

Coin Toss

Word Count: 1500

The first time I felt true regret was hopelessly surreal.

We spent most of our last day together with nary a word, unwilling to approach the uncertain future. We knew that when we reached the fork in the road, everything would lock in. The finale of our childhood story was being written.

As we made our somber procession side-by-side across the bridge, she suddenly ran ahead before turning back.

“Let’s do one more challenge.”

“... What?”

I reacted with both surprise and irritation that she would bring up our childish games. She seemed uncharacteristically thoughtful as she explained.

“Who knows when we’ll see each other next?”

“You said you were coming back...” My strained voice forced out a weak objection.

Instead of her typical carefree, smug grin, that smile exuded a serious air. An air of finality, of the end to youthful ignorance. Sorrow clamped around my chest, squeezing tears out of my eyes.

Her face flared with anticipation and she clapped her hands. “We’ll use a game to decide just that!”

I blinked, confused. “What?”

She searched her pockets. "Let's see what I have..."

She eagerly checked her haul. Disappointment washed over.

"... Only a quarter."

She scowled, then looked up with her usual excitement. Without warning, she threw the coin in a high arc.

"You get heads!"

Time slowed to a crawl as fate brought the coin closer and closer. It felt as though the outcome would dictate the rest of my life. As if a simple 50/50 would show the path before us.

No way could I accept that!

"No."

My hand, outstretched to catch the quarter, fell to my side. The coin dropped cleanly between the cracks in the bridge. Her surprise at my act of defiance quickly eased into wistfulness.

"I guess that was pretty pointless, huh." Perhaps her indifference back then was feigned.

"I dunno. It was the same as the rest of our games."

We stood there, grappling with the weight of our situation.

"How can you leave me behind? Did all of this mean nothing?"

Of course, I did not say that aloud; I screamed it over and over inside, praying for our hearts to connect.

I stared her straight in the eye, and she peered straight into my soul with a commanding gaze.

Abruptly, she turned and stretched her arms out, displaying the crossroad up ahead.

“The rest of our lives await!” She spoke with such hope. “So many experiences to be excited for, endless people to meet–“

She faltered.

“Plenty of time to make amends.”

She stumbled forward with a defined reluctance, as if she were on a plank. When she peeked back, her lips no longer formed a smile. No smugness, no odd sense of gravity. Not even wistfulness remained.

With lips trembling, she waited for me to say something.

Caving in to desperation, I exposed my weakness. My powerlessness.

“I’ll write! I’ll call! I’ll visit! I’ll find you, I promise!”

Her laugh in response was charged with a sadness no infinity could ever express. “But you didn’t win that toss, did you.”

“Huh?”

She strode to where our paths would diverge, then halted. My mind screamed for my legs to move; they stayed frozen in place.

When she finally spoke, the strong person I had come to know appeared so fragile.

“Be happy, you hear? Or I’ll never forgive you!”

I watched her run to her house for the last time. Even though there was no point to say any more, I stepped forward to holler.

“Thank you for everything! I’ll remember you!”

She did not stop. Her body noticeably tensed up as she continued running faster and faster.

She left my life when she got out of sight.

“... I'll miss you.”

I probably wondered if, down the line, this memory would eat away at me.

If I did, I was painfully right.

I return to the bridge on a chilly, overcast day completely unlike the warm, sunny day on which I had last seen her.

I lean on the rusty railing and smoke a cigarette while gazing out at the frozen river, lamenting how unfamiliar it seems from ten years ago.

How much time has changed everything, and yet how constant my spirits remain.

I look at the familiar fork beyond the bridge. Home is close: cross the bridge, take the left path, then continue until I reach my father's never-ending stories and my mother's delicious cooking.

I bitterly curse myself for getting into the habit of turning left.

I snuff out the embers dancing on the end of the burnt filter, then reach into my pocket and pull out a quarter.

One side is taped over. I inspect the revealed face and chuckle with self-pity.

Tails.

I never kept my promise. Whenever I think to find her, I remember that coin toss. Worse, I recall when I jumped into the water and pulled the coin out of the muddy stream.

Turns out, I lost. As expected.

I peel the tape off the other side of the coin and wonder:

“What if you were facing up?”

An incredible rage floods through my veins. I hurl the coin as far away as I can, then fall to my knees.

Through shimmering moisture, I see the snow and ice around me melt into the ground. I wipe my tears and glance up: the grey of winter has dissipated, uncovering a nostalgia-colored summer day.

Then, a most jarring sight...

She stands in front of me, holding a quarter.

I rub my eyes before daring to accept this magical moment. She smiles at me and tosses the coin in my direction.

“You get heads. Just like last time.”

I do not actually hear that long-forgotten voice, but somehow I understand.

I watch the quarter fly against a clear blue sky. My hands stayed at my sides. Unmoving.

“Catch it! Catch it! Catch it!”

My thoughts are frantic as I stand dead still, watching my opportunity pass by.

I think of those crushing defeats suffered at her hand, each one proving nothing could trump her skill and cunning. How ironic it is that in a game of chance like this, I have better odds than ever of winning. Of ruining that untainted streak of hers.

But what would that matter? Either way, we will soon be stepping into the unknown.

Once more, it seems as if a 50/50 will change everything. In this instance of insanity, it becomes clear that it will.

Something tells me that I would be making the biggest mistake of my life unless I act.

“ ... ”

The coin is falling right at the crack, like on that summer day ten years ago.

“Like I would deal with that regret again!”

My hand reaches out to catch it. On impact, the shiny quarter bounces off my palm and catches light as it tumbles towards the gaps between the wooden boards.

“No!”

The quarter barely misses an opening and rolls to the side of the bridge. As the coin nears the edge, my legs move of their own accord. I dive forward and hit the ground with a thud, reaching out blindly. As it rolls off the edge, the coin briefly suspends in time and space before gravity pulls it away from me. I stick my arm through the metal railings and swing my arm aimlessly, as if I can possibly succeed...

I feel a crisp impact and immediately pull my tightly clasped hand back.

I peer up at her from where I lay. I open my hand and reveal the result:

Heads.

She stands there wide-eyed, with tears slowly rolling down her face.

I stand up and stride towards her. I toss her the coin and she catches it clumsily. I offer my hand; she takes it.

We cross the bridge together, like on that day ten years ago. With our fingers and souls entwined, there is nothing to say. We already understand.

At destiny's juncture, we stop for a few everlasting seconds, enjoying the feeling of absolute peace. After a brief eternity, we let go of each other's hands and go our separate ways in total silence.

But as I yet again turn left and the summer day fades back into a winter evening, I sense a distant message cut through the ethereal tranquility of this tragic sunset.

"You can be happy, you know?"

I choke up as my heart breaks.

"Yeah. Yeah." I nod and brace myself against both the incoming cold and an overwhelming flood of emotion.

"I love you!" Her silent voice betrays much joyous anguish that it penetrates my entire being. I suppress the lump in my throat and utter the four words I always longed to say in response to those three of hers:

"I love you too!"

With that, she vanished with all other traces of that perfect, irrecoverable day.

I continue to the left, now with the lingering warmth of that wonderful eternal summer making this calm, quiet night that much more bittersweet.