

Matthew Canlas

## Winter's End

When I close my eyes, it's the sounds that come back first. Not the sights, not the smells—always the sounds. *The low humming of traffic, slightly muffled, from our apartment window.* Sounds are good. They ease me back into the memory. Dr Niehaus—my Saturday therapist; one of the nicer (but expensive) ones—says that uncovering a memory, especially a repressed one, is like developing a Polaroid. The different senses, like the colors of a photograph, come back slowly. Thump thump. A scared girl bangs her fist against the walls of my chest, quickening my heartbeat, begging me to stop looking for answers. I ignore her. There is a scar across my face that I don't remember. And somewhere in that developing photo is the reason you left me. Click. The other senses finally return, finishing with sight. *The roses on my bedside table were beginning to wilt.* I am now fully present in that day.

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*It was a wintery September morning; last night's cold spell had frozen the walkways, making the daily rush of early bird yuppies slip over and spill their Instagram-worthy, pumpkin spice lattes. (Oh, Lord, I sound like my grandmother—is this what being thirty feels like?) Fitted with a white collar and a black tie, you had just left for work. I was still in bed, however, feverishly shivering in the fetal position: down with a case of the winter chills. There was a sense of relief, though, knowing that my day off work—which normally included a good book and a diabetic amount of ice cream—would be justified.*

*A tap on my iPhone lit up the screen. It was the eighteenth. No, no, that couldn't be right, September had just started! It had been in my head for weeks. How did I forget that our anniversary was today? Five years had passed since some shy, cute accountant named Jarrod asked me to dinner, fitting into my life like the next chapter of a book. You were such a sweetheart, but I know I didn't always pull my weight. (Thank God you never let it get to you.) Case in point: right there, when I nearly committed the cardinal relationship sin of forgetting an anniversary.*

*There was no way I could forget your gift—even if it meant holding my own against a pulsing migraine and Monday morning sales assistants. So I took the rest of the aspirin that we kept under the sink, just for emergencies, and dragged myself into the car by eleven. Somehow, getting your present was even more difficult than all that. It took hours to choose the right one, and, my god—the cost?! It gave my bank account a near-death experience.*

*Once the gift was secure in my purse, I sped the Corolla back down Eleventh Avenue. It was already ten past four; you would be coming home from work soon. Not now, I hoped, I still had to prepare everything! The migraine began to tap a nail into my head at a routine tempo. Tap, tap, tap, tap. I rummaged through the compartment under the steering wheel for another painkiller.*

*I was startled by a screaming of horns. I looked up. A truck was charging at me, head-on. The driver was unconscious.*

*I forced the wheel right. It locked as the car crashed, at full speed, straight into the wall of a high-rise building. An invisible battering ram slammed my face into the dashboard. There was a*

*faint ringing of sirens. Amidst the smoke from the engine and the blurring of my vision, I saw a person, struggling, bleeding, pinned between my car and the wall.*

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My eyelids snap open to screaming. In my bedroom mirror there is a girl. Her hair is a tangled ball of thread; there are dark shadows under her puffy, red eyes. A scar stretches like a crevasse from the left side of her forehead, above her eye, jagging down across her face then ending just below her sullen lip. The stinging trench where my face hit the dashboard.

I take a deep breath.

I close my eyes.

I think of the trees in spring.

On the picture frame to my left, we are walking through Central Park in the snow. It was our second date—but the first time you tried to hold my hand. It wasn't a direct, "I'm just going to place my hand on yours" type of movement. Rather, it was an awkward grazing of my hand, like you were testing if the water was warm enough. You were scared. But when you finally mustered the strength, you held it until the snow stopped falling.

It's difficult to believe that even when I'm in our bedroom, surrounded by our photos and your clothes, I still can't remember why you left me. The Polaroid is not yet finished: one area is developing much slower than the others. I ensure that my legs are crossed and my back is resting against the wall. Once again, I start with the sounds.

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*There was a faint ringing of sirens. Amidst the smoke from the engine and the blurring of my vision, I saw a person, struggling, bleeding, pinned between my car and the wall. The cloud of smoke cleared. It was you. There was blood all over your mouth and on your hands and on your suit. You looked up and saw me—your loving girlfriend, your murderer—ripping apart her throat from screaming. I pulled the stick back and tried reversing. Chuk-chuk-chuk-chuk—the engine hopelessly spluttered before silencing.*

*Shivering, I stretched my hand out towards you through a hole in the windshield, as far as I could, letting the broken glass cut into my forearm. White flecks of snow fell across my empty palm. You reached out to me slowly, trying to grab my hand but missing the first two times.*

*When you finally mustered the strength, you held it until the snow stopped falling.*

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Even though the Polaroid is now complete, I do my best not to look at the darker areas. Instead, I divert my gaze to the clock, and remind myself of the time. Today is a day of work. I leave my bed and prepare for the day.

Before I leave, I reach inside my purse and pull out the box that I had almost forgotten. It is lined with silky velvet. Inside is the anniversary present I bought for you on that day.

*An engagement ring.*

I was planning to one-up you with the unbeatable romantic gesture (and who would expect the *girl* to propose first?). I gently slide the ring onto my own finger. Now it serves as a reminder—in the hope that I never forget that memory again.

As soon as I open the door, a cool spring wind hits my face. A scarred face, but one that stings less and less with each passing day. Now I can see Central Park. All of the trees are shedding their white winter coats and the first flowers of spring are beginning to emerge. I know you'd appreciate it. A harsh winter has come and gone; the city is beautiful again.