



the long stories that are short

Elea-Maria Abisamra

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Finished Plates

I have always been a slow eater. That's just how I am. I like to take my time and appreciate each bite I take until I reach the level of fullness I am comfortable with. It's either that or the fact that I am always talking about something.

I was nine years old; it was a few months after my brother was born. That was a true time of discovery for me. It was the time I became more aware of who I was, and more importantly, who I wanted to be. I was sitting at a typical family dinner. Background music was on the tv, and my mom, siblings and I were sitting around the table eating mom's homemade chicken soup. We were talking about things in general, like school and how everyone's day went. When everyone stopped to eat, I began telling them about the drama at my school, complaining about a girl who kept causing problems. She kept going to the guidance counselor about me, and every single day I had to be brought in because she was upset again. It was always about the same thing: she kept complaining that I wasn't trying hard enough to be her friend. But the thing was, I didn't want to be friends with her. She was always making me feel bad about myself, acting like she was better than everyone. Whenever we hung out, she only wanted to talk about herself and do what she wanted to, so of course I wasn't 'trying hard enough' to be her friend. They started chuckling, then, went back to eating, but I was honestly concerned about my situation.

A boy in my class called me "babe." It was the first time anyone ever said that word to me. I told them about how shocked I was. We were playing one versus one in basketball after school, and then other people joined the game, so it was us against them. We were crushing them, and I was so energetic. At some point, I did this really smooth lay up, and he was like, "Whoa! Nice shot, babe!" I immediately turned to face him and froze. My friends passed me the

ball, as it was our turn again—but I was so distracted that I just let it hit me. My siblings laughed at me when I told them that part. Hell, even I laughed at me.

I stopped telling my stories for a while so I could eat my soup. It was getting cold. My brother started talking to my mom about switching his college major. He wanted to get her advice on what he should do. They talked for a while about that as my sister and I ate. And then, they stopped. After a few minutes, I told them more stories for a bit, talking of nothing and everything, all at once.

My mom then asked for our opinions on her new website; we were all wowed by it because it looked amazing. It was for one of her organizations, and I loved hearing about them. When she finished, it came back. Honestly, I don't know why I hated it so much. I hated its noise. It just felt so piercing, so harsh at my skin, that I needed to fill the void surrounding us. So I talked about the talent show coming, and how I was so nervous to audition, but my siblings were quick to reassure me that I would be fine. I asked them which song I should sing to audition with. I started listing song after song. I know, I talked a lot. And they didn't say anything, they were just there, listening to me rambling on about regular stories, so that I wouldn't have to drown in the emptiness of sound. I paused what I was saying to finish my food, since it was barely touched. I was about to get up, but then I realized they all finished their plates lifetimes ago.

Fourteen Minutes

What shimmers for me are memories of the lives I once had. Yes, technically, we all experience one, but within our existence we play millions of people within a million different worlds. There is one particular memory that still shimmers within my mind after two years. It was the very last day of the fleeting summer, the very last 12 hours until I had to switch the flip back to reality. It was a day of stress for the following nerve-racking days to come. A day of hope for the dreams of next summer. A day with time on steroids, where it ran ten times as fast, yet made you feel each second with a certain sense of satiety.

My cousin and I were driving home from the beach, flying away from it all. Away from the days of laughter and relaxation, towards the following year of work and exams. We spent the whole summer together, him and me. We would take midnight drives to the city and morning trips to the beach. My partner in crime—stealing time together from our limited freedom, claiming every second we could get to escape.

The beautiful thing about summer is you don't have to focus or concentrate on anything specific. Your only purpose is to live life fully. You can just lose yourself to the feeling of limitless moments, letting go and praying that this freedom will last. You don't have to know the time of day or day of the month. You don't have to count weeks that have passed or worry for the ones to come, until they are a blink of an eye away, that is.

I lowered the window in the front seat of the car. It smelled like the ocean breeze—a combination of salt and algae, flavoured with the sweetness of being bound to no limitations. I put my head out of the window, and with one hand holding onto the handle, I lifted myself up to sit on the windowsill, and I left the other arm free, high up in the air. My cousin was in his

own world, music blasted in his head phones as he listened to “Baño” for the hundredth time that summer. He didn’t even notice my craziness, for he was just as lost in his.

