

As the sun embarked on its descent over the ocean, I watched as the sky yielded to the decorative twilight of the evening. A soft smile curved my lips upward. The sky before me was transforming into a breathtaking display of deep purples and fiery reds. The reflection of these colours on the surface of the ocean made the horizon look endless. It beckoned to me, promising a world of endless possibilities. As I listened to the soft ebbing of the waves against the shore, I felt myself slipping into a meditative state.

The serenity was disrupted by a peel of laughter, adding a playful tune to the soundtrack of the evening. I peeled my eyes away from the ocean to find the source of the laughter, my smile turning into a full grin as I spotted my siblings and boyfriend running towards the waves. The vibrant colours in the sky above seemed to reflect the happiness radiating from the group. I felt a sudden pang of longing, to experience the innocence and spontaneity they were displaying. The weight of my illness pressed upon me, burying my joy beneath layers of guilt and expectations.

Summoning my courage and muttering "To Hell with it", I kicked off my shoes and made my way towards the water. As I approached, their laughter grew louder carried by the gentle breeze. I entered the water, allowing the cool water to lap against my legs. My boyfriend, James, had spotted me coming to join the group and rushed to greet me with a salty kiss.

"What took you so long?" He teased me.

Pulling away from the embrace. I elbowed him with what strength I had left and looked up at him, still grinning. His brown hair was dripping sea water, and his eyes were crinkled at the

corners as he smiled back at me. It was times like this when I again felt like the girl he had fallen in love with and not the burden I had become.

I felt a surge of energy coursing through my veins as I splashed him playfully, the weight of my illness lifted momentarily. I was grateful when he scooped me up, my arms around his neck as he carried me further into the water to be with the rest of the group. I did not need to voice it for him to understand I possessed no strength to swim out. I looked at him whilst he carried me, etching his face into my memory. In doing so, I managed to catch the twinkle in his eyes just moments before I felt my body submerge in the water. The water enveloped me, and I resurfaced gasping for air. When the surprise subsided, I joined in with the laughter whilst James promised not to do it again. He continued to hold onto me tightly, his arms a comforting support. I enjoyed the feeling of weightlessness as my siblings splashed and played around us, their joy infecting every fibre of my being. For a few precious moments, I forgot about doctor's appointments, treatment plans and the constant gnawing fear that had become an unwelcome but constant companion.

James carried me out onto the shore, and I looked back at my siblings in the water. The glow from the setting sun made the group shine brightly. I soaked it in, reminding myself to cherish every precious second. My heart started to ache as I thought about leaving all this behind. Sensing my inner turmoil, James looked down at me, his eyes filled with concern. He gently cupped my face, his touch once again grounding me.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly.

I nodded, forcing a smile to mask the ache I was feeling. I reached up to cover his hand in mind and dropped them to our sides, fingers entwined. We made our way to the rest of my family gathering around the bonfire. He squeezed my hand in silent support, I squeezed back trying to convey that I was as fine as I could be.

We approached the bonfire, crackling logs sending sparks dancing into the sky. My Mum drew me into a tight embrace, squeezing as if she could fix all the damaged parts of me. She drew back, assessing me, hands still on my shoulders.

"Happy Twenty-First Birthday, My Beautiful Daughter" she said, her eyes brimming with tears.

"Thank you" I whispered, my voice barely audible. I had never been expected to make it this far, emotions were surging through me too fast for me to identify.

A chorus of Happy Birthday rang out around the fire, and I laughed as I saw my Dad walking towards us, holding a precariously balanced cake. He had even added twenty-one little candles.

"Happy Birthday Princess" My Dad beamed at me, pride shining in his eyes. He was a man of few words, but he conveyed everything he needed to in that gaze. *I love you too, Dad* I thought back, knowing he understood our silent communication.

I blew out the candles, making a secret wish. I felt dizzy from the quick release of air but managed to get out, "Thank you, Dad," I filled my voice with warmth and appreciation. "This means the world to me."

"You deserve it, princess," he replied tenderly, squeezing my shoulder gently.

Over the past month my health had started to decline rapidly. I was grateful for every extra day, extra hour, extra minute I had.

My family and James had all come to my grandparents for the weekend of my Twenty - First birthday. Their house had direct access to the beach, and it held my fondest memories from growing up. It was a bonus that it was away from the medical appointments and equipment that had plagued my life for the past few months. Here, I felt I could pretend to be 'normal' again – almost like myself.

As the evening wore on, I could feel myself tiring. I took a moment to sit back and watch everyone interact. If I looked closely enough, I swore I could visibly see the love spilling between them all. Soft tendrils of light and warmth dancing and twirling, entwining above the light of the fire. As I sat there mesmerized, a sense of peace washed over me. It felt like time had slowed down, allowing me to absorb every drawn out second. I knew my time was limited but I was suddenly okay with that. I knew the amount of love in front of me would see everyone through the hardest part of what was to come.

I turned to James who was sitting next to me and told him, "I think I'm ready for bed." James nodded understandingly; he was quiet as he helped me to my feet. Lost in his own reflection as we made our way back to the house. I hoped we had crept away quietly enough to not disturb the rest of the group and allow them to continue with their evening.

