

Bells and Whistles

14th of June – 2027

He smiles.

It's a smile I've never seen before, with the waterfall collapsing behind him. It's a smile for me, because he stares at me, all of me, with the sunlight behind me, in a kaleidoscope of colour but still real, still blazing orange and yellow, against the blue sky. He seems so happy.

"I've always thought of myself as the kind of guy who'd fall too hard, too fast, and then...", and his voice trails off, and he stares out, off the drooping cliff.

"And then...then we'd watch it all burn?"

He nods, almost unnoticeably. "Yeah."

Something halts him, as if something off the cliff, away from us, gives him pause. But when I glance over, there's nothing there – so I know it's something inside him, eating away.

"You came into my life so abruptly," he whispers, "but I know I shouldn't worry about time." He smiles at me, looking in my eyes for reassurance. He makes me smile so widely. So widely.

I squeeze his hand. "I...I don't know how we found each other, but I'm glad we did."

He pauses, suddenly. "Then why does this all feel so wrong?"

I pause, staring in his blue eyes. The waterfall behind him flushes out, a pour of water from cliff-top to pool, and then it flickers, a mere illusion.

"Because you're not here."

He tenses up. He's frozen again, glitching out. Fading away again. The waterfall dispels. The golden sunshine slumbers beyond clouds, and beyond mountains, somewhere amidst the blackness. The bleak. I close my eyes, then open them again.

I wish you were here.

20th of May – 2027

I met him underneath the stars.

He was holding a plastic cup, with his name written on it, and he was laughing. About the name. Because someone thought they might just lose his cup if it's blank, if it loses the word that binds it to him. To *Lance*.

The sun set an hour ago, and the moon rose, and the stars awoke. Lance looks at me, stares deep in my eyes, because he's asked me something. A question.

"Can I get you something to drink?"

He eyes around him, searching, because I've said yes.

"Here you are," he says, handing me a plastic cup, the liquid splashing, almost out of the cup. He's smiling at me.

"The cup thing is weird," I say, staring at his name written down. Feels too archaic, to stare at in pen like that, black ink. Weird.

He chuckles, taking a sip. "I think it's a nice throwback," he replies, and then he falls silent. "Are we gonna spend all night talking about plastic cups?"

"I don't want to."

Lance leads me to somewhere quieter, still outside. Still underneath the belt of stars, little halos in the sky. Little angels. “I wanted to tell you how cute you are,” he says to me, and I feel myself blush.

It’s been a tougher year than expected. I went on one date, earlier in the year, with a guy who told me he was unsure of his future. That he might be gone in a month or so. Not to death, no, but to overseas, somewhere. No other dates, a few guys that came and went, never quite came. Nights ended up lonely and dreading it – but at least I had the something down there to keep me company.

Lance smirks, and I sit down beside him. He’s shorter than me, but not by much. My father is tall. A mountain of a man.

“Tell me a bit about yourself, cutie,” he whispers.

“Oh, uh,” a pause, to breathe, “I like to write, and read.”

“I’d love to read some of your stuff someday.”

He makes me smile, in a sheepish kind of way. “Do I sound stupid saying I like not leaving my bed and not doing much with my days sometimes?”

“Not stupid,” he murmurs, a glint in his eyes, his smile. “I guess I’m the same.”

I laugh, softly, kind of a chuckle.

“I almost didn’t come tonight.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“Me too,” I say back. I can feel myself moving closer to him. The moonlit sky is beautiful out here. The view is almost too distracting. Almost.

11th of June – 2027

He told me once to look out for the divots in his backyard. Big and small lumps and bumps, from the dog, from his little brother. We barely had time for the backyard.

“You brought me back,” he whispers, staring down at the upturned dirt down near his feet.

“Brought you back...”

“I don’t live here anymore,” he says, fumbling with his hands. He can hear the birds, chirping out there amongst the trees, and he can hear me. The birds welcome him warmer.

I try to smile, for the comfort. “I know I can’t tell you I miss you.”

“But you do anyway...”

“It’s...it’s so cold out here now, colder than last month,” and my reply falls out, a fumbling breath, and he looks at me, half-staring. “I’m just going to go grab a sweater.”

He waits there, frozen still, until I come back to him. It’s a temporary forever.

