Just one more yesterday

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She's done this routine so many times now; she's even memorized her schedule down to the last minute. It takes exactly five minutes for her to gather enough energy to drag herself into the bathroom, where she catches sight of her reflection. She's a wreck—the bags under her eyes could hold a week's worth of groceries.

"This is it," Minouche tells herself at 7:53 AM. "Today, Lily won't die."

That's easier said than done. It hasn't happened the countless other times Minouche has tried, and if Minouche is completely honest with herself, she's not sure if it's ever going to happen. After all, what if she's actually dead and in hell, suffering her punishment?

The day proceeds as it always does. At 8:36 AM, she goes to school and meets Lily. It's probably the one highlight of Minouche's endless day to be able to see Lily, always smiling and unaware of what will happen, what has happened, and what will continue to happen.

At 10:12 AM, Minouche writes the Biology test yet again. She's done this so many times she actually has all the answers memorized; the entire class stares at her with comically wide eyes when she hands in the test within the first ten minutes.

For the entire day, Minouche restlessly counts down the minutes until 3:18 PM. Math drags on as the teacher tries to explain the proof of some complex trigonometric identity to an eternally baffled and despairing class. When he finally lets the class go, Minouche is heartily regretting not skipping. She dashes out the door and practically flies down the stairs to get to the parking lot in time. Three minutes left.

When Minouche spots Lily in the stairwell, about to leave, she calls out, "Lily! Wait up!"

Lily turns around, smiling fondly as Minouche runs over, "Hello."

"Hey darling," Minouche replies, linking their arms before stepping outside into the cold. "I finished the Bio test today, so let's go celebrate!"

Lily protests slightly, grumbling that she should go home and start on the huge Physics assignment due the next week. "At this rate, I'm never going to finish it," Lily complains.

Minouche forces herself to laugh rather than cry at how true it is. Holding tightly onto Lily's arm, Minouche steers her away from the parking lot and towards the cafe near their school. When 3:18 PM rolls around two minutes later, Minouche pretends that she doesn't hear the hideous sound of squealing tires trying to find purchase on the slick winter ice.

It's only one death avoided, however. Lily dies two hours later, when she insists on going home. They're crossing the road when Lily's scarf catches against the back of an impatient, right-turning motorcycle. By the time anyone becomes aware of what is happening, it's too late. It's always too late.

Minouche curses both herself and the motorcyclist as she rushes over. Some crows are startled into flight by Minouche's shouting, and they take to the air with mocking laughter.

Someone calls the paramedics and the police, but it's no use. Even if Lily hadn't snapped her neck, she would only have died during the drive to the hospital. At least this time, she died relatively quickly.

The next day, Minouche wakes up again at 7:46 AM and the day repeats.

Lily's first death was an automobile accident. She had been distracted all afternoon, claiming that her Physics test hadn't gone as well as expected, so Minouche suggested they go to her house after school to study together. "You'll tell me what's really going on, right?" Minouche had asked her friend, because she hadn't believed for a moment that Physics was the only thing bothering Lily.

They decided to cut through the parking lot to get home faster, which had been a terrible idea in hindsight. The parking lot was a mess to get through on a warm, summer afternoon—on an icy, winter day, they hadn't stood a chance.

They went single file between the parked cars, Minouche in front with her head turned to talk with Lily. Actually, Minouche did the talking while Lily did the listening. Minouche broke off in the middle of her sentence when she heard a sharp screech. Minouche looked up due to reflexes rather than an understanding of what was going on. The gray blur headed her way only inspired a single thought: *huh*.

While Minouche was processing the sight of a wildly veering caravan, something hit her from behind, causing her to fall flat on her face. A split second later, Minouche heard a sickening *crunch* and a scream. She braced herself for the blazing pain of a broken bone, but seconds passed and it never came. Her legs and arms stung where they had scraped against the ground, but that was the worst of it.

Minouche got up hastily, brushed off the glass pellets, and called out frantically, "Lily? Lily!"

No one answered except a crow, cackling delightedly.

Although the guilt began to set in almost immediately, it wasn't until after Lily's funeral that Minouche woke up again on December 8th. *It must be a sign*, Minouche thought, *now I can set it right*. She was, and still is, grateful for a chance to make it up to Lily. Even if the loop is Minouche's punishment for surviving, at least she has a chance to fix things.

When Minouche had seen Lily alive again, she cried. Lily patted her gently, and was a good sport about pretending that Minouche wasn't sobbing like everything important in her life had been brutally ripped away.

"I'll save you," Minouche whispered fiercely as she clung to a very bemused Lily. At least, Minouche tried to save Lily by proposing going to Lily's house to work instead. Minouche thought that maybe if the routine changed, Lily's fate would be changed too. It didn't work; when they passed the construction site by the library, a falling metal pole pierced Lily's skull and killed her instantly. Minouche's scream nearly drowned out the mocking laughter of the two crows on a power line.

And when Minouche woke up again on December 8th, that's when the doubts began to set in. Would she ever actually save Lily?

Some days, the futility of the whole situation feels is overwhelming and threatens to drown Minouche. She's not particularly proud of those days. Those days, Minouche cannot bear the sight of Lily and the knowledge of her death, and avoids Lily for the entire day. By 3:18 PM, however, guilt will be consuming Minouche alive, worsening when the phone call from Lily's mother comes. It doesn't help that the flock of crows outside seem to be laughing derisively at her, either.

The feeling never fades when the loop restarts and Lily is revived, unharmed, and confused over why Minouche hangs onto her and cries like the world is falling apart. Despite never understanding, Lily always holds Minouche tenderly and pats her back as she whispers meaningless reassurances in Minouche's ear, "Shh, I'm here for you. I'll always be here."

