**24 Hours**

“Michael?”

Her voice is low, resentful of my inattentiveness. The lunatic sprinting through the entrance caught my interest.

The sense of desperation about him should’ve been enough to make us realize what he was about to do. Even from where I am sitting, I can see the tear tracks on his cheeks. They contrast sharply with his strange, twisted grin and the reckless energy that seems to fill his entire body. As he passes through the door, he begins to scream. He runs across the main banquet table, throwing back shots along the way. All eyes are on him, everyone struggling to comprehend what he is doing.

He reaches the head of the table and turns to face us all, his eyes bugging out of his head, daring us to challenge him. Silence descends on the room in place of his screams, which have suddenly stopped. Then, slowly, people begin to rise out of their dining chairs to cheer him on, motivating him to drink more, to yell louder, and to show more brutality.

I am not like him.

The guy’s name was Christopher. He got his letter 21 hours ago and had another 3 to end his life whatever way he wanted. He looked no older than 25, no younger than 18. He was way too young to get marked. Youngest I’ve ever heard of. We all get marked. It’s a purely arbitrary system. No substance, no reason, no consistency. You get your letter when you get it, and there’s absolutely nothing you can do about it.

Everyone deals with being marked differently. Some lock their doors and cry for the 24 hours, others call their one true love to tell them everything they’ve always wanted to say but have been too afraid to, and some just get wasted. I have no respect for the people who choose to call the ones they loved. The last thing I want are calls from people who never cared to tell me they loved me until 2 hours before their death. Do they think that’s something I want to hear right before they die?

“I can’t sit here and watch someone celebrate that they’re going to be dead in a couple hours.” My girlfriend, Madison, is what you would call a pessimist. She isn’t a big fan of humanity. But despite her cynicism, I love her more than anyone on the planet.

Christopher runs out of the restaurant, eyes similar to a deer caught in headlights. “There he goes,” Madison proclaims, “Off to say goodbye to his ‘one true love”. I’ve learned to fall in love with her sarcasm.

She puts a cigarette between her lips as we’re leaving the restaurant. I catch a glimpse of Madi’s snuff bottle as she closes her purse. She turns to me while lighting her cigarette and says, “What do you think is the worst tragedy in life?”

“Depends, everyone handles tragedies differently.”

“I think the worst tragedy is meeting your soul mate at the wrong time. Imagine if we had met each other at 16? Maybe I would’ve been in love with you and you would’ve been fucking some other girl. Or maybe you would’ve loved me but I wasn’t interested in the arrogant ones.”

She knows how to make me laugh, “Shut up. Look at me, I’m the sexiest guy you’ve ever seen, you would’ve easily fallen in love with me.” She rolls her eyes at me, the same eye roll I get every time I talk about myself. “Once upon a time you thought I was the cockiest and meanest person alive, remember that?”

“Because you are, you confident asshole,” she shoves my arm away before retracting herself back into me from the cold of the early spring weather.

“We would’ve never known that a friendship like this existed.”

That thought terrifies me. It’s impossible to think of a future that doesn’t involve her. Sending her to me at the wrong time was the most fucked up thing that the universe could’ve done.

“Let’s stop talking about this. I don’t know why I brought it up.” She avoids everything that means remotely anything to her.

I plant my lips on her forehead as I say goodbye to her on her porch.

I’m on my way home when it begins to pour. Running down Markham Street, my eyes fail to acknowledge a small pothole in the sidewalk. Before I know it, my feet are slipping out from under me, sending me sprawling straight into a puddle. I slowly roll out of the puddle when I notice something strange on the sidewalk. Scratched onto the surface of the rain-soaked cement is my name, Michael. And beside it is a letter.

Trying to tear apart a piece of paper drenched in water is hard, but not as hard as opening a letter when I already know what it contains.

‘Michael Thomson, you now have 24 hours.’

I can’t scream, I can’t cry, I can’t do anything. Anything that demands a feeling, I am incapable of doing. I stare at the letter until the rain washes off all the ink and the paper is nothing but a soggy white sheet.

My feet splash water up my legs as I sprint back to Madi’s house. *Knock knock knock.* My knuckles are hard against the door, reflecting the emotions that are tumbling around in my head. I hear her stumble down the stairs. She peels back the door slowly; evidently she had just been asleep. Without thinking, I grab her face in my hands and kiss her harder than I have ever kissed her or anyone before. Her hand goes under my t-shirt to trace her fingers along the middle line of my back. Her long thin legs are thrown across my hips as I carry her upstairs to her bedroom.

It’s the best sex of my life. It’s always good, but this time, there’s an aggression to it- a passion and an emotional intensity that only we have.

10 hours left.

The sun peeks through the curtains to illuminate the left side of Madi’s face. Her lips are slightly parted and her legs are on top of mine. I blow air into her face to wake her up but all I get in return is a wrinkle of a nose.

It’s difficult to look at her without her knowing that I am dying. Marked. 10 hours is all the life left for me and she lays there as I make her the fool, allowing her to think that mornings like these are going to last a lifetime. I watch myself lie to her and I hate it, but what I hate more is the thought of telling her.

5 hours.

As I walk home the realization hits me that my life is ending. It hits me in the sight of people with their partner’s hand in theirs, of businessmen smoking cigars outside their company buildings, of a plane that flies overhead as it makes its way to a foreign land. I am never going to get the chance to experience any of it. I’m not going to finish my MBA or travel to Thailand. I am never going to get down on one knee and ask Madi to marry me. I will never see my beautiful baby girl that could’ve been. I will never tell my parents that they’re grandparents. I will never argue with my daughter about her choice of boyfriend. But most of all, I lack the opportunity to grow old with my best friend.