“So...how’ve you been anyway?”

“Yeah, okay.”

He sighs, and I do too. I’m looking at his eyes, how green they are. He smiles, when he notices, then it fades. He’s looking at his feet again.

“How’s the new place?”

He glances up at me, nodding. “We’re settling in now, I think,” he says, “but unpacking is a chore.” There falls a silence, an expected one. He draws a blank. It’s tough, I’d think, for him to talk to me. I want him to, still.

“Yeah,” I say, scratching my head, “I’ll be renting out with Jake soon, guess I can tell you.”

“He was your friend,” he bites his lip, “your friend from university, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The backyard has seen prettier times. It has seen the joy of a family, no doubt, and the flicker of rain crumbling down on dry soil. Now it sees dints, and bumps, and bruising.

21st of May – 2027

I left him at the party, I followed a friend out the front, her boyfriend did *this*; her boyfriend did *that*. I didn’t see him much after that.

I woke up this morning with a text from him. From Lance.

I forgot to ask you something.

I paused, rereading his message. Six words at first. Only the six. Then, a minute later, he replied to himself.

Would you want to hang out soon?

Are you gay?

Sorry, that’s a bit forward.

I didn’t give myself much time before I replied. I said yeah, I would like that. I would. When we spoke last night, my heart fluttered, I was transported into a romantic comedy lens-world, where you find love on the street, on the corner, at a party. I can see his smile still.

He texts me now, a few hours later – we’ve moved beyond first words, first flirtations. He says he thinks I’m cute, cuter than him, but I say he’s cute, cute without words, I probably make him blush.

Did I make you laugh last night? Was that serious laughter?

Yeah. You make me laugh. My fingers hit the keys; my cat sulks at my feet.

You make me smile.

The cat sulks out of the room, but it doesn’t feel empty in here now.

I wish you could see how silly the grin on my face is.

He sends an emoji, a yellow face, nothing like his. His is cuter.

What’re you up to at the moment?

Just lying in bed, watching TV.

I wish I was there with you.

14th of June – 2027

He’s stopped to smell the flowers.

I’ve taken him to the haven, a haven amongst towering colossuses, towering buildings in the heart of the city. I came here before him, when I wanted to be alone. You learn so much for the denseness of colour, the vibrant sprig of nature, and then the cut off, as it dips from green to grey. Without him would be with grey.

“Do you remember the first time we kissed?” He has my camera to his eye, and he snaps a photograph of the flowers. He’s still talking to me.

“I remember,” I say, smiling at him, “you were in my bedroom.”

“But we didn’t do anything else, did we?”

“Just kissed.”

He hands me the camera, tells me to look at the photographs he took.

“Had you noticed me before we talked? At the party...”

“I thought you’d be straight.” He glances at me, when I say this. Like he doesn’t believe me.

He slings the strap of the camera over his neck again. “So, you noticed me?”

“I thought you were cute, too...”

He smirks, aiming the camera at me. He takes a snapshot, before it goes.

“You’re such a cutie,” he whispers, then he turns the camera back to the flowers. He spots a vivid yellow flower, in the sea of white flowers. Dancing on its own.

I follow him, sometimes idling behind him.

“When you texted me, I felt something new,” and he glances at me, only for a second. “I felt like for once I wasn’t chasing after every guy I liked, that he came to me.”

“I liked you.”

He pauses, looking at me with those green eyes. But he isn’t smiling anymore. His face is of confusion, worry, almost, and the camera dangles from the strap around his neck. He doesn’t know what to say anymore.

“I like you too,” I mutter out, every word a breath. “I still do.”

“Matt.”

“I can say it,” a whisper, “but I know it doesn’t change anything, so don’t shoot me.”

He hands me back the camera and walks on by himself. He doesn’t want me to follow him, or doesn’t hope for it, so I wait back here, amongst the flowers and the bloom.

I miss you, Lance.

But I stay a few paces behind him. Or a mile.

24th of May – 2027

Lance is here, in my bedroom.

“It’s how I thought it would be, your bedroom,” he says, wandering around, looking at things, touching things, gently. He is gentle.

“What, cute, tidy and gay?” He smirks. “I guess it is.”