Inside, the air was cool and quiet, a stark contrast to the lively atmosphere outside. The hallway was dimly lit as we walked hand in hand towards our room. Once inside, James helped me change, his touch tender, as if he too was savouring every moment, every touch.

"I wish things were different," He whispered softly, helping me pull my pyjama top over my head. He embraced me so I couldn't see his face and I held him as he started to cry silently.

"I know..." I replied, lost for words in that moment. We held each other for a moment longer before drawing apart.

"Promise me something" I whispered. James gave me no response, but I knew he was listening.

"Promise me that you will keep living. For both of us" I said earnestly. "That you won't let this consume you" James stared into my eyes, his own swimming in heartbreak.

"I need you to find happiness again, make sure you give yourself that chance...when you are ready." I insisted. He didn't answer, just leaned down to kiss me deeply.

In our kiss I could taste the goodbye mixed with our love. It was a love that had withstood and seen me through countless hospital visits and sleepless nights. Our lips parted but our foreheads remained touching, "I promise" he whispered. I let myself linger with him a moment longer before stepping away.

James watched me enter the bathroom, pain radiating from him. I prepared for bed in my usual routine. Before leaving the bathroom, my hand reached into the hidden pocket of my toiletry bag. I clasped the pill bottle in my hand, a prescription I had been stashing away until the moment was right. I had suffered through the pain of the past few months knowing the agony was only going to get worse. I had squirreled away the medication I should have been taking until I had stockpiled enough. Ready for when I could make the decision for myself.

I clutched the bottle tightly, my heart pounding. The weight of the decision pressed heavily upon me. My mind flashed to the momentary peace I had felt earlier. I clung to that peace, letting it settle into my chest, working its way to my fingers then down to my toes. I knew the pain would soon fade. I could make this choice for myself, to reclaim some semblance of control in a life that had been dictated by my illness for too long. I swallowed the pills with a glass of water and emerged from the bathroom.

I found the bedroom illuminated by a soft glow, the covers on the bed turned down in preparation. James was waiting for me, ready to assist me in making my way to the bed. I settled on the mattress and he pressed a soft kiss to my brow before turning the light off and joining me under the covers. Our bodies were spooned together and no more words passed between us. The silence was heavy but the light of the moon was soft, illuminating the bedroom. Time ticked over and my body grew heavy. I held onto James's comforting embrace, wanting it to be the last thing I felt.

Dawn broke and I looked over at my physical body still nestled into James. He knew I was gone. I could tell by the tears that were sliding down his cheeks, but he wasn't ready to let me go and face the reality of it yet. I saw his body start to tremble with sobs as the truth finally started to set in. My heart felt like it had shattered into a million pieces to see him like this.

I reached a hand out to comfort him and as I did, I glanced down in confusion and awe. My hand was translucent and radiating brightly with the light of a single star. The light I was emitting seemed familiar somehow, and I furrowed my brows trying to remember where I had

seen it before. It hit me - it was the same light I had noticed dancing above the fire that evening, the love that had been so visible to me.

In that moment, I understood. I had become intertwined with that love, a part of the energy that connected me to the people I loved and those who loved me. I watched James slowly release my body and sit up, his gaze fixed on the spot where my spirit now was. Desperately, he reached out his hand as if he could sense me there. He was trying to grasp onto something tangible, something that would bring me back but all he found was empty space. He dropped his arm, burying his face in his hands as sobs overtook his body again.

A gentle breeze swept through the room and with a single thought I sent a pulse of my shimmering light along it, letting it brush over him. Not knowing what it would do, I saw the light brush against his cheek, drying his tears and soothing his trembling shoulders. I saw a sense of calmness wash over him. I hadn't anticipated there to be any effect and I was grateful I could provide James with this small comfort, after the unwavering support and love he had provided me.

The first rays of sunlight painted the sky with a golden hue, and with it I felt a pull. I looked towards the direction that insistent pull seemed to be coming from and saw the horizon shining brightly. It was time for me to let go, to embrace whatever lay beyond. A thought crossed my mind. I wondered if, before I departed, I could do one last action for everyone I loved.

The draw I was feeling intensified and before I knew it, I was on the beach once again looking out toward the endless horizon. My feet lifted from the ground, my hair billowing around me

gently in a non-existent breeze. My spirit started to thrum with energy as I was suspended by an unseen force.

I looked down at the house that contained those I loved, an intrinsic part of me knew the love I was holding onto was keeping me here. I took a deep breath and tipped my head back exhaling one last time. With a bright flare of starlight, I sent messages to my loved ones who were still sleeping soundly in their beds.

I sensed the soft glow of my presence appearing in each room. My parents stirred in their slumber as I let that glow of my light provide them with the unconscious reassurance that I was at peace. I left my siblings with the joy from the fond memories we shared, intertwining our laughter into the light that settled into each of their chests. I saved James for last, hoping my light for him would convey my gratitude and help him find the resilience to get through this.

Though I would no longer be here with them, I knew my presence would linger. I had merged those final pieces of me with their souls.

When I met the horizon, all I felt was peace as I blinked out of existence.