One Last Time

*“Remember, you only have a few minutes. Make it count, but don’t get carried away; you must return…”*

*“Before your body calms. You’ve said that multiple time, but I still don’t understand what you mean by* numbness*.”*

*“Imagine sleeping on your arm all night. You wake up the next morning and it’s stiff and it tingles. That stiffness will occupy your entire body, making every movement uncomfortable, but after a brief period, blood flow returns to normal and that stiffness retreats. Your body isn’t supposed to be there so it’s trying to adapt to its surroundings. This’ll all make sense once you arrive.”*

*“I won’t have much time with him, will I?”*

*“No. The longer you stay, the easier the decision to remain. I’m sorry; I wish I could prolong the procedure.”*

*“I know.”*

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Hannah jolted herself awake, gasping for air like a fish out of water. Her lungs flared with every breath and a tingling sensation swarmed every nerve and every muscle fiber combing her body. Hannah groaned in pain, trying to get to her feet, but it was nearly impossible. It was as if all circulation was cut off and she had to fight to pump her blood to her different arteries and through her veins. Her entire body tingled, but the sensation was slowly receding. Her fingers and toes now moved with ease, but her joints remained prohibited with little movement. She wasn’t sure how long she had, and she didn’t need to know. She wasn’t going back to a life of misery and darkness.

No matter where she went, a dark grey cloud hovered over her. Places that once brought peace and resolve, now radiated discomfort and loneliness. Her friends offered advice, but they didn’t know the timetable for how to get over death. Was there even a timetable? And was death something a person could completely get over and move on from? Hannah didn’t think so. It wasn’t like a skinned knee or a rejection letter from a prestigious university. Those were pains that eroded with time; this was a pain that would endure forevermore. She woke that morning beside her person and that night, she cried herself to sleep because he couldn’t come home. No more conversations, no more late-night cuddles on the couch while watching their favorite classic movies, and no more impromptu journeys across the channel to Paris, Rome, Amsterdam or Brussels. Their relationship was over on Earth and neither had a say in the matter. So, if they couldn’t be together on Earth, she’d make sure they could be together here.

Hannah rolled onto her stomach, completing a push-up that was as difficult as lifting a car, and got to her feet. She looked at her surroundings, but, surprisingly, there were none. Transported away from Johnny’s apartment in downtown London, she now stood in an endless white void, stretching for miles and miles. No people, buildings, or streets. Nothing. She was the only breathing being there. Sweat started to run down her face and the panic was setting in. Johnny said she only had a short time, and if she couldn’t find him this was pointless. Hannah frantically walked around in circles, panicking and quietly cursing under her breath. She stopped and wringed her hands together. They were clammy and shaking profusely. Her heart beat out of her chest as the sound of footsteps walking on wood floor behind her, pierced her ears. She didn’t dare look behind her, until she was sure it was him. It had to be him; it just had to be.

“Hannah?” a voice spoke with excitement. It was him! Hannah turned, nearly bursting into tears. Richard stepped forward, dressed in his ‘comfy outfit’ as he called it. Hannah gasped, covering her mouth in disbelief. She examined every detail, flabbergasted, that her former fiancé stood a mere ten feet away, appearing as he did when she last saw him in their apartment. The tight red sweater, purchased on their first date because he lent her his, his worn slim jeans stretched to the pristine white sneakers she bought him for Christmas prior and peering under his jeans were those red Manchester United socks he wore every gameday. His golden-brown hair was parted to the side with a small cowlick sticking up near the back of his head, and those hazel eyes were as mesmerizing in the afterlife as they were in life. He was perfect.

“Richard?” Hannah took a step toward him, but Richard took two steps back. “Richard, it’s me! I’m here.”

Richard shook his head, leaning away from his fiancé. Panic swirled in his pupils. “Please, please tell me, you’re not-”

“Dead?” Hannah asked taking a step forward; Richard’s feet remained planted. “No. I just had to see you.”

