" Beneath a Stained Glass Sky"

A Journey

William W. Collins

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CONTENTS

Table of Contents

[DEDICATION iii](#_Toc170216747)

[CONTENTS v](#_Toc170216748)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS i](#_Toc170216749)

[CHAPTER 1: Encounter 3](#_Toc170216750)

[CHAPTER 2: The Following Sunday 11](#_Toc170216751)

[CHAPTER 3: Church 18](#_Toc170216752)

[CHAPTER 4: COFFEE SHOP 21](#_Toc170216753)

[5 CHAPTER NAME 23](#_Toc170216754)

[6 CHAPTER NAME 26](#_Toc170216755)

[7 CHAPTER NAME 29](#_Toc170216756)

[8 CHAPTER NAME 32](#_Toc170216757)

[9 CHAPTER NAME 35](#_Toc170216758)

[10 CHAPTER NAME 38](#_Toc170216759)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR 41](#_Toc170216760)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: Encounter

Walking down a sidewalk is when I saw her. I was going my way. Rougher part of town. I understood that – but never understood my feelings at core of my apprehension. Not of the neighborhood. But being around those that lived there. More, existed there.

And the squalor was not to be ignored. The trash, the piles. The discarded food, bottles. However.

I was polite. I was unnecessarily uncomfortable. Why. Huh. More to think about but need to be alert of my surroundings. Sure enough. People asking for money, food. Other stuff.

Most stayed put. A few approached. One girl, way too young to be there. What was her story, I thought in passing. She spoke to me. I continued to walk. She did not walk alongside me – she walked parallel to me. She had short dark hair which partly covered her eyes which she brushed away with a constant and practiced nervousness. She was talking to me in a very rapid and excited manner, my first inclination was that she was on something until she looked at my eyes, held the glance just long enough. No, she did not look like she was under the influence. But who was I to really know. I was listening. I was not listening. Two doves descended, one at a time from the trees behind her - and yet she did not react. The birds broke me from this pattern of inattention. I started listening. I gave her my focus.

She spoke so quickly I had a hard time following her, figuring out what she wanted. She brushed her hair back with the back of her other hand this time. She had a bent cigarette between two fingers, and a syringe with a needle in the other. As I continued to walk, and every time she brushed her hair back with that hand, my stomach knotted as she came inches or less away from that needle. But as often as she brushed that short mop back, I realized that this mannerism was a constant. There was no recent scratch or mark near where that needle passed. I said nothing. About the needle at least.

I continued to walk, though a bit slower. I started listening to her. She would not stop talking. And she wasn’t really asking for anything. Yet, I thought.

And then she did. Not for money, she asked me in that quick voice if I had something (I could not understand) and then something about “an edible or something.” I stopped and faced her. She stopped and then looked up at me. She looked directly into my eyes, as if to determine if I was safe I figured. But it was something more. Like she was trying to assess my energy or soul or something. I held her gaze.

“You seem cool. Are you light?” she finally said, still looking into my eyes.

I answered back to those eyes, the sunlight at that angle of midmorning illuminated them. There was intelligence there. Depth. Those eyes of green also held pain. Way back there in the recesses. Not in the soul, but somewhere back there. Before I could answer she asked again.

“You’re light, right?” she said it in a manner as if she wanted me to agree. I did not.

“Hardly. And if I appear that way it’s probably only cuz I’m standing in it.”

“You mean like God, or something.”

“Not really.”

“Cuz I can tell things about people.”

“I’m sure you can,” I replied, being just agreeable.

“Yes. I can. Your eyes are different.”

“So are yours. And I meant it.” I added without thinking, “Why are you here?”

Now she looked away. But then again right back. “You mean here. Hanging with my homies?” Then a nervous laugh. “They know me. They don’t judge. They’re my people.”

“Hmm.”

“You look uncomfortable here.” She laughed.