My apartment door handle tumbles onto the ground after I smash the door against my apartment’s inner wall. I have four hours to live. How is someone supposed to remain sane thinking about that?

Call Madi.

“Hello?” Her voice sounds rushed as she picks up the phone.

No answer.

“Mike what’s wrong? Is everything okay, are you okay?” Her voice rises in pitch, suggesting that she had risen from her seat in concern.

“Please come.” I need her all the goddamn time.

*Knock knock knock. ‘*Tell her, Mike’, I think to myself. I rip back the door to see black circles around her eyes, and dried blood on her lips as she continues to bite them.

“What’s wrong Mike?” She slurs, avoiding my gaze.

I feel a sudden rush of anger. “Tell me you’re high. Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m sorry, it was bad, really bad Mike. I needed it to go away.”

Three hours left and I have to spend it with her in this state, high off coke.

“Where’s the rest? Give it to me now.”

“Fuck off, Michael. I’m not addicted.”

“Oh ‘I’m not addicted, I’m not addicted’ I mock her. “Shut the fuck up. Yes you are. Stop LYING to yourself Madi.”

She’s shaking, hands clasped together, unable to stop fidgeting.

“I can’t continue to sit by and watch you fuck yourself up even more.”

“Oh, even more? That’s real nice of you Mike, thank you!” This is when I hate the sarcasm. “Not like I already have enough shit going around my own head; thanks for reminding me. Just cause I’m a realist and know what a shit hole this world is, doesn’t mean I’m fucking insane okay? Or maybe I am! But guess what baby… you’re the one that fell in love with me.”

I turn my back to her. I would’ve kicked her out after saying shit like that, but not today.

“Don’t turn your back on me Michael,” she says as she throws me forward into the concrete wall. My head acts like a tennis ball and momentum throws me backwards onto the ground.

Everything goes black.

2 hours left.

“Michael please wake up. Please! I’m sorry!” She’s screaming and the salty taste of her tears is falling onto my lips.

I gradually open my eyes.

“I fucked up,” she whispers to me as she sits trembling, eyes wide open.

“Why? Why’d you have to go and do that?” I stare at her with eyes that no longer comfort her, but pierce her. Enough to see the physical pain that it creates in her.

She grabs my arm but I quickly rip it out of her grasp.

“You’re not allowed to just do that! You can’t expect me to constantly do everything for you and then throw me away when I’m looking out for you. I’m not going to be here one day Madi. What are you going to do then?”

Her eyes are no longer staring at me in the way that suggests I am the best thing to ever happen to her. She is screaming inside, I can see it. I have sent another bullet through her stomach.

I can’t look at her. I stare at the wall.

“I love you, I fucking love you okay?”

She flinches in physical reaction to those words. I have never said them to her before and it is easy to see that she does not like them.

“Don’t say that to me.” She gets up to look out the window.

“Why? It’s not like you didn’t already know that.”

“Don’t just say it to me because you think I need to hear it.”

“Madi you’re my best friend, you’ve let me understand you. I’m in love with you.”

“That makes me sad.”

“Why does that make you sad, it should make you happy?”

It did make her happy, I could see it in her restraint. She hid her face in her hands as she shook from the pressure of her emotions. She propelled herself into a hug that dragged me down to the bed. Her gold eyes peered into mine crying.

“I love you Mike, so much it scares me, and it’s messing me up. I’m not good for you.”

The strength of her hug started to feel good as I told her she had nothing to be scared for- painfully lying.

“You’re the only important thing in my life Mike. Forced to think about you leaving... It killed me.”

1 hour left.

I took a million mental pictures of her; maybe wherever I end up, I’ll be able to see them. Maybe I’ll get a chance to trace my fingers across her stomach once more, or hear her laugh when I mock her favorite songs, or see those eyes look right into mine when she wakes up.

This girl loves and cares for me too much. What good did it do her? I let her fall in love with someone who didn’t have the decency to tell her that they were going to be lying cold beside her when she woke up.

I decide to leave her a letter.

Madi,

Don't come looking for me. Don't hurt yourself more by doubting the circumstances that we were unfortunately given. Humanity has a cruel way of working; you of all people know this.

I was marked today. I couldn’t bring myself to telling you. I wanted to spend these last hours with you by my side as normally as anyone who gets marked could.

I’m sorry. We were never supposed to end like this and I understand if you hate me- in fact I want you to. But please just listen to me one last time.

Fall in terrifying love with someone. Someone that understands you like you once told me I understand you. A guy that would run halfway around the world if you told him to, as I tried to do for you.

I need you to need him because I can’t die and leave you with no one. He has to care for you more than I did.

You deserve everything you ever wanted. I wish I could’ve given it to you.

Who knows, maybe we’ll meet in some other time or in some other place. But for now, I’ll miss you.

Michael

I slip the letter beside her pillowcase and totter out of the apartment. The rain aggressively falls as raindrops splatter across the pavement. Discomfort and shame floods my body as I recite to myself what I wrote her. Physical hurt vaporizes all over me and makes me sickly comfortable.

Brick walls in the surrounding alley attract my fists to them. Punch after punch, scream after scream, I slowly lose momentum and my knuckles allow blood to plunge into rain puddles. My legs give out sending me directly to the wet street. I’m losing sense of my vision now, and white lights shoot like bullets through my irises.

‘Take me, just fucking take me already.’

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