My hair was flying south, but in a million directions, swaying back and forth with the breeze—completely unsure in which direction it wanted to stay, just like me. I love the feeling of the wind on my face, however strong or weak it may be. It is as if the hands of nature are coming forth and telling me, “I’m here. I’m with you,” carressing me with its soft touch, however harsh it may feel.

During the summer, time is like a freedom, it’s an escape. It turns into a feeling of power, raising us to the mindset of “we can do anything.” We feel as though we are the ones with the ability to control our time. There’s a lot of irony there, since the power of time is continuously overtly underestimated, for it can run out just as fast as it entered our grasp. It turns from a leisure in the beginning of August, to hands ready to choke us at any moment by the end of the month. But I didn’t worry about any of that when I was flying with the wind. It would be such a waste to focus on worries instead of being free.

I was there for what felt like a moment, but within that moment were fourteen minutes where I have never felt more released. One with the world, every part of it. I turned around to see the view, staring wondrously, yearning for more and more and soaking in everything I saw. It was beautiful, the buildings that stood high, looking over the ocean like its protectors. Of course, one could never neglect the mountains behind everything, completing the picture, filling the setting with peace. I turned around, feeling as if I were in that scene of the movie when everything is perfect, before it all goes wrong. And in that moment, I felt it all, every day of summer. Every moment I spent flying in the wind and swimming in the endless waters. Every second I spent visiting my family and thinking of absolutely nothing at all, and yet everything at once. I didn’t yearn to have anything else, for everything went right, and I had no more anger

for everything that has ever gone wrong for it was all settled dust in the past. I felt it all, and that is the part that shimmers the most, because it was one of the fewest moments in my life where my heart and my mind were thinking the same thing: you are free, never forget what it feels like to be free.

That may have been two years ago, and I may have forgotten the details of that day, let alone the summer, but I will never forget those fourteen minutes. They have been embedded into my mind, finished with a knot so tight, that I can not let it go without losing myself. I look back into my life and some things shimmer differently than others. It is like looking into a mirror after a hot shower, and seeing myself beyond the midst of the blurry image, but I can only see so much. The only difference is, with this particular memory, everything is crystal clear in all of the fog, as if the shimmer causes the mirror to melt all of the clouds away. And then I see the person I once was and remember her with a certain fondness, one encompassed within a sea of nostalgia. I could never allow myself to forget this day, for if I do, I will never know the girl I want to be again. The girl I was then. The person that I strive, yearn, and want to be forever. The girl who was free.

Gasoline, a Match, and a Closed Water Bottle

It is typically a standard thing for good moments to be temporary. However, this case is special: I didn't even realize the moment ended when I was in it. I didn't even come to terms with the fact that we had an expiration date. That's because I was in denial. It's not that hard to understand, though. When things are good, we want them to stay good, or at least keep thinking they are. I was home in my room, laying down on my velvet sheets at three in the morning. We were still talking, of course we were. But it was only as friends. I didn't feel the need to ruin everything by being more. And it all started in that one moment... velvet sheets and late conversations. I look back now and remember it all—**gasoline, a match, and a closed water bottle.**

I felt comfortable and heard whenever we spoke. He always found a way to make me laugh, even in my worst moments. The air became sweet within its usual blandness. The darkness within my room turned into a comforting color, one that encompassed me whole with kindness. It was a normal day, and then, he asked to be more than the chains of friendship he felt bound to. So I thought of hypothetical situations, so that for once in my life, I could think with my head, not my heart. And in a world of what could've been, my mind was overtaken with the bottle of gasoline that could fall to the ground. I could see the shards of glass splattering everywhere, as I'd just sit and watch, holding a water bottle. Just look without seeing. Just staring without fixing. And I could see myself going on about my day as the liquid would fall to the ground and take everything it could get its hands on. And I would go along with it, thinking the spill is insignificant, since there is nothing to light it with.

Hours could pass, hours where the gasoline would spread throughout every corner of my mind. And then, there he'd showed up. With the overconfidence he carries and blinded

wishes he makes, he would ultimately carry a match. The very match that would light up all of the gasoline on fire, tearing away at any solid foundation I would've had up until that day.

