

The End of the World

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Everyone gave Olivia flowers after she won the contest. They all stood haphazardly about her room, strewn in glaring clusters of pollen. There were roses, their thorns jutting out like teeth; lilies, with browning stamens that reached like fingers; peonies, their petals spotted in different shades of pink, like a rash, and orchids, their blooms like jaundiced tongues. She'd run out of vases after the first few bunches, resorting to using old juice bottles, jam jars, and finally, mugs. She hoped that it looked charmingly mismatched instead of chaotic; people might think it was intentional and praise her interior design skills.

"It's like a florist's shop in here!" Charlotte had laughed when she came over. Her fingers traced the outlines of petals as she admired each bloom. Olivia supposed she was meant to find it endearing.

"It's a bit of a waste of money, really," Olivia replied. "They'll die in a week or two."

"But they're so pretty now!" cried Charlotte. "Don't you think so?"

"I guess," said Olivia.

She'd entered the competition on a whim. The story had been swirling in her head for weeks, ripe with colour, like a fruit that she couldn't quite sink her teeth into, skin too thick to pierce. So to write it, she'd sliced into its hide, dissected it, shaped it into easy-to-digest pieces so the judges could swallow it without any hint of bitterness. It had been original, delightful, wonderful in her head, and as soon as she wrote it down, she knew she'd written exactly what the judges were looking for – something oozing with false sentimentality.

A promising young writer, they'd called her. It made her uneasy. Promises meant you had to deliver what someone else wanted. That you had to keep a secret. Do something big. Love someone forever. She didn't want to promise anyone anything.

She brought it up with Charlotte as they lay together on her mascara-stained bed. It was a heady summer's day, school had ended, and neither of them had anything to do. Charlotte was looking down at her phone, while Olivia was looking up at the ceiling.

"I don't want to be a writer," she said suddenly. Charlotte laughed, double-tapping the screen with her thumb.

"Well, then don't be," she smiled. "You're good at it though. Why don't you want to?"

And how could Olivia explain it? That it gave you such a portrait of yourself, an irreversible mark on the world. She wanted to be untraceable, for her thoughts never to exist outside of herself. It was silly, of course it was, but it just felt like too much responsibility to write something down and know that it could be used for and against her, like evidence, evidence that she thought those exact words at that exact time. It built an indestructible reputation.

What if she changed her mind, or thought something differently – those words would be there forever. Those words, so perfect in her mind, mangled into sweet, saccharine shreds. She didn't want anyone to know her thoughts – she wanted them to die just as beautiful as they were in their conception. There was something thrilling in having things in your mind that no-one else would ever know about, each idea formed taking itself to the grave.

"It's like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," Olivia said to Charlotte, "But everything I write leaves a mark on the portrait...oh, never mind. I just don't really want to be a writer. It's not for me."

"I've never read that," Charlotte mused. "Is it any good?"

As she asked this, her eyes flicked up to a bunch of lilies, where a butterfly had landed. Before Olivia could reply, she sprung up and went over to it.

"How beautiful! It must have come in through the window. Aren't their wings just so lovely?" And she traced a finger over the orange-and-black wing.

"I think you're not supposed to touch them. It damages them."

“It’ll be fine. Anyway, I’m letting it out.” She let the grotesque black legs climb over her, then flitted over to the window and set it free. It flew away lopsided, one of its wings fluttering limply.

“By the way, we’re doing fireworks for New Year’s at Princess Bay,” she added. “Sean and Jack and Anna will be there, and some other people from class. You should come, it’ll be fun.”

“Sure,” Olivia murmured vacantly. Charlotte sagged down onto the bed again.

“Stop worrying about the writing thing. You’ve got all the time in the world to figure out what you want to do.”

“There’s two years until I’m done with high school.”

“That’s heaps of time. Don’t worry about it,” Charlotte said, and wrapped an arm around Olivia. Once, she could have made her forget all about it.

“You know, they said the world is going to end this year,” murmured Charlotte. Her voice was oddly muted.

“Who said that?”

“I don’t know, just read it somewhere. Scientists. They say it every year, though. Do you think it really will this time?”

Olivia shrugged. “Who knows.”

Summer passed with slow certainty. Olivia kept putting off changing the water of her flowers. Their water had become murky, the yellowish colour of a sick child, and clusters of bubbles were beginning to form. Her nose stung with orange powder each time a rotting flower head fell from its stem. The seed pods popped sporadically. The noise was a reminder – *bang!* – don’t forget why we’re here – *bang!* – don’t forget what you have to live up to.

The night of the bonfire came, and soon she stood, crisp with smoke and alive with the mania of darkness. The smell of the fire permeated the air, drenching her hair and clothes. She knew already that she'd carry the scent on her for days; it would cling to her like a bad omen.

Charlotte appeared next to Olivia, slipping their hands together. Her cheeks and nose were flushed red, each freckle illuminated. The two shared a silent smile for a moment, before Charlotte saw more people walking over and ran up to greet them. Olivia imagined wings coming out of her, orange wings dispelling pollen in spurts that followed the twists and turns of the wind. She imagined her feet lifting from the ground, her body becoming weightless.

The fireworks crackled, then popped like seed pods, expelling their glistening streams into the black curtain of night, peppered with distant stars. Phones were pulled out, photos were taken; the glow of screens piercing through the dark. Olivia simply watched the sparks launch themselves upwards, then fall down into the ocean, extinguished.

The crowd started counting down to midnight, couples already pressed against each other, ready to kiss. Olivia looked around for Charlotte but couldn't see her anywhere. 4,3,2,1...the couples kissed, and the moment was gone, just like any other.

"Heaps of time," she said aloud, because nobody could hear her over the fireworks. Heaps of time. Did she really have heaps of time?

Charlotte came running over to her. "I am so sorry!" she exclaimed. "I lost track of the time."

"Don't worry about it. Doesn't really mean anything. Just a silly tradition."

"Yeah," Charlotte said. "Hey – the world didn't end."

"I guess it didn't," Olivia replied listlessly.

"Do you think they'll still say it again next year?"

"Probably," she said. She could smell the charcoal on herself already. There were hours of partying to go.

She arrived home at three in the morning. The thump of music and laughter echoed in her ears as she unlocked the door. Her parents were asleep. As quietly as she could, she scrubbed at her mascara-caked eyes and cracking foundation, then slipped into bed. Her eyelids slowly closed, but a foul smell woke her; a smell like the inside of a nostril, like a blackened apple forgotten in the bottom of a school bag.

She flicked on her light and peered at the myriad of flowers. They had all withered from the hot afternoon sun. Their water was a sludgy green, and foamed, like the flowers had struggled to death, thrashing as they drowned.

One by one, she took up the juice bottles, jars, and vases, and lay the flowers outside in the garden like they were corpses. She poured the water over them as if she were sprinkling dirt on a casket. Then she went back to bed, feeling strange. As if something other than the flowers had died.