

“Ever After” and “Phoenix”

A Short Story and Poem by Kelly Stephens

## Ever After

By: Kelly Stephens

The smell of disinfectant and sickness made me want to gag. It was all overbearing: the whiteness of the tiles and walls, the scrubs resembling the color of thrown-up crayola, even the vague attempt at color that the bed's coverlet made -- a crusty, mustard yellow. I had the feeling dead people were running their fingers up my spine, probably spiteful that the doctors couldn't save them. I tried to stop my jittering leg. It was bouncing at a rate a roadrunner would be jealous of, and I felt that maybe if I slowed it, then maybe my thoughts would slow down too.

Reaching out a sweaty palm, I clasped Angela's hand -- the one that wasn't hooked up to the IV. Despite the number of times I'd come to visit, or the amount of times I'd held her hand, I could never help but wonder at how small her hand was in mine, how pale it was, and cold -- like death had already stolen her away from me. But her hand wasn't stiff yet; her fingers would yield to mine as I'd wrap my fingers in the gaps between hers. Sometimes the EKG would hiccup a bit when I did that -- it made me wonder if maybe deep down she knew I was there.

I'd talk to her for long stretches of time -- for hours maybe. I wasn't sure. Hospitals were weird like that. Time lost meaning, stretching and convulsing, sometimes unbearably long, and yet suddenly too short. Each breath ticking time away, like a clock counting backwards. I tried to avoid clocks.

Sometimes I'd read to her -- all types of books. She was a real reader. Always had been, even back when I met her in elementary school seven years back. I used to poke her and pull her ponytail, hoping that I was maybe interesting enough to draw her out of her world of fairytales and adventures. Her brown eyes would be dreamy when she'd first look at me, like she was still lost somewhere, but then they would sharpen in annoyance. In hopes of making her smile, I'd ask what she was reading. She'd smile-- a beautiful smile, like the ones a princess would make in one of her fairytales -- and then she'd gush about wonderful things: mice that could talk, pirates with good hearts, knights who killed dragons. I wondered at her wonder.

But then we grew up. Her parents divorced and she stopped reading as much. She stopped talking too -- for the most part. Sometimes she would laugh, shoulders shaking, but mostly her eyes would glaze over, not from daydreams but from drugs. Each day it felt like it took a bit longer for her eyes to focus on me, each day a little further gone, until the day I found her on my bathroom floor. Her hair had spooled around her like a scarf. Nothing I did woke her

up. I even screamed at her – I never screamed – but it was useless. She was gone from the world, from me, and I could only hope that one day she'd awaken from her drug-enchanted sleep.

I tucked an errant hair behind her freckled ear. The movement threw her face in sharp relief: a narrow nose, a heart-shaped face, winged eyebrows. Like a Sleeping Beauty, except shadowed. Bruises marked like thumbprints beneath her eyes, and sickly green veins spread out along her pale skin like some spider's poisonous web.

A thought teased me, had for the longest time. It made my stomach dance like vengeful fairies were inside, but I couldn't suppress the hope that maybe, just maybe...

Holding my breath, I leaned down and kissed her. Her lips were dry, a bit like puckered leather. I felt the cool air of her exhale, and I pulled back with a jerk.

She didn't wake up.

**Phoenix**  
By: Kelly Stephens

Do you understand  
this fear that swallows and sucks  
you under to the deepest crevices of your mind?  
Where water silences and you daren't speak  
lest that murmuring darkness enters your heart too.

It's a strangler, this dark water.  
It encircles your brain like some Ouroboros and  
trails down the side of your mouth,  
kissing the jaw to slide down the spine and embrace the very cage around your heart  
in slow pulses.

*Do not speak*, it breathes behind the shell of your ear,  
and water droplets crystallize  
into ice picks that tap along the bones of your spine,  
testing for the final breaking.

*Your words are worthless. Quiet, quiet, let me speak*,  
it sings as it smothers your lips and eyes,  
to drown your mind and freeze your spine and bind your heart  
in darkness everlasting.

But your shadowy snake does not have hands,  
and it cannot fully bind  
what it doesn't understand.

It cannot freeze those hands that burn,  
those fingers that trace such fiery words  
of unsung hopes and secrets and dreams.

No. It cannot smother, it cannot drown  
those sparks that catch and crack so loud

that ice will shatter, and hiss, and brown  
amongst the ashes and embers of memory.

No, for it cannot be, it cannot be  
when a phoenix is born and learns to speak.