And there I would be. Holding a water bottle. Watching as the fire would spread from the first puddle, to the rest of the oceans of gasoline. A bottle that could've put out the fire in the very beginning, if I hadn't been frozen and watched. Just looking. Just staring at everything going up in flames and falling into piles of ashes that would never be us again.

But as I pulled away from this hypothetical situation, the ashes fell up into the sky. The glass was restored, and the sea of gasoline rose to return to its bottle. The arms of time kept turning back, faster and faster, until the days before what could've been the end and disappointment, before potential excuses and all of the problems that could've occurred, before I could've lost him and myself and everything we had, all the way back to that night when everything could've changed. And then, I stopped wondering of all that could be and just smiled for all that was. "I'm sorry," I said.

Alive

I'm writing this as he's still alive. Well, as alive as he can be, laying in that hospital bed with half of his body taken by the cancer, and a low voice that is hard to speak with, now. And when I say laying down, I mean laying down as much as he can, since he can't go on his back, side, or stomach. So then, I guess he's kind of sitting, legs spread on the bed, as he folds forwards to lay on the table. But he's still in control.

Nine and Thirty at Night.

I'm writing this leisurely as he is a ticking time bomb. They can't do anymore tests on him, because his body can't handle the radiation or MRI's anymore. I just learned about them in biology class, how those tests and treatments contain radioactive isotopes which can kill the cancer. The only thing is, it kind of kills him too. They don't know how far it's spread in his body, but his voice has been gone for a month now. So my guess is that it's in his lungs, going up. More and more cancer cells reproduce, and less and less of his remain.

But he's still in control. He still decides how he acts and feels. He signed the DNR, so he's also in control of when he leaves. Yes, he's waiting. But him waiting is a choice, and a hard one, to say the least. One that takes strength and patience. It takes control to pick your own expiration date.

Ten and Twenty at Night.

I'm writing this as he's constantly taking visitors. Although, there are nowhere near as many as he should be having. Everyone that knows him should go. But maybe, they just don't know what he's going through, since he hasn't opened his phone in the last two months. So, yeah. Maybe, they don't know. And maybe, they just don't want to know. Sometimes, it's easier not to know. It's easier not to know how bad it gets, because then, it's easier to believe that

everything's okay, or that everything will be okay and it's all just a nightmare to be woken up from in the morning.

I'm writing this as some friends travel to see him. Family members, too. Watching them try to do anything so he's happy. But he's not happy, is he? Maybe, he is because soon he won't have to feel the pain anymore—pain that even excess morphine can't conceal. And it sucks, it really does. But it would be selfish for me to wish for him to last, because 'lasting' means feeling the pain for more years. 'Lasting' means more time in a hospital bed when he'd rather be out in the world. 'Lasting' doesn't mean living.

Eleven and Twenty at Night.

I'm writing this knowing I didn't spend as much time with him as I could've. I didn't spend enough time memorizing his face. Or his voice. Or the way he laughs—idiotically, but contagiously. I didn't spend enough time hugging him. Or watching those creepy videos. I didn't, and I could've.

I'm writing this as he feels pity from others. Which he hates. He needs to be treated like an equal, because that's what he is. Yeah, he has cancer, and yeah, it sucks. But he's smarter and kinder and loves harder than 99% of the people I know. He's the only person I know that could go through all of this still in control of who he is, and making sure that who he is is always the best version of himself. Cancer took over his body, but it can't take his soul. His essence, that's all him. And that will never change.

I'm writing this as I remember yesterday. My mom told me about how bad it's gotten, before she ordered a last minute ticket to travel back to New York, so she could say bye. That pissed me off. I want to go. I want to say bye. I don't care about parties and exams—there will always be parties and exams. I just want to see him. He doesn't even have days anymore. But my parents told me I can't miss a week to travel there, and then another week for the funeral. That

killed me. Yet, I stayed motionless, but that's only because my insides were collapsing and there was no more energy to move at all. So I kept trying to process the one fact I wanted so badly to be untrue: the next time I see him, he'll be gone.

Eleven and Fifty at Night.

I'm writing this trying to remember every single day I've complained. About homework or exams. About no time or no sleep. But now, when I think of everything he goes through, I feel like an idiot if I allow myself to drown in self-pity. At least I can live another day. At least I have time. I feel like everyone should imagine a day in his shoes, and then, think again before complaining about their lives. But if I always think like that, I'm going to end up with an oversupply of rage and hatred because of my disappointment. I can't control the world.