“No. Well. I was.” She was right, but wrong. The interaction had distracted me. Stopped there, I no longer was, really. The very thing I was uncomfortable about, consciously or otherwise, had greeted me. Discomfort for a moment had vanished. Yet now I was again conscious of my surroundings. She looked away again. I saw both our reflections in the window behind. Hers waiflike, more the form of a child seemingly, mine towering behind her. Glancing back to her eyes, the eyes of a young woman who had perhaps seen too much for her years.

“Wow. I don’t usually wander this far down the block,” she said. “By the way, my name is Lydia but they call me Itty. I know I know,” she saved me from asking. “Ittly Bitty. It’s a name they just call me.” She looked back at my eyes. “Yeah, you have light. I’m good at seeing that. I am. And I can see darkness too. But mostly light.”

I evaded the dialogue. “Are you light?”

“Yes,” Lydia said. “Well. Maybe not. I mean look at me.”

She was barefoot. Thin, but not short. A bit lanky, boyish figure. Dirty feet. Somewhat unkempt hands but surprisingly short nails. I figured she was in her early to mid-20s. Beyond those deep eyes that hinted at a deep soul, street life seemed to have yet aged her. I wondered if her parents even knew where she was. Did she even have parents?

“No. Thinking of her eyes again, “You have a light in your eyes.” It was a much-needed compliment, it seemed. Yet she did not smile. Just all look back at my own, “You’re different.”

“We all are a bit.”

She held me under the microscope with those eyes. Still catching the sunlight. “Not really.” And behind those two words I understood saw in the same depth more of that deep pain. I stopped myself from thinking. I did not want to even imagine. I changed the subject. It was Sunday. I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“Do you want to go to church next week?”

“With you?”

“No. Not really with me. Just there.”

“Where there? Will God be there?”

I thought she was joking a bit. When she continued her gaze, I realized she was not.

“Well. Yes. He will be there.” As I said the words I realized, going to church though often sporadically, I believed He was. But had myself not thought of it in that context in a while. But she had. A slight remorse and shame, though brief, washed over me. I doubled down.

“Yes. He definitely will be there.”

“Cool. Cuz He’s hard to find around here. I mean I’ve looked. Not real hard. But I have. But you have a bit of it. Light. So, I do see signs some of the time. I look for signs, you know. They’re easier to find. Harder to read.”

“Do you read?” I felt stupid as soon as I asked. Stupider as she looked at me a “are you just stupid look.” She took pity on my ignorance and said, “Of course I can.” She was looking at my eyes again.

“So tell me about the church thing. I mean look at me. I couldn’t show up like this. Hah.”

I lied. “You could show up anyway you want.”

“Hah,” she said again. “You’re a terrible liar.”

And I was. So, truthfully, I answered. “You should be able to show up however you want. Hypothetically. But not.”

“And I left my Sunday dresses at home.” She laughed a small laugh for the first time. Like her frame. It was small and guarded.

“Do you believe in Karma?”

“Not sure. I guess. Or that you reap what you sow. Like that.”

“Yeah. I believe I did something right. You know. Without knowing it. And that’s what I think. Must have, since this morning showed me some light.” And, she laughed briefly again and continued that doe-eyed, soul-piercing gaze. “Lots of peeps ask me to do things. But you’re the first one who asked me to go to church. That’s a first, boy. Hah. That’s a real first.” She paused. “Why’d you ask me? Why me?”

Half-joking, I said, “Because I saw a light in your eyes.”

“Ah, you’re making fun of me.”

“No.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm...”

“Is that all you saw? A light? It must have been a pretty dim dull bulb.”

“Actually, it was small. But distinct and bright.”

“So, you can see light, too. And you’re not even crazy. I mean, like some people around here. And I’m from around here. Ha.” She laughed her small nervous laugh.

She suddenly said, “So, give me your arm,” and in with the other hand she dropped the cigarette, the hypo, and then reached in her pocket. “I use this pen to write. Yes, hah, I can write too. Biting, accurate.” She wrote her number in large, no huge digits across the complete underside of my left arm. She noticed her fingers and added, “No, you won’t catch anything.” She looked up from my arm and looked at me again with those eyes. Now bearing a small mischievousness.

“You asked, so yes. You have a church date.”

“It’s really not a...”