Richard straightened, realizing the truth. “You used the serum?”

She nodded. “The last of it.”

“How did you manage to get some?”

Hannah smiled, rocking back and forth innocently. “You know Johnny! Your brother has always had a way to get what we wants.”

Richard smiled and shook his head. “Johnny and that silver tongue of his.”

Hannah grinned. “I met him three years ago and it’s as sharp than as it is now. Your mom still prays it loosens.”

“Probably because whenever she denied him a toy or the car, he’d always find a way to convince her to say yes,” Richard reminisced, looking to the distance. “But he doesn’t always use it for his benefit. Our mom would come home upset after a long day at the office, opening and slamming the door with such force and huffing and puffing like the big bad wolf! She’d be so angry or upset, I didn’t dare approach her, but he would always venture into her room and was always the one to cheer her up. I wish I had his silver tongue; would’ve come in handy during our visit to Berlin!”

Hannah shook her head with amusement. “You pleaded with that host for nearly an hour trying to get a table.” Hannah pursed her lips and grinned. “I believe you forgot it was our anniversary!”

Richard threw his head back and laughed. “If *I* remember correctly, I was in charge of booking the hotel and excursions, and you were supposed to get us a table at *La Vigna*. If you’ve forgotten, let me refresh your memory!” Richard cleared his throat and filled his lungs to the brim with air. “Our couples’ spa at Liquidrom was amazing, walking through the Schloss Charlottenburg Gardens and smelling the flowers with you was one of the many highlights of my life, and our exploration of Little Venice on tandem bicycle was unforgettable, but our dinner left much to be desired.”

Hannah crossed her arms and smirked. “I didn’t realize I booked reservations for the one in London! And last I checked, you enjoyed bar hopping in Prenzlauer Berg a lot more than I did! You should be thanking me for messing up our reservation.”

Richard smiled and crossed his arms as well. “And I doubt we would’ve had that much fun at the restaurant, so, thanks.” He paused and approached Hannah, taking her hands in his. He didn’t meet her eyes at first, staring at their hands intertwined. Hannah looked at him puzzled. Richard finally looked up, locking eyes with her and whispered, “You’re as beautiful as the last time I saw you.”

Hannah smiled, a few tears streaming down her face. She shook her head in frustration and gripped his hands tightly. “I’m so sorry I didn’t get to the hospital in time, Richard! I traded shifts so I didn’t have to work that morning, and if I was there, I could’ve saved you! I got to the Underground as fast as I could go but I was too late!”

Richard pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her tightly as she sobbed. “I know you did! I’m sorry I couldn’t hold on.”

Hannah buried her face deeper into his sweater. Maroon pools gathered on the thick fabric, while he gently ran his fingers through her hair. She gripped him tightly, never wanting to let go. The numbness retreated through her forearms and shins, now making its way toward her torso.

“You still smell like roses,” he whispered. “It smells sweeter than I remember.”

“You still smell like the cologne you bought in Milan,” she whispered back, falling into his hazel eyes. Richard blinked, parting his lips slightly and leaned down. Hannah wrapped her arms around his neck and their lips met. Fireworks exploded in her mind, sending goosebumps down her skin, and making her hair stand at attention. It was magical. They broke apart, still clinging onto each for dear life.

“I’ve been waiting to do that two months,” she said chuckling.

“I hope it was worth the wait!”

“It was.” Their fingers intertwined and Hannah stood on her toes, kissing again. She missed his smell, touch and taste more than she realized. Ever since the accident, their apartment felt hollow, especially their bed. Every night she’d roll over, hoping he’d miraculously appear in the dead of night, but that was a folly. She’d roll over, and his spot would be as empty as the void they stood in now. Hannah looked around and said, “I didn’t realize the afterlife would be so empty. There’s no golden gate, no massive temples and we’re not standing on a white fluffy cloud. Cartoons lied to us.”

“You don’t see anything?” Richard asked curiously.

