

## Once

Adapted from *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C. S. Lewis

By: Isabella Martinez

*“My sister Susan,” answered Peter shortly and gravely, “is no longer a friend of Narnia.”*

*“Yes,” said Eustace, “and whenever you’ve tried to get her to come and talk about Narnia or do anything about Narnia, she says, ‘What wonderful memories you have! Fancy your still thinking about all those funny games we used to play when we were children.’”*

*“Oh Susan!” said Jill. “She’s interested in nothing nowadays except nylons and lipstick and invitations. She always was a jolly sight to keen on being grown-up.”*

- Chapter 12, *The Last Battle*

“Susan Pensive? Is there a Susan Pensive, here?”

The group of college girls all giggled and one of them leaned forward, half-hiding behind her book to whisper at Susan, “It’s the cute soldier who works at the post-office!”

Susan Pensive made motions that her friends should shush and turned to face the soldier with her best dazzling smile. The American Soldier-boys always did like to speak to a pretty young woman with an English accent. “I am her.”

One of the girls giggled and Susan almost blushed. Her Narnian queen voice always came out when she was speaking with attractive men – *no. Not Narnian Queen. Her pretend voice, her make-believe voice. Because there was no such thing as Narnia. Right. Silly childish games that her younger siblings and cousins still played.*

“Miss Pensive,” said the messenger, extending a white envelope. “A telegram for you.”

“What does it say?” She asked, not taking it.

The young man blushed a bit. “I am not in the habit of reading young ladies’ correspondence.”

“Please,” Susan asked, batting her eyelashes playfully. “Read it to me.”

“Whatever for?” He asked, looking honestly surprised.

“Why,” said Susan, making her eyes wide. “I like the Yankee accent.”

One of the girls behind her snorted into her book, trying hard to restrain laughter. The young man began to play along, still blushing, but also grinning furiously.

“All right then, ma’am,” he said. “Let me show you how us Yanks can put on a good reading. Like those English plays you’re fond of over on the other side of the Atlantic.”

He opened the letter with a flourish and opened his mouth. But then, he went very pale. His eyes skimmed it twice and he looked up to meet Susan’s eyes.

Susan’s heart stopped.

“No,” she whispered.

She snatched the letter from his hands and ran.

“Susan? Susan!” Susan’s room-mate rounded on the young man. “What did it say?” she demanded.

“Her family is dead,” the young man whispered.

An audible gasp rose up from the group.

“Her sister and brothers?” whispered the room-mate, looking horrified.

“No.” The messenger shook his head. It was suddenly apparent that, despite his youth, he had fought in the War. He had seen letters like this before. “A train crashed. Her parents died, too. Everyone is dead.”

Susan sat in the center of her room, clutching the letter to her chest and sobbing.

“I never said good-bye,” she sobbed. “I never said good-bye.”

That wasn’t quite true. She had said good-bye to her parents as they boarded the ship in New York to visit the rest of their children in England. She had said good-bye to Peter as he returned to England after staying with her for the summer – *oh, what a wonderful time she had with her older brother that summer*. They had gone to such splendid parties and had been hosted by such wonderful people – the parents of the friends she had made in America. It had almost been like being High King and Queen again in Narnia – *no! Narnia was not real. It wasn’t! And yet*.

“I hope you’re there,” she sobbed into the paper. She had not seen Lucy and Edmund in so long. She only had pictures of how they looked. Lucy had grown to be so beautiful. And Edmund... Edmund had been accepted into the newly formed Royal Air Force. She had a

photograph of him in his uniform, looking like the wise and kind King Edmund the Just of Narnia.

*No! No! And yet...* "Oh, Aslan," she prayed, "Oh Aslan, I'm so sorry." Her hands crept to the chain that she kept tucked into her shirt at all times. The last item she had bought herself in England. A long silver chain with a small golden charm. A small etching of a lion's head, his flowing mane styled with silver, looking wise. If she squinted a bit she could almost think it was Aslan himself.

She had never stopped believing in Aslan. Despite not wanting to believe in Narnia, she had always believed in the Lion. But she *hadn't* wanted to believe in Narnia; it had been too painful to remember it. Too painful to think of Cair Paravel and the centaurs and the unicorns. To think of long walks on the beach with her sister, to think of picnics in the forest with her friends the trees.

"Susan?" asked a voice. "Why are you crying?"

Susan closed her eyes, pretending that Edmund really was there behind her. That she was in her room in their palace and he had just walked in, tracking mud onto the wooden floors. Peter and Lucy had already been so good, so kind, that Narnia had only made them better. Her and Edmund...Narnia had been necessary to fix something broken within them. Except that Edmund had come back better, and Susan had somehow broken again. Broken a little bit on purpose, after their second adventure, because it was too painful to be Susan the Gentle in a world where she could never go back to Narnia.

As if he could read her mind, Edmund said, "You can come back, you know. Just not in the way we thought last time. England and Narnia are really so close. You just go a little further up and a little further in. And then you'll be right there. We'll be waiting for you, Susan. You're still the Queen, remember?"

"Once a King or Queen of Narnia, always a King or Queen of Narnia," Susan whispered.

"Right," said Edmund, she could hear the smile in his voice. "You always were the smart one." The voice didn't sound as if it were in her head.

"Edmund!" Susan cried. She dropped the crumpled telegram and spun around. But no one was there.

Except, when she turned back, there was one large, muddy paw-print on the telegram.

And it smelled like Narnian soil.