“Yeah, yeah. See you next Sunday. Unless I see you when I see you. You know, before that. Beforehand.”

“Gotcha,” I muttered.

“Guess I should know your name.”

“William.”

“Well, William. Sunday then.”

“Yes, Lydia,” which I read off my arm.

“I’ll be here next week. 9ish?”

“Actually half past. I’ll be walking the same way. Then about 10 or so minutes that way,” I pointed vaguely off in the general distance.

“I see you then.”

“Will you?”

“Yes, William. I might be crazy but I will not be late for church. You will not have a problem getting me to the church on time...”

She shook my hand somewhat firmly and with slight exaggeration. She did not smile. Yet her eyes did.

“Until then.”

“Until then.”

As I walked away, and for several days afterward I pondered that meeting. And if I would ever see her again. It was a haunting few days. No explanation as to why. Just was. As Sunday approached I both looked forward to and feared that meeting. No change was expected in my life up to that point. It was not welcome. That was not part of the plan. Then wind gusted as I left that part of the neighborhood. I spent the rest of the walk blinking and trying to lose a piece of grit that was blown up from the street and lodged in my left eye.

CHAPTER 2: The Following Sunday

The week went by both slowly and quickly. With anticipation and some degree of dread.

William ventured outside. Brisk. Nice, he thought. The weather is changing. And the crisp air carried with it the scent of fallen leaves, a mix of earthiness and the faint sweetness of that old decay that both buries and hits at future resurrection - rebirth. The autumn morning sun cast long shadows and as it did, distinguished it sullenly from the sun and glare of the heat of summer. Under the autumn sky the world felt both new and ancient.

Back inside and taking care to rid his darkened leather boots from the first of the oak trees onslaught of autumn leaves, he stepped upon the marble floored entry. It shined. He liked this apartment from the moment he first saw it. It was his apartment, with its cozy corners and well-worn dark leather furniture, which was both a sanctuary and a place of quiet solitude. The forest green cup was a splash of color against the dark wood of the table, a reminder of his morning rituals. It was carefully accented as well. Gilt-Framed Monet, Degas and the occasional Van Gough graced his walls in the ant-room to the left. His study to the right with its spacious alcove that faced the large bay window facing the street. He walked into this room, and always took in the street before him. The lawn, the oaks. The golden floor of golden, red and green leaves that carpeted the lawn after their spiraling decent to the verdant green rest below. Solace. And then the reality of meeting Lydia interrupted.

“What was I thinking” superimposed with both the joy of newness. He rested his hands on the desk before him, still staring out of the large squares of the same window. And fear of change. His mind vacillated. It was the time of year where the weather disagreed with late heat and argued for and was torn between the calm of summer and a beckoning early chill. There was that overwhelming feel of fall, and as he watched, the leaves that continued to spiral down from their heights agreed.

As he dressed he wondered at her attire. What? He pictured her as she was. And surprised himself in realizing that he would really not care what she wore. But then decided that was not entirely truthful. He pictured her the dress that she alluded to – and wondered if she had ever had such of life. Obviously so, no one is born in that situation – they somehow through a series of mismanaged decisions, find themselves there. He marveled at each person’s lot in life and journey. How different. Yet how much the same. We all often wander and are lost, different stages and different plays, but really more commonality than difference. He thought of the distant light in her eyes. He wondered how she would look. Whether she had overcome her madness to meet him, walk with him again. Talk.

He finished his coffee, and set the forest green cup back upon the small, quaint table. He loved its dark walnut legs and its scrolled feet, its marble surface. It was a good companion. No, the best of companions. Whether for his solitary comings and goings each day. As he shook hands with the doors rich brass hand and it greeted him to take the load off his leather satchel or his burdens, he felt a certain solidarity and a consistency it offered to offset the loneliness of his journeys to and from town. So much more the case when he visited his countryside estate. A place that he purposely told not a living soul about. This was his holy of holies – where no matter what life threw at him, he could find sanctuary and retreat.