She shook her head. “Nothing. It does remind me of our trip to Scotland though. Luscious, rolling green hills stretching as far as the eye can see, but here it’s flat and white. Although, it does stretch forever.”

Richard squeezed her hand. “The afterlife must appear differently to those whose time has not yet arrived.”

“Do you see something else?”

Richard nodded. “We’re currently standing in our flat, overlooking the Thames River. Nothing’s changed, except for the fact that the fridge is empty.”

Hannah suppressed a laugh. “Can you show me?”

Richard wrapped his arm around her waist. Suddenly their small flat was constructed before her eyes. The lone brick wall was constructed brick by brick, the wooden floor was laid plank by plank, and the massive windows, opposite the brick wall, were inserted into the panes that held them together. Family pictures, massive posters of *Casablanca*, *Sunset Boulevard* and *Blazing Saddles* were nailed to the brick, while the large white mangy rug they bought at a SWAP Meet, unfurled onto the floor. The old leather couch where they cuddled and watched *Casablanca* countless times, materialized behind them, and the coffee table they bought whilst vacationing in Ireland appeared at their feet. She looked around, unable to wipe the smile from her face. Their bicycles leaned against the wall underneath the middle window, the creaky ceiling fan slightly swiveled back and forth above, and their large television sat peacefully on its stand with nearly a hundred Blu-Rays neatly organized alphabetically below it. She was home.

“It’s perfect,” she said, unable to wipe the smile from her face. Her eyes bounced from the rustic, yet modern kitchen, to the recliner they cuddled on, to the small spot on the floor where they completed puzzles together and finally to the clear windows with a beautiful view of the Thames with Big Ben in the distance, but the white void remained on the other side of the glass. “Why can’t I see the Thames?”

Richard swallowed and took a step back, his pinkie still wrapped around hers. “It’d only serve as temptation. The more I reveal, the more you’ll want to stay.”

“Is that so bad?”

He nodded. “Your time hasn’t come yet.”

“And yours came too soon!” she exclaimed, grabbing his hands again. “I’ve lived in hell without you, Richard, and I’m staying so we can be together again! Why are you pushing me away when all I want to do is be held in your arms!”

Hannah didn’t intend for her words to sound so curt, but she longed for this moment and she wasn’t going to be refused. She was surprised by Richard’s reaction. He was always slow to anger, and they rarely fought, but she expected an emotional response from him. Instead, he remained calm and stood there patiently, staring at her.

After a few minutes, Richard, with a gentle smile, took a step toward her and gripped her hands tightly. “Because I love you.”

His words hit Hannah like a runaway truck. “But- I don’t,” Hannah paused and recomposed herself. “I don’t understand. What do you mean?”

Richard swallowed and squeezed her hands. “When someone enters the great beyond, their lives don’t flash before their eyes. We don’t see the memorable moments from our life, because we have an eternity to reflect on them from above. And we’re not shown the future we could’ve had, because that future never existed. I was only meant to wander among the living for 28 years. Nothing could’ve prevented the accident because it was always meant to be.”

Hannah looked at him aghast. “So, we’re set on a path at birth and we can’t change the destiny written for us? So much for freewill.”

“Let me try to explain it better,” he said. Richard mulled over his next words before finally speaking. “Our lives are similar to the trees and the many branches and sticks sprouting from them. We begin at the trunk, running up the wood until we approach two branches: one diverts left, the other right. *We* choose which branch we take until we come to the end of that branch that diverts into three different branches. Again, we have to decide which branch we wish to take. One can lead us down the path toward the light, the other darkness, and the third leads us between. This pattern continues our entire life. We continue along, continuously choosing which branch, or path, we wish to take. We choose who we want to be and what kind of life we live, but there’s always a path back to the light. Unfortunately, that path is always accompanied with the temptation to travel down the path into darkness. Yes, our lives are mapped out for us, but we decide where to go and who we want to be.”