I'm writing this as he feels. Sadness. Hope for peace. Nostalgia. Love. And too much pain. They give him morphine, but he still yells harder than I've ever seen. He went through years of radiation and chemotherapy, and granted, it saved him a few years. But it didn't save his life.

Eleven and Fifty-Seven at Night.

I'm writing with the last hours of the day, while they're the last hours of his life. I'm writing this as he's seeing cures and medical trials being made for everyone, except for his type of cancer. Maybe, it's because he's stage 5. Maybe, it's because he's running out of breaths. Of words he can say. Of songs he can rap. Of "I love you's" we can hear and his amazing, filling hugs we can feel. But regardless of the reasons, it's unfair. All of this is unfair.

But I am also writing this as he is strong. Stronger than anyone. Stronger than superman and iron man. And he's on a completely different level than them, because he's real. But he's only human. So when he's gone, sadly, he won't have Marvel or DC Comics to bring him back. But

death will never make him any less of a hero. If anything, he will always be there, looking over everyone in the infinities of time where he will never cease to exist.

I'm writing this as I live vicariously through our memories. I remember how we used to play chase around the house. I remember how his sister and I used to watch him play video games for hours. I remember how he used to teach us how to work out, and then, make us drink what felt like an endless supply of water bottles. I remember how he would listen to all of my pointless, boy problems. And how he said it was okay when I had a panic attack after I got two dots from a stick and poke tattoo at a summer camp when I was 14.

Midnight.

I'm writing the end as I remember the beginning. I remember how he came to visit us in the States when he was living abroad. He came alone at 15, not knowing that later that summer, he'd find out that he got cancer. I want to remember everything, but my mind is too limited right now, holding memories of him and all of the schoolwork I have to memorize—schoolwork that seems so pointlessly stupid right now. But I still remember so much. And he's still the same person that wants to make everyone laugh and smile, that's why he started becoming a magician. He saw all of the sad kids around him with cancer, feeling the aura of the hospital to be too morbid for survival. So he became an expert with magic and cards, growing happiness in the same rooms where tumors grew. He created laughter out of dead silence and smiles out of faces that forgot the wrinkles that could be made from joy. Anyone would be the luckiest person to know him.

Twelve and Ten.

I'm writing this a month after I last visited him. After going through so many stupid boy problems. Problems that have changed me. He could see it in my face. I felt it. He wrote me a letter on one of his cards he plays games with. It was so tethering to my soul, saying how he'll

always be with me, even after he's gone. A few days ago, I was calling my sister and he could hear me. He said he loves me. After that day, they said that he can't talk anymore. I guess, my predictions were correct about his lungs. Now it's just minutes, counting down to the last second.

But I'm writing this as the silence of midnight has passed, and he's still here. I'm writing this as time races past me, and he's still here. 12 and 47. 12 and 55.

So I'm writing this to say it's okay for him to go, even though I'm not in any kind of place to give permission. I'm writing this to say that I'll never be ready to let him go, and it'll never be okay, but I'm also writing this to say that it's not about what I want or what our family wants. It's about what gives him a peace of mind.

One. One and thirty. One and Forty-Six. I'm writing this as the hourglass surrenders the last of its grains of sand.

I'm writing this as he's still alive. But I know there are so many things he misses doing. Like walking the dogs, or actually sleeping on his back. I know he misses the feeling of not being in pain. Careless. Free. Unknowing—which was probably the best part. He didn't have to know the amount of pain that a human body can handle. He still loves, even stronger than before, if that's even possible. But I know he's tired. I know he's had enough. He's my hero, but he's only human, and his mortal body does not have the capacity or ability to keep up with his celestial beauty. And I know he just wants peace.

One and Forty Seven.

So I'm writing this as he's still alive, and he always will be. He will reign the positive infinities of love within our hearts that he has created through our memories, and he will soar in all of the negative infinities of moments we will never get to encounter, but that still live within

our souls with all of the “I love you’s” that would’ve been exchanged and “hello’s” we would’ve gotten and more memories of his idiotic, contagious laugh we would’ve heard.

But at the end of the day, he’s still alive. He’s still ali