"No, no you won't," Minouche always sobs, overflowing with the need to explain—the loop, the deaths, her punishment.

But the few times she did, Lily only kissed her forehead and said, "Please rest more, and take care of yourself." Eventually, Minouche stopped trying to explain.

Minouche stopped counting how many loops she's lived, but she's pretty sure that she passed the fiftieth loop a long time ago. By now, it takes her five minutes to finish the whole Biology test and she can do the trigonometric proof faster than her Math teacher.

Every day, it's the same thing with only slight changes and it's killing Minouche. She just wants to break the damn loop already. She's fed up with Lily's deaths; she thought she would become desensitized to it the more times it looped, but it doesn't. It only gets worse.

It's always Minouche's fault. Every day, she makes some small mistake and it is Lily who pays the price. The guilt nipping at her heels has grown into some grotesque monster gnawing on her bones, forcing her heart to pulse in time to the thought of *If only it were me instead of you*. The thought settles down in Minouche's mind like a stone dropped into a pond. The longer it stays, the more connecting ideas are stirred up by its ripples.

Minouche ponders the many "what ifs": what if the time loop is making her atone for her mistakes? What if to make things right, Minouche had to die? After all, if Lily hadn't acted on that day, it would have been Minouche's death. It would be fitting if Minouche was supposed to take her rightful place as Lily's replacement.

But despite Minouche's desire to bring Lily back, she's not sure if she's willing to die. After all, once the time loop is broken, death might be pretty permanent for her. And being dead means Minouche can't spend time with Lily. She won't be able to read Lily's awful poetry, to graduate with her, to be roommates with her and learn to be independent. If Minouche dies, she'd be giving it all up.

*Am I ready for this?* Minouche asks herself again and again, but she doesn't have a definite answer for herself until one day Lily is bleeding to death in her arms, again. It's hard not to be overwhelmed with the need to just stop this from ever occurring.

Minouche knows, then, that her answer is a resounding *yes*. It doesn't matter if she dies trying to set things right; she just wants Lily to stay alive. Lily deserves more than an eternity of dying. She deserves to live and experience the feelings she has so far only written about. As much as Minouche wishes to be there with Lily and experience the same things together, it's not her choice. And if she has to give up what she wanted most, well, at least the time loop knows that she wants to fix things at all costs.

Minouche gives herself the span of two loops to change her mind or to come up with an alternative. Those loops come and go, and Minouche has to live with the fact that she can't put this off. Looking in the mirror at 7:53 AM, she tells herself, "Today is the day that Lily *lives*." She grins at herself, feeling a lot more confident about that today than ever before.

Throughout the day, Minouche runs through her plan again and again, paying little attention to anything else. For the first time in her memory, she barely finishes the Biology test.

Lily notices Minouche's odd behavior and calls her out on it, "Are you okay? You're really distracted today."

"I bombed the Bio test," Minouche lies, "so I think I should pick up the slack and study really hard for the Math test. Wanna come over to help me?"

"Sure," Lily agrees, like Minouche expected her to. "You'll tell me what's really going on, right?"

Minouche is too busy scanning the parking lot to answer. She lets Lily walk in front, and Lily turns her head back partially so she can hear Minouche talk. It's 3:17 PM, and it will happen any moment now.

Minouche sees the car and—it's already skidding on the ice! Hearing the squealing tires, Lily turns around. But Minouche has lived this before, and she knows how little time there is for Lily to react. So Minouche reacts instead. Lily isn't even fully turned around when Minouche slams into her from behind, sending her to the side. Minouche, however, is unable to stop herself from slipping on the ice as the van rushes towards her, the driver futilely stomping on the brake.

*Crunch.* And pain, the pain she should have felt long ago, burns its way through her body as she falls to the ground. Finally all is well.

Lily desperately calls out her name like the world is ending. "It's okay," Minouche wants to say, but nothing is working anymore, "I finally fixed it."

Minouche's last moment is spent looking into the eyes of a crow loudly applauding her with raucous laughter.

The funeral is a small, quiet, and private affair. Throughout the service, Lily tries to keep her eyes dry. If people notice her sniffling, they're kind enough not to mention it. A small trickle of people come up to her during the day to offer condolences and tell her, "We understand how you feel."

*No, you don't know what it's like to lose the person you wanted to grow old with*, Lily thinks as she smiles tersely. *Your wife is still alive.*

At one point, Minouche's tearful grandmother, Nana, comes up and enfolds Lily into a tight hug that reminds Lily of afternoons with Minouche. "Nana," she confesses tearfully, "it should have been me. Minouche, at the last moment, she… she…"

"Poor dear," Nana whispers. "There wasn't anything you could have done about it."

Lily nods and buries her head in Nana's shoulder, breathing in deeply to stop her shaking sobs. When Nana hums and tries to rub soothing circles into Lily's arm, Lily wrenches herself away; the gesture reminds her too much of Minouche. Lily smiles apologetically, although it's closer to a grimace, and promises to call before fleeing.

Lily can see her parents among the guests filing outside to where they are lowering the coffin, but she can't bring herself to go to them. They would definitely try to coerce her stay and pay her "last respects" to Minouche, but Lily would rather leave it hanging between the two of them like that hopeful, hesitant question she never got to ask. If she never actually sees the coffin lowered into the ground, she can at least pretend that things will eventually be okay.

Lily desperately wishes that she could see Minouche one last time—to be able to apologize for being unable to help. It should have been her, and Lily wishes she could fix things. She can't imagine an eternity without Minouche, after all.

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[Word count: 2,494]