

So Eden Sank to Grief

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There was something about the evening - a strange lost beauty in the dusk shadows blurred by the dry throb of a headache - that made me want to cry. I leaned out of the window blinking tears from my eyes, determined that Archie wouldn't see me. He'd think I was sad - which I wasn't. Bittersweet happiness is hard to explain to people who live in rambling villas with private vineyards. And the villa was beautiful - there was no denying that. A wide, glassy river ran close beneath the window, and a white swan cruised through the reflected shiver of a sunset. The far bank was a tangle of wild fruit trees, branches melting into the pencil strokes of vineyards and a distant stony village. Everything seemed so ancient and strange and beautiful, and it seemed almost wrong to feel so happy.

I knew I wasn't dressed for the occasion. My just-in-case dress, thrown into my bag while packing, had crumpled beneath sweaters and unwashed socks in the past few weeks on the road. But Archie didn't seem to mind, just as he hadn't minded when my van had rattled up his driveway and I'd asked if I could stay the night, little knowing he had a houseful of guests.

The swan had disappeared, and I arranged myself on the window seat so the dress's worst crumples were hidden. On the balcony a group of Archie's academic friends stood smoking in the gathering dusk. The very air of the house smelled rich: burnt wood and vanilla and cigarette smoke.

"Is something wrong?" I wiped a hand quickly under my eyes, feeling my fingers dampen with tears. No point really - Bella had already seen.

"Yeah, I'm happy. Just tired." Bella swilled the last of her wine thoughtfully, one arm draped over the sofa. She wore her hair in a very sharp, shiny bob and had dark eye makeup which was beginning to flake a little under the eyes. I was more shy of her than I cared to admit, and found it hard to tell whether she disliked me.

"Archie never mentioned he had cousins," she said, throwing me a glance.

"Our families aren't all that close. I just happened to be passing through." She was silent a moment, holding up the wine a little so it caught the light.

"So you're on a road trip?"

"Yeah. I'm filling in the summer."

"You're not working?"

"I was. I saved for this trip." Bella tossed back the last of the wine, then stretched luxuriously.

"Where's that man when you need him?" As if on cue, Archie strolled in from the balcony, flicking away the last of a cigarette. I'd been surprised when we'd met that afternoon - in my head he'd been younger. He was tall and broad shouldered, but had the vague, forgetful quality you'd find in a doddering professor.

"The insects are getting worse by the day," he said, then, seeing me by the window,

"How's the sunset, Eden?"

"Beautiful."

"Just as I said." He flung himself back into one of the armchairs, propping up his heels on an expensive looking settee.

"So dawn goes down today, nothing gold can stay. Robert Frost. I must lend you some of his poetry sometime."

"I'd love that." I'd never read poetry in my life and had a sudden panicked thought he might start pressing me on my favourite poets. Bella rolled her eyes and leaned forward to top up her glass.

"Not a literary one, this one," Archie said, waving a hand in her direction.

"Not all of us have PhD's in English Literature," Bella said.

"Not all of us read nothing but romance," he countered.

Bella draped herself back over the sofa, sliding the stem of the glass between her fingers.

"Romance novels are the saddest books out there. There's nothing sadder than a brick wall happy ending." Archie began to chuckle, and she ignored him.

"The comfort in a romance is to start reading another straight away before the melancholy kicks in." I couldn't decide whether she was being profound or pretentious, however Archie seemed to find the whole thing very amusing.

"Wise words," he said with almost mocking politeness.

The small daughter of one of the academics had wandered into the room, and Bella crooned over her golden hair and lisp. Beyond the door, glowing cigarette ends tracked their way through the gathering dusk. The heaviness in my stomach settled to a warm ache.

"Endings are tricky things," Archie said. "I read an astounding novel years ago - for the life of me I can't remember the title. Very profound ending though - something about ascending angels with diagonal text."

Bella had lost interest in the fair-haired girl, who was now pulling threads out of the carpet. "I never read a book without first reading the last page. Last lines always have the most profound life advice."

I would have never thought Bella the type to take life advice from a romance novel. I myself had copied out a lot of those sort of quotes onto sticky notes in an attempt to inspire myself, where they'd curled on the hot dashboard. I'd crumpled them up only this morning after realising that quotes like *turn each stumble into a dance* only ever work in retrospect. It's only when you've reached the end that the hopeless frenzies of the middle tidy themselves into neat steps and stumbles. I was half tempted to voice this thought, then, second guessing my creased dress and small-town upbringing, kept quiet.

Archie was growing restless, his cigarette-less fingers twitching against the plush arm of the chair. "I'll see if the others need drinks," he said, standing and striding out the door.

"Do you ever re-read books?" I asked Bella.

"Never," she said. "I like the twists to be a surprise."

A thought came to me, and I found myself saying, "Yesterday I found this old tape I used to listen to all the time when I was younger. It was... I don't know, it felt weird hearing it again, because I've changed enough for the lyrics to mean nothing to me now, but hearing it brought back everything it once meant to me." Bella was frowning, and I realised she was no longer listening to me. I curled my legs under myself, feeling stupid for trying to engage intellectually. I was out of place here.

The little girl was lying full length on her stomach, peering under Archie's vacated chair. "There's a cat under here," she said, stroking a dark shape in the shadows.

The vineyards and river had vanished in darkness. Even the night felt expensive here; there was a weight and stillness against which the flare of a match or murmur of swans glinted. But beneath lingering perfume and vanilla wax and summer fruits the house felt echoey and hopelessly impersonal, as though the panelled walls were drawn in on themselves, and I knew I didn't belong. There was an almost physical ache for the isolation of drowsy, dreamy late nights on the road, of dust sheened like sweat over the windscreen, road signs and damp trails of cat's eyes, of heaven emerging from the darkness in the yellow mouth of a tunnel.

Pressing my head back against a curtain I tried to put off thinking, but it was too late; sleepy conclusions were already drawing themselves in my head and I knew that no matter how many *difficult roads lead to beautiful destinations* quotes had fuelled my road trip, the ending had always been guaranteed from the start. Midsummer magic masked the meaninglessness of my trip, the vapidness of Archie's quotes and Bella's languid conversation, and bitterly I felt as though this trip, this life, was nothing but a spark of vitality bookended by sleep.

"He's gone to chase the moon," said the little girl, sitting back on her heels and watching the black cat stroll out the door and into the smoky darkness. She turned to look at me - I had given up all attempts to stop crying, and moonlight was licking the shadows and catching my tears. I managed a small smile.

"Are you happy?" she asked.

I wiped my cheek on the lace curtain. "I'm not sad."

"That's good," she said, standing to follow the cat.