctors were cautiously optimistic. The treatments were risky, but Shelby was young and strong-willed. The first two surgeries were unsuccessful, and it was after the second failed attempt that doctors realized that interfering with that part of her brain would turn her into a vegetable. Moreover, the cancer had spread and was attacking her lungs, liver, and kidneys. Her body was slowly shutting down. The past week had seen an especially sharp decline. The nurse added something to her I.V. and Shelby blissfully fell back to sleep.

In her dream world, she was standing in a long line of teenagers. She had on bright white heels that peeked out from under her deep green graduation robe. She stood tall and focused intently on the swinging tassel on the mortarboard of the girl in front of her. The class of 2009 was just beginning their procession to the football field where they would graduate, and Shelby could already see the 376 chairs arranged neatly in long rows. The sun was shining, but there were dark clouds on the horizon, and everyone was praying that the ceremony would be completed before the storm came.

Once the seniors had taken their places, the superintendent and principal both spoke. The clouds were now directly overhead. Rumbling thunder seemed to come from somewhere in the distance. At the end of

his speech, the principal told everyone to move inside from the high metal bleachers before the storm started. Because of this, student speeches would not be given. Several teachers read quickly through the names, and when Shelby Romano was called, she walked proudly down the fifty-yard line, ignoring the slight drizzle which had started. She felt the rough binding of her diploma in her hand and felt the truest sense of accomplishment she had ever experienced. Eighteen years had come to this. She was no longer a child and was officially a high school graduate. By the time the last of the graduates were announced, the winds were swirling in the valley in which the field sat, and it was raining heavily. The ceremony ended, and instead of lingering on the field in celebration like classes of the past, the class of 2009 ran for cover.

Shelby's legs jerked, as if she were trying to run in her hospital bed. Her mother, who had taken to sleeping in a chair in the corner of the tiny room, awoke to the sound. Shelby was also awakened by the sudden movement, and she let out a low groan of pain. A searing agony tore through her small frame and brought her back to reality. She had once been an athlete, a strong basketball player with a slender build. The cancer had taken almost everything she had, and it wasn't done robbing her yet. The doctors were doing everything they could to manage her pain, but over the last few days, they had nearly run out of options. She was on the strongest medicines on the market, but she was often shaken awake by fits of agony which took her to peaks of delirium. On top of the pain, she was also really tired. She opened her eyes for a second and gazed at the white swirls of paint on the ceiling. She could feel her eyes rolling back into her head and she lost consciousness again.

"Shit," she said, stumbling in the darkness of her tiny dorm room. She had walked in the door and straight into something, probably a book, which she had left lying on the ground. Her boyfriend of the last two months entered the room behind her. He was already furiously fumbling with the zipper of his jeans and by the time he collapsed onto her bed, he was only in his boxers.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm ready," she replied, her words slurring slightly. He was more experienced than her, and he tried to keep her from drinking too much, insisting that her first time had to be special and memorable. Still though, Shelby was afraid that it was going to hurt, so she had kept a steady flow of vodka in her system.

She carefully took off her black dress and threw it on the floor. She lay down in her bed and watched as her boyfriend carefully unwrapped

the condom and disposed of the wrapper in the trash can beside her bed. He positioned himself on top of her, kissed her gently, and his dark brown eyes gazed softly into hers. She bent her legs back as if by instinct she knew exactly what to do and took a deep breath. As she went to exhale, she felt a searing pain. It was worse than she could've imagined.

"Jesus Christ, what the fuck was that?" she gasped.

"I told you it was going to hurt, babe," he said. "I promise I'll be as gentle as I can."

Before she knew it, he was inside her again, and the pain was so intense that she just wanted to get away from it. But there was nowhere she could go. She was stuck, and the pain was literally coming from the inside out. Her legs ached from being bent uncomfortably, and the pain seemed to be taking over her body. She just wanted to burst into tears. After the first couple minutes, it dulled a little and she felt herself opening up to him. It didn't exactly feel good, but it wasn't quite so painful either. She opened her eyes, which had been squeezed tightly shut, and looked into his eyes. He wrapped his big strong arm under the arch in her back, and she felt completely safe for the first time all wrapped up in a man. Anytime it started to hurt, she focused on his broad shoulders and all their intricacies and curves. His mouth gently pried her lips open, and he gave her a deep kiss. When it was all over, she rolled over and lay in the curve of his body, and he wrapped his arms tightly around her as they both fell asleep.

When Shelby awoke, the first thing she felt was the gnawing emptiness. She felt as if she were drowning in a sea of darkness and beeping machines. The memory of her dream was fresh in her mind and she cried out for her boyfriend hoping against hope that for once it wasn't a dream. Why was everything only just a dream? It wasn't fair. In a second, the emptiness was replaced with a pain which seemed to radiate from her very center and out into all of her limbs. All she wanted was to be back in the tiny room wrapped in the arms of the boy she loved. She wanted to be far away, and she wanted to be safe. She opened her eyes and cried out to him again. She felt nauseated looking at the tacky beach scene on the painting on the wall. She couldn't formulate the words and the sound remained in her throat. She vomited all over herself, and she could faintly hear her mother calling for the nurse as she fell back to sleep.

