

Repeat After Me

A couple is vacationing at a mountain resort for their anniversary when they get into a fight. A brain surgeon offers an interesting solution.

“Stood between the canary and the crow,

I made my decision between two paths.

From beneath the crow, I heard it utter:

‘Good grief, and alas!’”

I slowly opened my eyes and peered towards the sky above me, my sight immediately assailed by the sun. As I moved my hand to block it from my vision, the face of a woman leaned in, completely replacing it. “What’s that from? A poem?” she asked, a curious smile resting on her face as she looked down at me. Her smile and eyes were almost as radiant as the sun, yet so kind and inviting that it’d feel rude to look away.

“I don’t remember. It just sort of popped up in my head, don’t really know why,” I answered her, sharing her confusion. She looked up away from me, possibly in slight dissatisfaction, and began to survey the landscape. I rolled to my side, the grass poking and brushing against my skin, to admire our surroundings with her. We were in a green pasture situated in front of a large pond, whose light blue water reflected the sun like a sheet of glass. Lush, vibrant, and even greener Mountains surrounded us.

She giggled, “I guess all this natural beauty can bring the poet out of anyone, even someone like you”, She said, looking back down at me with an even bigger smile than before.

“I...,” tried to respond but couldn’t muster a retort, fanning my hot embarrassment.

“I’m guessing your silence means I hit the nail dead on,” she said, and we both laughed at the silliness of the situation. As I laughed, I felt a twinge of guilt knot itself in my heart. Misunderstanding my pain, she responded, “I love that about you, of course”.

“We’re married, maybe you’re obliged to love that about me,” I replied, trying to tease her back.

“Oh, whatever. Don’t ruin a good moment here! It was just starting to be a good anniversary too,” she joked back, so I posited, “Well, I still got the rest of the trip to make up for it, don’t I?”

“I wouldn’t risk that wager if I were you, mister. You already had something good going here,” she said.

“I’d always take that gamble,” I said back, and we both began laughing again. As the laughter dissipated, our focus was diverted back to the world around us. I closed my eyes and felt the cool earth beneath my back, the grass shifting and bending beneath my weight. I heard my wife lie down next to me and for a moment we both existed in motionless silence. I felt a brush against my hand and then the soft, clammy embrace of her hand. Opening my eyes, I peered again towards the sky, although in this moment all I saw was a clear blue reflection staring back at me. The sun

had begun to retreat behind the mountains, no longer hampering my view. The guilt in my heart had subsided; now I feel truly at ease. As the sun leaves, however, its light fades with it and soon, a deep blue began to gush from over the mountain tops, flooding the valley. Soon, we would have to leave. The grip of my wife's hand tightened in mine, or... no... maybe it was my grip tightening. The guilt returned to my heart.

About a fourth of the way on our drive back to the mountain resort we were staying at, the deep blue from before had thickened into a complete darkness; night had fallen over the entire mountain. Trees whizzed past either side of the car while I maneuvered it down the small and winding two lane mountain road. Despite the car lights being on, the trees formed a barrier against the moon, covering the road in an even darker haze than before. Still, I felt a sense of safety within the metal shell of the car, even if it might've been a false sense of safety. The guilt in my heart remained, though, and the darkness outside clawed at it from the windows of the car.

"You're going a bit fast, don't you think?" my wife said from beside me, her voice bringing back my focus. Slowing the car down, I felt thankful for her presence beside me.

"So, tomorrow we'll have a bit of down time after visiting the national park and I was wondering if you had anything else you wanted to do?" she asked.

"How about we stop by the city?" I suggested, although part of me already knew she would be averse to the idea.

"Honey, the city's too far for us to go there in the middle of the day and come back at a reasonable time. We'd have to dedicate a day for that," she responded tiredly, which made me feel bad for bringing it up.

"I just feel a bit exhausted from all this nature, as beautiful as all of it might be. It'd be nice to just walk around the city for a bit," I said back, hoping my earnestness would earn me back some favor.

"Well, maybe it'd be fun to do it on the last day, as a kind of send off to our anniversary," she said from beside me, assumingly with another teasing smile on her face.

"What if there isn't a last day?"

"...What does that mean?" my wife asked hesitantly.

"Well, what if something were to happen and... we were separated?"

We sat in silence for a moment, the only audible sound being the idle hum of the car as it trekked further down the road. "I hope you're not implying what I think you are," my wife

responded, a notable frustration rising in her tone. My eyes were transfixed on the road ahead of me, but only because I was too scared to see the anger or disappointment in my wife's eyes.

"What if something happened? I don't know, I'd be extremely sad. Why do you feel the need to bring this up all the time?" my wife continued angrily.

"I'm just being realistic. When we talk about the future like this gets me thinking, and I'd just want to know if you'd be okay," I said back, hoping my honesty might calm the situation down a bit. As I finished my statement, however, a part of me felt that I might've just made the situation worse.

"Is that realistic? That you would just get taken away from me now as opposed to any other time? Is there something you're not telling me?" my wife retorts, her frustration now abundantly clear. It's funny, I recognized that if I responded, I'd likely just exacerbate the problem, yet my mouth was already moving to defend myself.

"Sometimes that's how it works. For reasons out of our control, life is cut short. We're not entitled to long lives, honey," I said, digging the hole even deeper.

"No, I don't suppose you believe you're entitled to anything," she said back, and somewhere within me a cord had been struck, resounding deep into my psyche. "*I* think you deserve some happiness, though, even if *you* don't," she continued, pulling the cord even harder.