We didn’t feel like going somewhere out of the way, so we had dinner at a restaurant nearby and now he’s come home with me, and we’ll watch something in bed.

He kisses me when I almost bump into him.

It isn’t awkward or forced – it feels natural. We’re alone now, after all.

“I feel fat after eating so much,” he murmurs, collapsing down on the bed.

It doesn’t kill the mood entirely.

“I’m bloated too, I ate half your chips too.”

I cosy up next to him. He’s warm, his arms aren’t built like tanks or strongholds, but he holds me, and I feel safer than I would alone, in the darkness. The light’s still on.

“Do you think people see past their differences, or do differences nibble away at them?”

He surprises me, with that. It’s out of the blue, before we’ve started watching the first episode of a TV show I wanted to show him. It’s about an old-timey jazz singer.

“You want to hope you can accept someone for their differences, I guess.”

“Sorry, it’s a heavy question.”

“It’s fine,” I say, smiling at him, “I just...I don’t have answers sometimes to stuff like that.”

We watch an episode, and then we kiss again. His lips are soft. His lips taste like cotton candy, or the sensation of it, when you eat it. His lips taste sweet.

He sleeps here, in my bed. I can’t sleep. I replay something he said to me, when we were eating dinner. *I didn’t know if I was ready for something serious until I met you.* He said this before he took a sip from his glass of water. Then he continued eating and staring at me.

So, I hope he is ready.

In the morning, when he wakes up, I’ve been awake for an hour. I let him sleep in, in the warmth of my bed, and I lay there beside him on my phone. I slip the wireless headphones out of my ears as he says good morning.

“Good morning,” I whisper back, kissing him. It’s natural already.

“How did you sleep?”

“I slept okay,” I say, facing him proper, “how about you?”

He says he slept well, and soon enough we get out of bed, not that we want to. He follows me around the house, because I want something to eat, so he steals a piece of toast too. He showers when I sit down to edit something I’ve been working on. Then I shower.

“I’ll miss you,” he says, as he steps outside into the sunlight.

I don’t want him to go. “I’ll miss you too.”

“Text me, then, when you miss me.”

I’m smiling again. “I will,” I whisper, and he moves towards his car, parked off the driveway, on the grassy sidewalk. He waves, then opens the driver’s side door.

Maybe I should rush over and kiss him again, I think to myself, but I don’t. I just watch him go. I wave again, when he’s inside, staring back at me. He waves one last time.

I’ll see him tomorrow, hopefully.

15th of June – 2027

I remember what he said about a week ago. The words have barely changed in my head.

“I think I know how you feel,” he said, which had come after, “I just don’t want to rush into things with you.” But it wasn’t time that halted him. A connection can bloom, like a flower, even without years in the sunlight. I suppose a connection is less a flower, more of a randomly-decided something. *A something.*

“Are you going to look at me today?” He snaps, letting the snow fall on his cheek, staring only to me, sitting down beside him. First snowfall.

“Not today, Lance.”

He shakes his head, almost unnoticeably.

“I don’t know why,” he mumbles, “I don’t know what I’ve done now.”

“Don’t blame yourself today, okay?”

“Okay.”

In the field of snow, he looks fallen. Sunken, almost into the snow. But his hair is perfect, almost. Everything is almost here. The snow is heavy, almost.

“I thought about that day, and the day after it.” He looks at me when I talk, I know, even as I stare down at the rubble of white.

“What did you think of?”

“You know,” I whisper out, “I wonder what would’ve been enough to change your mind.”

“Nothing, I think.”

“Humour me, a little.”

He pauses, staring, then he fishes for something in his pocket, realising he doesn’t have it in there. He must have left it somewhere else. Entirely. He nods his head, “Okay.”

“What if I asked you right then if you ever had feelings for me?”

“I’d have told you the truth,” he mumbles, pausing, “that I do, or did.”

“Do you?”

He smiles, cupping a handful of snow. “I do,” there’s something in his voice, “Yeah, I do.”

“Then it wasn’t me...”

“You remember what I said to you that day.”

“It’s etched in my mind. Yeah.”

Lance inches closer, and then closer still. But he doesn’t touch me. It wouldn’t feel the same as before, nevertheless. His hands would feel different; his warmth has gone.