The organ music reverberated through the 200-year-old chapel. Her white dress was pressed and clung tightly to her torso before dropping off into a big poof. Her hands were shaking as she prepared to walk down the aisle. Her father stood next to her.

"You look so beautiful honey," he said.

“Oh my God, Dad, I’m so nervous. I can’t believe this is it. I can’t believe this is here,” she stuttered.

“Don’t be nervous,” he smiled, “but it’s time to go.”

With a deep breath, she linked arms with him. Even in her heels, she was still four inches shorter than him. Shelby started taking small strides down the aisle, feeling everyone’s eyes on her. She kept her gaze straight ahead, focusing on the man who awaited her at the altar. His name was Mark, and he was tall with blue eyes and wavy brown hair, and she couldn’t wait to spend the rest of her life with him. He was a lawyer, and by far the most intelligent person she had ever met. The ceremony began flawlessly with the priest administering the vows. When it came time to exchange rings, Mark reached back to take Shelby’s ring from the best man. He coughed nervously and began frantically searching his pockets. A nervous laugh went through the pews and all of a sudden, he leapt from the stage and sprinted down the aisle. When he returned a minute later, he ran back down the aisle, and triumphantly held up the ring for all to see. The priest smiled brightly and announced:

“I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

Mark leaned in to kiss her and the crowd erupted.

It sounded like the priest was still speaking. His part was supposed to be over, but Shelby swore she could still hear his voice. It was quieter now. And it sounded like it was coming from directly above her. She could hear words: Unintelligible words, deep male noises, and beeping. She couldn’t be back in the hospital, she had just gotten married. She had been there, it had really happened. It hadn’t been a dream. The priest was still talking.

“And as I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”

She tried to speak and she tried to open her eyes, but she was paralyzed. A searing pain shot through her limbs and this time an audible groan escaped her lips. She started seizing, and suddenly the taste of blood filled her mouth. She could sense people running into the room, and soon she was falling back into a dark unconsciousness.

When she came to, she was sitting around a dining room table, surrounded by young couples and small children.

“How are you feeling, Mom?” her oldest daughter Elaina asked.

“Much better, sweetie,” Shelby replied. She had been bedridden on and off for the last several months. It wasn’t one specific illness; she had had several severe head colds, one of which ended with an intense bout of pneumonia. She was up and moving again, albeit a little slower, and she was noticeably weaker and more unstable on her feet. She and her husband of fifty-five years, Mark, had been lucky to have a large, healthy family

and to have long, healthy lives themselves. Shelby was seventy-eight, and Mark was a few weeks away from his September birthday—his seventy-ninth.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Elaina said. “I don’t know what this family would do without you.”

The microwave began to beep incessantly, and Shelby jumped up to remove the pie which had been warming in there. She took it out and began to serve her family.

Suddenly, there was a slight clinking noise, and her son-in-law Mike gruffly cleared his throat. His wife, Shelby’s youngest daughter Natalie, stood up, with Mike quietly following her lead.

“Everyone, we, um, have an announcement to make,” she said, a smile slowly taking over her face. She glanced quickly around the table and then to Mike standing beside her. When he nodded slightly, she blurted out:

“We’re pregnant!”

The table exploded with well-wishes and excitement. Elaina’s daughter, three-year-old Lauren, banged her spoon on the table, overturning her plastic cup of milk. Elaina and Shelby each raced to the other side of the table and embraced Natalie, whispering their words of congratulations in her ear.

When the excitement died down, the questions started:

“When are you due?”

“How long have you known?”

“Do you want a boy or a girl? Are you going to find out ahead of time?”

“What about names?”

Everyone was eagerly talking over each other before tiny Lauren piped up to ask, “How did you get a baby inside you?”

The teenagers broke out in laughter and the adults exchanged nervous chuckles.

“When two people love each other very much,” Elaina replied calmly, “God will often give them a child to raise to complete their life together.”

Lauren pondered this new information before nodding understandingly and deciding it was more interesting to eat her pie than ask more questions about babies.

“Now to answer everyone else’s questions, we’ve known for a couple months, but we wanted to make absolutely sure before we told everyone. Plus, we had to make our travel plans. And we’re due May 23rd. We’re planning on finding out the gender, but I don’t think either of us have a preference,” she said quickly, glancing at her husband.

“We just feel so blessed to be having a child after trying and waiting

for so long. We're so excited to be able to contribute to this happy bunch," Mike added.

Shelby was ecstatic. Another grandbaby to spoil and another person to sit at the family table. As she looked around the room she couldn't help but smile at the life she and Mark had built. She took a sip of her coffee as Mark leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

"You are so beautiful, my dear. I love you," he whispered, brushing a strand of her silky white hair off her face.

She smiled brightly.

"I love you too. But I'm not feeling too well. I'm going to take a little nap. Don't worry about the dishes or the table, I'll get them later."

She stood up shakily from the table and retired to the master bedroom in the back of the house. Slipping off just her pink slippers, she crawled under the covers on the left side. She was suddenly so tired. She reflected on the events of the day and thought happily of the wonderful people who filled her home. She could hear the microwave beeping again in the kitchen. Mark must be reheating his cup of coffee, she thought. Her breathing became deep and even as she shut her eyes and drifted into the blessed darkness. She felt an overwhelming warmth fill her as her breathing slowed.

The machines in the hospital went from periodic beeping to a long piercing scream, then fell silent.