"I understand that... and I appreciate it more than you could know-" I tried to respond, before being cut off by my wife.

"Then please, I want you to stop talking about this nonsense. You've come so far from where you were before, and whenever you start talking like this it reminds me of how you were before. I don't like it," my wife retorted, trying to end the conversation there. The cord within me had snapped, however, and in its place remained undirected indignation.

"But I can't just brush it off! I've done so much wrong in my life, and you've helped me so much, yet every day I still face this sinking fear within me!"

"It's this fear that..." I continued, fighting the volatile emotion within me that choked back my words. "...this fear that I'm not truly past where I was before. This fear that because I relied on you, someday my past will come back to reclaim me and *without* you, I won't be able to resist." We sat in silence, the hum of the car more grating than ever before, until even that was overtaken by the deafening quietude now between us. "I want to know if *you'd* be okay if I wasn't here for you-"

"I WOULDN'T! I wouldn't be ok!"

The explosion of emotion from her voice had realigned my heart, and now my focus was directed away from the road and towards the trembling figure beside me. A similar weakness ran through me; that instead of uplifting this person who has done so much for me I would cause such

pain and anguish. She continued, and every word twisted the guilt wrapped around my heart further, “But at least I try to be more than that. You’ve also carried me so far from where I was, but at some point, I acknowledged that no matter how much you can do for me, change can only be brought by myself.”

A feeling of weightlessness had spread over the entire car for a moment. At first, I had thought it was just me. With my confidence and pride thoroughly cleaved in two, I thought this uplifting shame was what was left. A violent jolt dealt to my head in the next moment dispelled that. I saw my wife for just a moment longer, her face now equally shocked as it was sad, until a sharp pain pierced through my conscious thought, like a spike driven through my head. Patches of ink blotted my vision, and from this point on I only vaguely remembered the course of events before I had awoken once again. All throughout my body I felt a dull pain, like icy heat gradually creeping through my veins. Then, once again, I went weightless. My body was suspended in space, stars bursting across my vision and dissipating. As I was swallowed by the dark void around me, I could see the car drive off into the distance, and fear was the last emotion that settled within me.

“And that is your complete retelling of the events?”

Hospitals have always emitted an eerie ambiance to me. Luckily, I haven’t ever really had a prolonged stay at a hospital before, but when I did, I never enjoyed it. Especially when you’re the one being treated.

“Sir, I’m going to need your confirmation.”

The man that stood at the edge of my bed had a coldness to his voice, emblematic of his clinical expertise. Something about it was perhaps too cold, though, as if it lacked some of the humanity you would expect in his profession. Although at the same time I don’t exactly know what his profession is, just that he looks like he belongs here. Here in this hospital. Looking towards the man, I weakly shook my head yes. He stared at me, evaluating my words and seemingly even my character. His eyes bore holes into mine, but there was a certain control behind his that undermined their intensity. They did make me feel vulnerable, though.

“I’m truly sorry about what happened to your wife. Apparently when the paramedics arrived on scene it was far too late to salvage, well, anything.”

Did he feel sorry? His tone, his cadence, everything about him felt shallow and heartless, like what I was looking at was just a shell of professionalism. I could care less, anyways. My own heart rang hollow at the mere mention of her presence, or now lack thereof. Guilt could not even describe what hung inside my chest cavity; whatever benign emotion sat there now rotted away at my insides, leaving *me* the shallow imitation of a man. Hospitals have this feeling of finality to them, this surrealism that separates me from not only reality but from myself as well.

“According to these documents, you struggled with a gambling addiction for a few years? It seems here like you had relapsed many times before eventually putting an end to it, after you married your wife, that is.”

Hospitals have this aura, throughout their white halls and pristine rooms. The pure white of it all leaves me bare, and all I’m left with is the weight of my life and its direction. Right now, it certainly felt like that direction was now out of my control.

“It might seem a bit strange, me bringing that up now, and by no means do I intend to offend you. Help is really what I’d like to provide.”

Despite what I said earlier about the chill of his voice, there was also something very alluring about it. While his outward expression was initially inhuman, it grew to feel inviting, in the same way you might feel talking to a salesman. It’s not like trust was a valued resource to me now, anyways. It’s funny how quickly I fall back into what I’m familiar with.

“I fear that if you leave this hospital and rejoin the world as you are currently, you will simply go back to the vices that had once comforted you before.”

What was it my wife had said? I had just retold the entire story, yet I’m struggling to remember what she had said in those very last moments. I couldn’t be any more pathetic than I am now.

“Needless to say, it’s not like I have any right to hold you back. You’re free to move down whichever path you see fit, towards self-destruction if that’s what you fancy. I’m simply here to offer you another path to choose.”

If only we hadn’t gone on this trip. If only I hadn’t let that useless drivel leave my mouth. If only...

“What if you could see your wife again? Oh, I see that got your attention. Yes, there is a way for you to see her again, but only in your memories. You might think I’m joking. Let’s just call it a ‘new form of revolutionary brain surgery’. You will go back and relive the memory most integral and precious to who you are now. I won’t reveal more, though, unless you want to go through with it. Will you return to the world and thus also return to yourself? Or will you go back, if not to find some form of courage or closure then to simply relive the happiness you once had?”

... Have you made your decision? Okay, now close your eyes and repeat after me:

“Stood between the canary and the crow,

I made my decision between two paths.

From beneath the crow, I heard it utter:

‘Good grief, and alas!’”

