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Is it Just Me?

Do you see it? The end of the world. The daunting, ratcheting, all-consuming fire slowly spreading its vile flames across everything the eyes can see and far beyond. I've always wondered about that — what lies beyond what we can see. Is seeing something what makes it real? I can't see you anymore, but the burning buildings are mere memory compared to you. We mourn, but I suppose there's only one way to cease mourning. To let go of the idea that it could have ever been any different.

Is it just me, or do you see it too?

I remember what stoked the fire — a tiny innocuous seed planted in the darkest recesses of my mind. A spark behind my eyes that caught on all the wrong memories. I remember you laughing. I can't hear the sound, not exactly — just the shape your mouth made, like something waiting to break.

Is it just me, or do you see it too?

I look up and watch a bird soar in the sky. It's flying, high and free, yet it's wings inevitably catch fire. It burns, returning to the lowly ash and dust from which it was born. I wonder if my eyes deceive (I know they do); if memory is but a dastardly liar that poorly mimics your voice, saying things you never said. Yet, I suppose I'd take even the most awful recreations if the alternative meant the absence of you.

I stand up, and start walking. I must. I have no destination, just the ritual of movement. I step through cracked pavement, through yards littered with memory and ashes. The air burns too; it feels heavy, as if inhaling it makes it harder to breathe. Like if I stopped walking, the buildings around me would crumble into nothingness.

I reach the bridge that stands over the Genesee, the river's dull blue surface a shell of its former deep blue self. I swear I can hear your footsteps, your voice calling out all those years ago.

Is it just me, or do you hear it too?

I close my eyes, and I'm there again.

I could feel the same chill in the air. A younger me, brittle and silent, clutching the railing like it owed me something. It had been raining that day. Not very hard, just enough to slick the metal under my fingers, just enough to blur the lights of the city into something unreal.

I don't remember what pushed me there, or perhaps I just don't want to. It was the kind of hurt that builds from small, unremarkable disappointments until your body can't carry them anymore. I suppose the rejection — from universities, from people I cared about — got a little too much. It slowly chipped away at me and going to the bridge just felt right.

I hadn't planned anything. Not exactly. I hadn't written a note. I hadn't even told anyone I was going for a walk. Perhaps, I just wanted quiet. Perhaps, I wanted more than that. And that's when I heard you.

“Do you think the river’s cold?” you said.

I didn’t turn around right away. I felt annoyed, if anything — as if the moment had been interrupted. But then you came and stood beside me, close enough to feel your heat through the rain. You didn’t look at me. You looked down at the water.

“I used to come here when I felt like disappearing,” you said.

I hadn’t said a word, and somehow you knew exactly what I was thinking.

“You’re not the first one to stand here like that,” you added. “And you won’t be the last.”

We stood there a long time. I didn’t jump. I don’t remember deciding not to. I just remember your presence, like a gravity pulling me back toward the world. And if there’s one thing I’ve learnt about gravity is that it’s inevitable. You were just standing beside me, raincoat covering your head, yet that was enough.

Eventually, you asked if I liked coffee. I didn’t answer.

“I mean authentic black coffee,” you added. “Not that fake Starbucks crap.”

Words still eluded me, yet I let out a simple nod.

“I’m going to a cafe right down the street, you should come with,” you said.

You started walking. And I followed you.

We didn't talk much in the beginning. You had a way of filling the silence without crowding it — like your presence knew exactly how much space it was allowed to take. It wasn't the kind of silence that presses in and demands to be broken. It was soft. Steady. Like the kind that settles in when two people understand each other without needing to explain anything.

Is it just me, or did you feel it too?

To love you was peace. To love you was to rest. To love you was hope.

We didn't use that word a lot — “love.” For I suppose we didn't have to. It sat between us, unspoken and unmistakable — like the heat from a fire you don't touch, because naming it would make it burn. Just like gravity, it was always inevitable, wasn't it? The fire had spread to everything I could see, not even the soaring birds or indomitable buildings escaping its touch.

But back then, there were no signs of it, no chaos that reigned over me. The first time I saw your apartment, I noticed it was filled with her favorite things in the world — plants and books. You called the plants your “babies”, yet I couldn't help notice that most of them were half-dying. They weren't rotting, just slowly wilting. Like they weren't sure if they were worth saving. Yet you cared for them regardless, as adamant as they were.

“They're stubborn,” you said, brushing dust from the leaves. “Even the thirsty ones. They hang on longer than you'd think.”

You had a habit of speaking like that — as if you were talking about something else entirely. Maybe it were the books that rubbed off on you, the words etching themselves into your soul. The three bookshelves that stood in front of me were intimidating, yet along with the plants, they

were a monument to who you were. I liked reading too, but poetry appealed to me more. I probably couldn't get through one of those bookshelves even if I had a lifetime to spare.

You used to make fun of me for the way I read poems too, saying I read them like I was scared of them — one line at a time, always rereading before I moved on. But I wasn't scared. I was careful. I knew how easy it was to miss something important. Yet, you read differently.