He did not bring his Bible. The door thumped behind him as it closed, its black surface with its bright-brass knocker clacked its goodbye. He glanced behind, which was unusual for him, taking a small pleasure in the door's contrast against the rich red brick façade of the 4-story building.

It was early, giving him time enough for both walking and navigating through the unfamiliar path to the neighborhood where he had met Lydia. It is amazing, that one wrong turn or one choice of a different path can lead to the unexpected. And toward perhaps a means for either ruin or happiness. But the road less traveled literally had led him to where he now went with direction – with no purpose other than to be held accountable to what he had put into motion. Decisive felt good. And the cool brace of the crisp early autumn air confirmed his resolve.

The streets were quieter than usual, the typical bustle subdued by the early hour. As he approached their meeting spot, he glanced around, this looked the spot. Yes, definitely the place he thought as he continued looking for the figure of the young woman with short dark hair and piercing green eyes.

Now Lydia, true to her word, was there, standing under a streetlamp that still flickered despite the daylight. She was wearing the same or similar clothes as the previous encounter but had made an effort to appear much cleaner – bathed and bright. Her hair was brushed back a bit, and the nervous energy she had previously exuded seemed more contained.

She spotted William and waved, a small, tentative smile momentarily appearing on her face. He adjusted his collar for the third time that morning, a nervous habit.

"Morning, William," she said as he approached.

"Good morning, Miss Lydia. Ready for church I see?" William asked, trying to match her brief and fleeting smile.

"Well yes," she replied, the hint of apprehension in her voice masked by bravado. "Did you bring him as well?" She pointed to something imaginary to his left.

He looked where she pointed. Momentarily confused, but then, sheepishly, boy-like, "Oh, yes, Him. Yes. He’s walking with us. I assume He needs no introduction and is more than welcome? Playing back to the banter. "And of course, He will be there to greet us as well."

Lydia lowered her head slightly, involuntarily forcing the dark bangs back over her face. William, noticing her more newly assumed shyness, struggled to pay her a compliment regarding her appearance. He noticed the same attire. Though less unkempt. So, he opted to move his eyes to hers. She raised her head and peered up to his. And the very instant he saw those green-blue eyes, he thought and reminisced of the sea.

"Foolishness," he muttered, thinking his reply silly, awkward.

"Excuse me?" she said, confused.

"Ah, nothing. We need to be on our way or they will have us cleaning the pews after the service."

"Really?"

"No."

"Oh. Humor. I see." In an assumed air, she said, "Then let’s be off, shall we?"

William looked at her and muttered again, "Fascinating."

"What is?" Oh, fascinating. Yes. Me going to church. I must agree."

"Yes. I mean No. Something else. Yes, shall we go?". He silently cursed and tried to tame his nervousness while questioning why he was so.

So, after timid cordialities, the two walked in silence for a several minutes, the sounds of the city then gradually giving way to the quieter streets leading to the church.

William noticed Lydia's eyes darting around, taking in her surroundings with a mix of curiosity and wariness. She continued in silence, as did he – and their interaction differed drastically from their first meeting.

Her eyes looked to the windows, and fixated briefly on a lace shawl placed elegantly over a black blouse posed prominently in the window. She did not stop to look at it, but William followed her glance and saw her eyes had lit momentarily on the figure. She was wearing black. He spoke.

"Are you cold. Yes you must be with autumn approaching. Just a second." He turned and approached the shop door, there was a key left in the door. Thinking someone mistakenly left it in the lock, he removed it and entered. At first it appeared that no one was there.

After entering the shop with the intention of securing the blouse he realized spontaneity had backfired. Not only would he have to have the shopkeeper remove the white lace shawl from the mannequin, but there was Lydia directly outside. Then, "Oh my God. She’ll think I am ashamed of how she looks." The best of plans, he thought. Damned fool! He spoke some other impossible atrocities to himself. And, now, how to get out of a woman’s boutique with a legitimate excuse. What was to be done. Nothing, something. No nothing! Oh Godding and damning himself, and on the way to church. He decided.

Outside, he heard the door behind him clang shut along with the ringing bells on the door announcing his grand and illustrious exit.