Hannah’s eyes unlocked from Richard’s, and she stared at the floor. “So, when I was in high school, and I stopped a couple guys from picking on the new kid, and the same day, I lied and said I couldn’t do the homework because I forgot the book in my locker. The results of both decisions, were already predetermined for me?”

Richard nodded. “You chose the light by helping the new kid, and you chose the path to darkness when you lied. Each has shaped your life, and even though they were inconsequential at the time, they’ve shaped who you are today. They’ve shaped the way you act, who your friends are, your emotions and so on!”

“And where do these ‘branches’ lead?” she asked, her eyes sparkling.

“Here, or,” Richard pointed towards the floor. “So, it’s a good thing you didn’t stay with your high school boyfriend after you went away to college!”

Hannah’s mouth fell to the floor. “Wait, he’s in-”

“Oh, no!” Richard panicked, waving his hands. “That was a joke!”

Hannah’s nose scrunched up. She pushed him away and jabbed Richard in the arm, trying to conceal her smile. “Very funny!”

Richard smiled and rubbed his arm. “You still punch harder than me!”

“I told you, you should have gone to the gym with me more often!”

“And I should’ve! But the reason I’m telling you this, is because your time on Earth is not yet done. There are so many people you haven’t helped, friends you haven’t met, places you haven’t travelled, lives you haven’t changed, and” Richard paused and swallowed. “A husband you haven’t fallen in love with or grown old with. Three kids you haven’t watched at futbol games, traveled to America with or watch marry their significant others. There is so much more living you have yet to do.” Hannah was speechless, trying to scramble together a few sentences to deny everything Richard said, but she couldn’t. Richard continued.

“Those who have passed on see the potential lives people can live, and you have the brightest future ahead you Hannah. But, if you choose to stay with me, none of that will come to pass, and you’ll be choosing the darkness over the light.”

Richard sighed and stared at his shoes again. Hannah peered down and saw the hurt in his eyes. She placed her hand under his chin and lifted his head.

“Hannah, I want you to stay with me so badly, it hurts. But it’s because I love you, that I need to let you go.” He motioned toward their thick blue front door. Hannah’s lower lip quivered, but before she could sob, Richard wrapped her in his arms and held her tight. “This isn’t goodbye. We’ll see each other again, but the branch with us being together has ended and you must continue this next branch of your life without me.” He squeezed her tightly, pushing aside the thoughts of having to let go. “The numbness is retreating isn’t it?”

Hannah shook her head. “No, I feel fine!” she stated. “The numbness is still there!”

“But it’s fading quickly,” he said releasing her, still keeping his arms wrapped around her waist. “I know because the first time I touched you, you were unbearably cold. Now, you’re becoming warmer as every second goes by. Your body is becoming accustomed to this place. This is where we must part.”

Hannah shook her head wildly. “This wasn’t nearly long enough! I need more time!”

Richard smiled and held her face in his hands. “You’re right, I wish we had more time on Earth, and more time here, but I’m just glad I got to see you at all. I’m grateful for this moment. Moments like these aren’t beautiful because they endure; they’re beautiful because they end. But don’t worry, this memory will endure forever in our hearts. I know I will reflect upon our time together a lot.”

Hannah looked up, bathing in his hazel eyes for the final time. “As will I.” She stood on her toes and kissed him passionately. “I love you Richard,” she whispered.

“And I love you, Hannah,” he whispered back. He lifted her chin and smiled. “Here’s looking at you kid.” Hannah surged forward, kissing him once more, using all her strength to pull away. Hannah turned and strutted for the door, trying to keep her composure. She grasped the bronze handle and turned it counterclockwise, allowing the door to swing open. She stepped out the door, taking one last look at her fiancé as the door closed behind her.

Light enveloped the apartment, surrounding each object within, until it reached Richard. It crashed against his heels like a gentle wave, rising higher and higher. His feet, legs, waist and torso became light, and as the light wrapped around his head, Richard uttered his final words.

“How did I get so lucky?”