Voraciously, with unadulterated passion. You bent spines, scribbled in margins, folded corners like you owned every word. I remember thinking you treated people the same way — loving them with everything you had. I think that's why I let you in. You weren't afraid to stay.

I remember how the days blurred, the way they do when you're not waiting for anything. We built routines, unspoken ones —our chipped coffee mugs, evening walks to nowhere, music playing low in the background while we lay on the carpet and stared at the ceiling. You used to trace cracks in the plastered walls of your apartment like constellations. You said it helped you feel like you were a part of something bigger, which made you feel safe and seen.

You made the best coffee too, even if the mugs we drank it in were chipped. You'd drink yours on the floor instead of the couch, with your back against the wall, knees pulled up to you chest. And of course, I'd sit beside you. We would just look out the window like there was something worth watching. That window overlooked nothing but a parking lot and a flickering lamppost. But in that moment, it felt like a lighthouse.

Once, during a thunderstorm, the lights went out and we lit candles. You read to me from a book I didn't recognize. Your voice was low and even, and I barely heard the words. I just watched the way the candlelight touched your face, and I remember thinking, *this is what it means to be alive*.

You looked up and caught me staring, and you let out a gentle smile. I think I knew, even then, that nothing lasts. That there would come a day where I would have to let you go — as nice as it was to forget, even for a little.

Is it just me, or did you know that too?

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I hear my phone buzz, shaking me back to reality, if I can even call it that. I pull it out of my pocket. She sent me a message.

‘Are we still on for tonight?’

I look at the message for a moment, just staring at it. Am I ready? I have to be. I reply with a fervent ‘Yes!’, even if it is slightly feigned. As I put my phone back in my pocket, a crumpled picture falls out.

It was one of the only ones we ever took because you said you hated photos — that they made things feel too final, like once something's captured it's already lost. It was blurry, taken by a stranger (taken of strangers, I suppose). We were standing at the edge of the same river, arms brushing but not quite holding. Your hair was a mess. I looked tired. Neither of us were really

smiling. But there was something in the way we leaned toward each other — like gravity once again, subtle and unrelenting. Perhaps, there was something left back then.

Is it just me, or did you feel that too?

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The fire was slow.

It started in small things. The way you'd forget to text me, forget to look me in the eyes when you spoke. I pretended not to notice at first. Maybe I didn't want to. Maybe I thought if I said nothing, you'd find your way back. But then you stopped reading. You stopped brushing dust from the leaves of your plants. The shelves gathered dust, and so did your voice. And when I touched you, you didn't pull away — but you didn't lean in either. You tolerated it, like you were just waiting for it to end.

You spent the entire day at work, started coming back later and later. I'd come home and it was always empty. I'd wake up in the morning with you by my side, but I would have to leave before you woke up. I made sure to kiss you on the forehead before I did. I tried. I really did — didn't I?

Flowers. Favorite songs. Books. Walks to the bridge. Coffee, strong and black, in your chipped mug. You smiled sometimes. I think you were trying to mean it, but you didn't want to be there. You drifted. Not like someone being pulled away — more like someone choosing to float. You weren't angry. That's what made it worse. You were kind and quiet, distant in a way that couldn't be fixed with apologies or questions.

The fire was inevitable, and god did it spread.

I didn't want to, but I understood. Not all at once, but slowly. I understood that I was no longer the gravity in your life. You were gently slipping free, and I didn't know how to make you stay without holding onto you for dear life. But you saved me, and I love you, so I what choice did I have but to save you too?

Is it just me, or did you love me too?

The fire is all I have left of you. Perhaps that's why I like to feel its warmth every now and then, even if it burns. Even if it means I become a prisoner to memory.

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The picture flutters in my fingers, then back into my pocket. I don't need to look at it for now. I start walking across the bridge — that's where she lives. I can see a warm light flickering beside her apartment window. A soft glow, the starkest contrast to the fire's unrelenting chaos.

She doesn't know everything. She doesn't know about the fire. The photo. The black coffee. The ghost I still talk to when no one's listening. She just asked if I'd come over. Maybe we'll cook. Maybe we'll sit in silence. Maybe I'll tell her about poetry. She likes stories, but shorter ones. She couldn't get through your huge novels if she tried — I surely couldn't either.

I wait outside her door, staring at the flower-laden wreath hanging from it. It's a bit easier to breathe now, the sky looks clearer, and the birds don't burn quite like they used to. I hesitate slightly, yet I knock anyway. She opens the door and she gives me a hug.

“I know this is very forward, but I missed you,” she says.

It’s only been two weeks, but I have a good feeling about this. When I look into her eyes, my gaze lingers. I haven’t done that since us. Her eyes glimmer with a golden spark under the sunlight, just like yours did. She has curly brown hair, albeit not as shiny as yours.

“I missed you too,” I say, smiling. I mean that.

But she’s not you. And so, there’s only one thing I can think of in this moment.

Is it just me, or do you miss me too?