"Lydia?"

"Yes, William."

He loved the way she spoke his name. But Ah. Focus focus.

"Can I be honest?"

"Yes."

"I believe I saw you look at that shawl."

Lydia just looked at him, puzzled. Her expressive eyes begging him to continue.

"Well."

"Yes?"

"You have a black sweater on," he felt his face flush.

She looked down at her sweater, and held out her arms, her small thumbs protruding through the finger holes at the end of its sleeves.

"Yes. Is it appropriate for your church?"

God, how much worse would he make this! "Why yes, of course. The window there. Where you looked. It seems. Well. I mean…"

She saved him. "Ah, you saw me glance at the lace shawl. Very pretty. You are quite the observant one."

"Well, I guess, well. I was thinking. Well that... I thought. Umm."

"William, just say it. Whatever it is."

"Well, you looked cold. Autumn approaching and all. And I thought…"

She completed his sentence. "That you might get it for me?"

His shoulders relaxed. "Why, yes."

"Thoughtful. I accept. But just this once. It will be my turn next."

Surprised. He just stood there in silence.

"Lydia said, Church, William."

"Ah yes. Be right back." And he was in and out as fast as possible. From the inside of the store, the store owner, watching the awkward dialogue and the unique pair, smiled as he lifted the shawl over her head and draped it across her narrow shoulder. She felt its warmth and the warmth of the moment. She looked left and right at the lace on her shoulders.

She looked up at him and he saw that light again. He took a short inward breath as she said,

"Perfect. William, it's perfect. Thank you."

"My privilege," he responded. "You looked cold."

"You said that already."

"I’ll shut up then."

And they walked away from the storefront and onward toward the small church which was just past the park with the tall old oaks, and just across the street from the old cemetery with the scrolled iron gates.

William broke the silence just as they climbed the first of 3 tiers of steps. "Have you been to a church before?" William asked, breaking the silence.

"Yes and no," Lydia replied. "Yes. I mean, I’ve seen many, walked by them, but even though I ventured in to one or two in my braver moments, I never felt like I belonged inside. You know? And it did not help to see the stares when I actually entered in. I felt between the solemn nature of the place and onlooker stares that demons might fly out of me at any moment."

"I understand," William said. "But truly, everyone is welcome. Truly. Even I am – God help me."

Lydia nodded but didn't respond. She couldn’t fathom him doing much wrong – so prim and proper – but she thought, everyone has a story. And through experience, her own personal experience, many a demon can live behind the holiest and most innocent of masks.

She seemed lost in thought, her pace slowing as they neared the church.

As they entered, she reached out and touched his arm. He paused.

"William, you don’t have to worry about me. I mean the shawl. I did not think that you thought me unacceptable. I mean, I know I’m not exactly. But I could tell that you were caring about me. Not if I was acceptable. You know, church and all. Remember, I saw light in you. I saw that in your eyes when you came out of the shop, well, befuddled and such. I’m OK. OK?"

The transparency and honesty of this girl, he thought in brief reverie. He felt an honor unearned. And looking into her eyes just below those dark bangs. He just stared.

"William?"

"Yes?"

"Church?"

"Yes. Why yes." And they entered with the only sound being their footsteps on the marble floors and the small echo they made among those hallowed vestibule walls and brilliant stained glass windows.

Noticing the noise from both their shoes, he realized that he had spent the entirety of the time mainly focused on her eyes, and had not really looked closely to all she was wearing – including the elegant soft suede heeled shoes she was wearing. She caught him looking. And as he raised his eyes they met hers. Her eyes smiled.

"Pretty."

He nodded and muttered yes. He knew she meant her shoes. His nod though, recognized her beauty. Inward as well as outward. Such an unexpected surprise. And as they entered the main of the church he held out his arm, and hers naturally slipped in. And there they were.

CHAPTER 3: Church

The church. It was modest. An old stone building with unusual stained glass windows depicting scenes not just from the Bible, but also of nature and beauty, of God’s very creation. Church, thought Lydia, it was more of a cathedral. Like those in books over which her imagination poured in quaint bookstores and libraries she used to frequent, especially as a child. It took her back to those times when survival often meant losing herself and escaping, surviving.