I want to hold his hand, again. “You should go, Lance.”

“You don’t mean that,” he says, “not one bit.”

“*I don’t.*”

“You look cold, Matt.” He inches back, stands up, stretching. I look over at him, and he’s turned away, admiring the snowfall around him. He’s shaken me off.

“I’m okay, it’s not too bad.”

He walks to stand beside me again. “You’re doing this to yourself.”

“Standing out in the cold air, oh well?” he murmurs. Snowflakes fall.

I shiver.

29th of May – 2027

He came in when I was working. I told him he couldn’t stay long.

“I just came to see you,” he says, a smirk there, clear as day, “and I bought an extra coffee, on accident.” He slides the warm coffee cup across the bench, and I glance around for any other customers. The store is mostly empty.

“You shouldn’t have, babe.”

“You call me babe in public now...”

“I won’t hide it.” I give him the cheesiest smile I can manage. I wish I could wink.

He takes a sip of his own coffee. “When does your shift end?”

I glance down at my watch, as it phases in. “I’ve got an hour.”

In an hour, he meets me outside, carrying something in his hand.

“I bought us dinner.”

We walk down to the collapsing pier, a chin of stubble on the coastline of town. Rubble. There are tables, underneath the trees, tallest trees near here. Early stages of replanting.

He sits down opposite, and he begins to unpack. “I thought about the night we met more, when I showered last night.”

“Anything new to report?”

“I don’t think I realise I wanted to flirt with you, back then.”

He unfolds layer by layer, until substitute fish and chips lies out in front of us. The fish almost all died, a few years back. Bleached.

Beached. “So, you weren’t attracted to me?”

“No, I was,” he says, chuckling, “I’ve already said you surprised me.”

He bites into one of the potato chips – it’s hot but cooling down. What they call *fish* looks especially sloppy tonight; too moist, or too battered.

“A good surprise...”

“Of course.”

“That’s all that matters then.”

He smiles, and then laughs. I didn’t like the taste of the *fish*. He can see it on my face, no doubt.

“Stop,” and he continues to laugh, as I glare at him, hiding my laughter, before I crumble into it, like laughter was the ocean. “It tasted horrible! Hey, hey, it tastes bad.”

“Try it,” I whisper out, ceasing laughter.

“Okay.” He picks out a piece of the *fish*. “Fine.”

12th of June – 2027

He dunks underneath the water, his hair drenching, his smile hiding in the blue. It’s a waterhole I came to as a kid, but I hadn’t been back in years. Probably ten, at least.

He splashes around, playful, like he’s a child again. He’s forgotten I’m here, sitting on a sloping rock, watching him swim from behind my sunglasses. These are older, too. My dad’s.

“You don’t think you’ll get sunburnt?” I say to him, but he shakes it off, dipping underneath the water again. Something behind me, in the bushes, is causing the rustling. A lizard, probably.

“Come in, Matty.”

“I didn’t dress for this,” and I look down at my clothes, all wrong, “you surprised me.”

He swims around, almost searching for something, but then stops, glancing back up at me.

“Please come in.”

I smile, and jump in.

I can dry off after.

Maybe soak in his warmth.

He swims over, smirking. He runs his hand through his hair. The water is cool, a nice cool, not close to freezing. It’s relaxing now, more than the rock up there. It feels wrong to give in to him so easily.

“So, was this a good surprise?”

“It was, yeah.”

He smiles, widely, then turns away.

“What is this, now?” I want him to look at me, when I say that. He’s distracted.

He smiles again, but it’s changed. It’s not a *happy-to-hear-me-speak* smile. It hurts to stare at, to ponder. I bite my lip.

“We’re just friends.”

A floating bug drifts past – dead. “Don’t you want more?”

“I wish I could.”

“Lance –”

He pauses, staring into my eyes. The sun is almost setting, behind him.

“You told me yesterday that you’re moving out,” he says, perking back up, “that’s exciting stuff.” I can tell he wants to splash me, but he’s hesitating. Holding back again.

“It is, yeah.”

7th of June – 2027

He came inside with an empty iced coffee to throw in the bin. He remembered where it was.

“I didn’t get enough sleep last night,” he says, sitting down on the bed. His eyes linger at my feet. I sit beside him.

We don’t kiss.

