

## A Way Home

The snow fell on silent streets, muffling the world under a blanket of white. She had been walking for most of an hour when he saw her pause momentarily outside the window. The snow covered her chocolate colored hair in a thin layer of frosting. Her eyes flitted between street lamps, cars, houses, windows and everything they could find, but they never lingered long on anything in particular. It was as though her eyes were trying to capture every single detail of the world around her and commit them to memory. At first, he thought his sleep-deprived mind was playing tricks on him. But she was there, at least in body. His heart grew warm and trembled with each beat. Her eyes met his, somewhere in their wandering and they stayed for a few extra moments.

He dressed quickly, pulling on boots and lacing them haphazardly. He pulled a grey wool coat around his body and a fleece scarf, blue plaid and torn at one end, around his neck. The frigid air met him as the heavy pine door swung inwards, tossing his curly golden hair in every direction. She was still standing there in the street, hands buried in the pockets of her own overcoat, as he stepped into the snow storm.

His footfalls left deep prints in the snow. It was impossible to find the path underneath all the snow and he quickly gave up trying. As he approached her, she tilted her head slightly and began walking along the street once again. It took him a few more moments to catch her, but then, her rhythmic pace was easily matched. She walked as though she was in a dream. There wasn't a destination, just a motion. Slow, heavy steps, one at a time, her boots sinking into the snow as it crunched underfoot. The noise of their footsteps was drowned by the overwhelming silence of the world around them. It was easy to believe that they were the only ones awake for miles.

"Hi," he finally said. She didn't respond immediately, so he continued. "Really, Tupha, what are you doing out here so late?"

She started at her name. "Just walking." Her response was robotic. "What about you?"

"I couldn't sleep. Then I saw you."

“Hmm...” she stared at the street in front of them. “I couldn’t sleep either.” Her mind was wandering another street, and silence fell again on the pair. He wasn’t sure how to fill the silence. In some ways, he enjoyed it. A comfortable quiet between them, just walking as the snow fell softly around them. He glanced at her every few meters. She wasn’t much smaller than him, her average frame concealed by her own dark grey overcoat. Her hair was wet from the snow that had melted and some strands clung to her forehead. Her pale cheeks were red from the cold.

After a while, her silence began to worry him. She was rarely so passive. Her mannerisms were perpetually playful, but sincere. She hung onto every word that was spoken. At first, he thought she only did it so she had ammunition to tease people with. But in the end, it was a deep authenticity which made her listen so closely to each word. In her head, she was writing novels about everyone, because she cared too much to forget even a single detail about them. Even when she was silent, listening to those around her, her eyes sparkled. Now, her eyes stared out at the world as though she was seeing it for the first time.

He stopped. “Tupha.” She paused a few paces ahead of him and turned towards him. Her eyes were wet and red. “What’s wrong, Tupha?”

She stared at him in silence. She felt a weight sink into her stomach and her pride rise up in a fiery defiance to the thoughts and words that swam in her disordered mind. She wanted to say that nothing was wrong, that she was feeling okay, and that she was just tired, but she couldn’t form the words. Instead she stared down at his feet.

He moved closer to her. “What’s bothering you?”

“She’s gone...” She murmured under her breath. He didn’t say anything but stood close to her, gazing at her with soft grey eyes. She looked up at him. It struck her that his eyes were like stormclouds. Tears were beginning to flood her eyes and her lips trembled. “My best friend... she’s gone. She took her own life, when I wasn’t there to protect her...”

He said nothing, but carefully wrapped his arms around her and held her. She trembled with inaudible sobs. “I don’t know what to say.” He paused, staring into the distance. The snow fell more softly now, large flakes falling from a vast sky of darkness. His stomach twisted into knots and his heart grew heavy. Then, he said the only things he could think of. “I’m sorry. I’m here for you as long as you want, whatever you need.”

She pulled away and fixed him in her large amber eyes. They were flecked with emerald green in a way that was particular to her. They held a softness to them, a tenderness that he could feel as she gazed at him. She returned his hug slowly, her arms exhausted from the weight of her feelings.

Several long moments passed, filled only by her occasional sniffing and the rustling of their coats. She withdrew from his embrace, and he let her go, stepping back slightly as he did. Their eyes met again. He flinched and glanced away for a moment, then looked back.

“Let’s go,” he spoke in a voice barely above a whisper. Briefly placing his arm around her, he began walking, and through his touch, encouraged her to do the same.

The roads seemed much longer, much darker, and much quieter than before. Suffused with such melancholy, the streets felt empty. There was nothing to fill the space. The pair gazed at the little details on the sides of the road: mailboxes, cars, trees, signs, the occasional table or chair; they were all covered in snow. Sometimes, their eyes would follow the snowflakes which drifted down to earth. They each felt more than they saw. Loneliness seemed to haunt their every step. Despair hung on her shoulders, weighing her down so much that she was unable to clear the snowflakes which were landing on her eyelashes. Guilt was gnawing at their chests, accompanied by an overwhelming urge to do something, to fill the void. But neither knew what to say, nor what to do. And silence reigned for some time.

“I know that nothing I say can change any of this, but I want you to know I care about you.”

She nodded. “I know.” She took a deep breath and exhaled, forming a cloud in front of her. “Thanks.”

He didn’t have anything else to say. What could he say? He had nothing to offer but a few words, and they were incomplete and felt so pathetically insufficient compared to the magnitude of a human life. His chest grew tight. “Can I do anything?”

She didn’t reply. She just kept walking. The quiet streets at the edge of the little city by the sea were populated only by scattered houses and wheat fields, their once golden expanses now covered in a blanket of white. His eyes searched the houses, streets, every meaningless sign. They were familiar. He knew the streets by heart, but in the middle of that night, his heart was lost.

She wasn't beside him. He stopped and turned around. She was standing a few dozen meters behind him, underneath the dim amber light of a streetlamp. Her eyes were fixed on something in the distance which only she could see. He started back towards her, smiling slightly.

The last time he had seen her standing in the snow, it was with a playful smile on her face and a snowball in each hand. Their friends were there too. It was at a park closer to the city center. The midnight sky was full of clouds and she danced in that snowfall, sticking out her tongue to catch the snowflakes in her mouth. She giggled when he slipped on the ice and almost swept both of them off their feet. She tackled him from behind at least once and they fell into the snow, laughing. It was freezing cold that night, but his heart was warm. They must have spent hours outside, wrestling, dancing, laughing, and a calm filled him as he remembered that night. That night her eyes shone as though they were full of stars, the emerald flecks glittering with life. Now, as he approached her, they were dull and lifeless.

"You know..." He paused and felt himself blush. "You're a really beautiful person, Tupha."

She looked at him with a blank expression. "Am I?"

"You are. You make so many people happy." He smiled softly. "It's okay to grieve. It's okay to cry, to scream, to take time for yourself. But I want you to know that through all of the pain that you're feeling, you are so loved by so many. I think the world of you." He fixes his eyes on her. His natural tendency to avoid eye contact with her was crushed by his affection.

"Thanks..." she murmured, then faltered. She took a shaky breath, "You're... a really great friend."

They were silent for some time, facing each other, both unsure of what to say. The snow continued to fall, drifting here and there and landing on their faces and in their hair. Her eyes were deep and tears lingered on their edges as they stood in silence. She nodded a few times, and took a few more labored breaths before she spoke again.

"It's really cold," she whispered, traces of a smile appearing at the corners of her lips.

He nodded. "It is. Come on, let me walk you home."

She leaned against him and wrapped her arms around him. "I am home."