The interior was a breathtaking display of Gothic grandeur, bathed in a golden, ethereal light that filtered through the resplendent stained-glass windows. She longed to touch and trace the glass with her fingertips and feel their cold surface which housed the warm and sacred. Each window told a story. A sacred story that resonated with her – but seemed so far from where she was spiritually. The more she felt the images, the further she felt from its reality in her own life. The vibrant hues of red, blue, and gold depicted saints acting within each of the scenes with divine intricacy. The central window behind the altar commanded the greatest attention, featuring a radiant figure, possibly Christ, enveloped by a heavenly glow. The high, vaulted ceilings made her feel lifted up – yet far beyond her reach. Each was supported by slender stone columns, amplifying the space's majesty, while the ribbed vaulting and pointed arches created an architectural symphony of elegance. As the organ music rose to its heights, they both merged as one. And, at the very front, the altar, adorned with ornate carvings and a prominent majestic cross, stood as a focal point of reverence. Yet more than reverence. Surpassing that. Hope beyond hope and tangibly intangible. All so elaborate and leaving one immersed in spiritual reflection. Wooden pews lined the nave, spotted with parishioners nodded in quiet personal prayers or rapt attention toward the windows, cross in meditative silence. The interplay of light and shadow, the intricate details of the stonework, the serene atmosphere. All converged to create a scene of profound sacred beauty and tranquility. Lydia was overwhelmed. From the streets, to meeting William, to now sitting next to a man that little less than a week prior – did not exist. Was impossible to even believe possible. And here he was by her side.

They had sat down, toward the back. Lydia looked again about the interior. Warm and inviting with the soft scent of . She noticed how the soft light filtering through the stained glass cast colorful patterns on the pews. It reminded her of childhood – at least the few good parts and places where she found her peace amidst the constant tumult of home. Or, what home was supposed to be. The smell of the church. It struck the mind with the ancient. Of the passing of time. And that scent from her earlier days. What was that? It was the aroma of a rich tapestry hinting of citrus and pine, unfolding into a warm, balsamic heart with subtle hints of spice. And grounded by woody and earthy base notes that seemed to breath from the pews. The sacred and mystical scent of the church, both calming and invigorating, evoked ancient rituals, people who had long ago been but children long grown and passed. All of it intermingled and promoted a profound sense of inner peace and clarity. Lydia exhaled and if one looked closely and was very observant, a hint of tear had softly welled up in her eyes. She closed them to hide the evidence. William was right. And Indeed, as he said. God was there. Her fingertips tingled.

As light often does, that morning its angle caught and illuminated even the smallest of airborne particles. it all seemed so ethereal. She had been 7 years old again in her mind. William sat to her left. Her arm had again threaded its way back through his arm and she instinctively ran it down his arm to his hand as she closed her eyes. William took notice of the gesture, and as she reached his hand, he looped his thumb and index finger around the smallest of her two fingers. That is all he had nerve to venture. And even this, both surprised and pleased. He glanced to his right and saw her closed eyes. Her bangs. He was transfixed for a moment. He was allowed to take her in without the beautiful intimidation of those deep beautiful eyes. He also noticed her fingers of her other tapping nervously on the flat of the pew, a subtle reminder of the needle she had carried. Lydia's hand stopped tapping suddenly. Those eyes opened and she was back. She sat quietly, her eyes now scanning the room, taking in the details.

The sound of organ music drifted about the space, mingling with the faint murmur of voices from within. She looked at him and did not let go. It was new. It was old. Memories of childhood spilled into the present and back. It was uncomfortably soothing, She was both at peace and anxious. She closed her eyes briefly again. Inhaled and slowly exhaled – breathing in the moment and even a bit dizzy. She felt her fingers curl in within his light hold on her fingers. She add a third to his grasp and leaned into the moment. It was hard to believe that just the prior Sunday she was in such a different position. And now. Church! Incredible. Uncanny. Unpredictable life. Yet she had a new breath. The old seemed so different, yet not odd. Was normal changing? There was both the hope and the fear that it was.