“We didn’t stay up that late talking.”

“I stayed up later to listen to music, and to think.” He glances to me with a sympathetic smile. I can hear what comes next in my head. I’ve heard it all day.

“I listened to the songs you suggested,” he begins, nodding softly, “I liked them.”

He relaxes his hands beside him, on the bed. It’s not perfectly made – it looks dishevelled, a mess of sheets and pillows. Tossed on when he knocked on the door.

“I’m glad.”

He sighs when I don’t say anything else.

“I don’t want to hurt your feelings,” he whispers out.

Sunlight pours in from the right side of the window – I only opened the curtains on that side. Outside, the green never browns.

“I care about you, Matt, I do,” he continues, “but I’ve got to give myself the time.”

He frowns. He’s fiddling with the sleeve of his shirt, near his wrist.

“I guess I understand that.” I try to smile. “No, I understand. I do.”

I swallow everything.

“We’ll stay friends, for sure, and…” and his voice trails, but I know what would come next. He’s hesitant to say it. Afraid, maybe. He wants hope. But can he afford it?

I sit beside him in silence. “You’re such a sweet guy.” I’m taking everything in, piece by piece. “Thank you for understanding.”

He reaches out for my hand, to squeeze it one last time.

“Lance –”

“Hey,” he says, smiling at me, “I know you want to tell me you’ll miss me.”

I want to tell him. I do. But I bury it, under more dirt.

“I think I better go.” He begins to stand up.

I force out a smile, a smile that probably doesn’t look sincere enough. That probably looks as forged and forced as it is. “I’ll see you around, maybe.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

20th of June – 2027

I couldn’t decide where I wanted to take us today. It’s plain bleakness. Stale white in colour. Just a room with no doors, and not so much walls as endlessness.

I met Lance one month ago.

Barely anything.

A blip.

Lance walks towards me, step by step – he’s wearing blue today, and a pair of jeans. His hair is neater. His smile isn’t forced, maybe. Maybe not.

“Good morning, babe.” He says that last word without pause.

I stare at him, surrounded by the paleness. He isn’t hollow, like the room. No.

“Hey,” I whisper, “Sorry there’s no bells and whistles today.”

He glances around, taking in his surroundings. He smiles. “I don’t mind.”

“You never minded much, until me.”

“Don’t start acting like that.”

I bite my lip. Fiddle with my hands. He’s standing there, still as a beanstalk. Frowning.

I reach into my pocket for something. It’s a folded note.

“I’ve cried over you too much this past month.” He inches forward, reaching out for the note. “I’ve held on to the thought of you every night, when I felt alone.”

He doesn’t know how to react.

“I want you back, and I’ll admit that.”

He’s staring at me, or is he staring through me? I don’t know.

“Sometimes I see you, and I stare at the back of your head,” I whisper, shoving the note back into my pocket, “and I think, what can I say to change his mind?”

“The answer is nothing, I guess.”

He hasn’t said a word.

I search in his eyes for a greenness that isn’t my own envy, or lust, or whatever I’m feeling – but his insides are bleak, like the whiteness of this room. He’s a shell.

“I wrote you something, then looked at my shitty handwriting and trashed it.” He’s staring at my pocket, where the note is tucked. Safe. “So, I typed something up.”

“I wanted to be old-school, because you always liked that.”

He parts his lips, murmuring softly, “I always liked stuff from the past.”

I take out the note again, shoving it into his hand. He tucks it into the pocket of his jeans, with a sympathetic smile on his face.

“You were never going to be him.”

“Don’t say that –”

“No, it’s true.” I try to smile, for him. “Like everyone else, you let me down.”

“I didn’t know –”

I sigh. “Of course you didn’t.”

He inches forward, closer and closer. He seems more replaceable, up close. A doll.

He shouldn’t. “You made me feel worthless, after all that.”

“You tore me in two.”

He says nothing.

“I’ve wanted so bad to hurt you these past few days,” I mutter out, a hopeless cry, “because I see you without hurt and without pain, and you fucking grin.”

He inches closer, and I push him back. I shove him.

“I don’t want you holding me and telling me things will be okay.”

He barely moves.
I push against him again, and again.
I tear at his hair.
I rip away his face.
He is a shell.