The Service

The service began, and William, with her small hand in his, felt Lydia's initial tension ease as she listened to the hymns and the opening words of the sermon. She followed along, occasionally glancing at William for cues on when to stand, sit, or sing. Yet there was none of that. Less formality that she remembered. It was mainly about the message. The voice emanating from the pulpit was soothing and calming. She realized though it was not Williams voice, it had the same effect. As she sat there she was overcome by a peace that let her know that God was indeed there. And also brought with it a sudden and overwhelming desire to sleep. When was the last time she was even able to contemplate the ability to drift off without concern or worry? She fought it but lost and faded in and out hearing bits and pieces of the sermon. Her mind drifted to dream and a restful sleep long overdue.

William, also listening to the sermon, felt her hand relax in his and felt her lean her head against his shoulder.

She had drifted off. While bits and pieces of the pastors voice seeded a day dream that played out behind those sweet trouble eyes and the pulse of the air from the overhead fans far above became the sound of the ocean, and the winds of the seas.

She was standing at the edge of a secluded beach and her toes sank into the cool, wet sand. The rising sun cast a pink and blue hue across the ocean’s surface with waves gently lapping at her feet, whispering sweet secrets to her. She breathed deeply and immersed herself in the wild, sweet sounds and smell of the surf. Seabirds and their calls and were with distant echoes of church bells. The waves crashed rhythmically, like the gentle murmur of voices blended with splash of the ebb and flow of the small waves that drew and pulled against her ankles. She felt the sand shift under her feet and then she came to. The message was over and she now realized people were standing up all around her up to sing. She rose as well – with William’s assistance – as she still was recovering from the swoon of the dream.

William came close to her ear. "You OK?"

"Yes. Yes I must have dosed off." Then her face turned to his ear. "Oh my gosh, did I snore or something?"

"Yes." Came the response.

She looked up in mortified horror.

He said "No." And the parishioners behind them smirked as William recovered from an undeserving short blow to his arm.

CHAPTER 4: COFFEE SHOP

The tall church doors were open and the crowd spilled out and poured down the steps and among the rose and herb garden below. They stood still for a second as William adjusted her shawl.

"Shall I walk you home?"

"William? Not quite yet if you don’t mind. Can we walk some more?"

"Of course."

Lydia hesitated, then shrugged. "In case you’re wondering. There is really not much to tell about me other than that I grew up around here. Life's been tough. I’ve made a series of bad choices. I’m still trying to figure things out. And just when I think I have, I realize I still don’t have a clue."

"Aren’t we all like that? We all have stories. Our ups and our downs," William said gently. "And it's never too late to write a new chapter."

Lydia looked at him, her eyes searching his face for sincerity. "You really believe that, don't you?"

"I do," William said. "I've seen people turn their lives around. I’ve turned my life around. It takes time, but it’s possible. It’s really not an event, though there are those. But more of a constant process of change, punctuated with moments of joy, and of sorrow."

"This part of the city is so much nicer. I would like to get used to this."

Their walk took them past a small coffee shop. Her senses brightened at the aroma of coffee. Good coffee. And the faint smell of chocolate. And of cinnamon. William watched her tilt her head back and inhale. Her bangs framed her face as she did so. And he was able to again and without witness, look at her. Her eyes opened up and her face formed a small smile.

"I feel safe with you."

"Coffee?"

"Yes. And I’ll treat for chocolate," Lydia replied.

William insisted no, but lost the short argument.

A Glimmer of Hope

As they sat with their coffees, Lydia seemed more at ease. She even smiled a few more times, real smiles that started with her mouth and then reached her eyes. William felt a sense of hope for her. And also, something stirred within him as well.

"Thank you, William," Lydia said. "For inviting me. For listening." She looked down at her hands and then at him directly. "For creating this."

William was at a loss for words. He merely reached out and placed his hand over hers, which she had circled around the cup of coffee and laid out palms down before her. He then kindly held those three fingers of the same hand that he had at church. She placed her other hand over his and pressed down.

"I haven’t felt this good for a long time, William."

"Glad to be of assistance," he replied with a smirk. Not of arrogance, or wryness. More of slight embarrassment.

Lydia looked down at their hands. "I really don’t want to leave yet."

"Then let’s not. Agreed?" And Lydia did not protest.

“William?”

“Yes?”

“Will you tell me where you live, and what its like? And I promise I will not come to haunt you there. At least not without your permission.”

And William did so – of his study. And as he spoke with such great passion and detail she could imaging her self there. His language in facts was so descriptive and her imagination so agile, this is how she imagined it as he spoke.

She saw herself stepping into William's study for the first time, her senses immediately captivated by the room's enchanting aura. The rich scent of aged leather and paper wraps around her, mingling with the faint aroma of a bold, foreign coffee. She sees herself closing her eyes briefly, taking a moment to breathe it in. In doing so an hearing him speak of it, then feeling an unexpected comfort in this new environment. William’s worlds. As he spoke of the far end of the study, she pictured the soft glow from the bay window casting a warm light on the dark wooden shelves. She could feel the warmth of a spring day actually spilling into the room and illuminating a treasure trove of books. She saw her self enter further. And while William continued to speak, she snuck unawares toward the bookcase, fingers brushing against the spines, one at a time, of a complete collection of the works of Charles Dickens'. Feeling the embossed letters of each volume run over the title of each of these works. She saw that the embossed titles were worn, yet still gleaming. Then her mentioned other volumes running across those shelves – and she could see them clearly. The romantic poets, Shakespeare's timeless plays, and novels upon novels from the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries standing as proud little soldiers, each in their places. All a testament to how he spoke with them in wonder, and reflecting his, William's, love for literature.

She heard his works and continued to get further lost in her imagination. Lydia's eyes travel to the leather armchairs, invitingly positioned near the window. She imagined herself curled up in one of them, losing track of time as he might sit with a small warm blanket pulled from a corner chair, and listen to that caring voice take her on a journey together into one of thise literary classics. Ah, the antique desk catches her attention next, its highly polished and gleaming brass lamp casting a gentle glow over the neatly arranged writing instruments. The desk's surface also polished and smooth, reflecting the care William puts into all things he hold precious. She reaches out to touch the leather-bound journal resting on the desk, feeling the cool, textured surface under her fingertips.

As she takes in the room, Lydia feels a sense of wonder and admiration for him. This study, with its curated collection of books and meticulous organization, speaks volumes about his character. It reveals a man who values knowledge and cherishes the stories of the past. Who might or even must cherishes many things, perhaps in the very same way. The careful arrangement of literary treasures and the inviting warmth of the space reflect his deep appreciation for beauty, for intellect. For imagination.

Lydia feels a mixture of emotions—curiosity, respect, and a growing sense of connection. The study is not just a room; As he speaks of it in such careful and illustrious detail - it is a window into William's soul. Offering glimpses of his thoughts, passions, and dreams. A sanctuary of inspiration and a place where she can sense the depth of his spirit. As she stands there, Lydia feels a quiet thrill, knowing that she is about to embark on a journey of discovery, guided by the literary wonders that fill this remarkable space. And perhaps even those that inhabit it. For a moment even, she is part and parcel to that small but exquisitely beautiful world.

Lydia?

Yes, Sir.

“Yes , sir?” He laughs. “So formal?” “Did I lose you?” “Bore you?”

Oh, no. I was merely pondering a few things as you spoke. That’s all,” as as she slowly mouthed the words. Feeling she must have blushed. And found herself sitting in the coffee shop again. And leaning over to self consciously take sip of her now cold coffee.

William smirked, a playful glint in his eye. "Pondering, huh? I must have really made an impression."

Lydia chuckled, feeling a warmth spread through her – even to her toes. "More like I was transported. Your study sounds truly magical."

And what about the other parts of the house?

“One better,” William countered. Perhaps where you live? And he realized that he had grown so comfortable in their conversation he lost the train of thought regarding the much larger context.

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