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In Her Eyes

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Valentin sat at the window, wishing the people outside would mourn with him. His world was dying and life marched on. The thick windows silenced the noise from outside. He felt as cold and numb as the hospital room. His wife lay on the bed, motionless.

The nurse stood beside his wife, waiting for Valentin to pull the plug. She patiently scribbled in her notepad, like a reaper scribbling names in the Book of Death. He reached for his wife's hand, gently squeezing it.

"Babe, wake up." He pleaded with her. "There's still so much left to do." He cleared his throat, trying not to breakdown. His hands shook as he caressed hers. He kept hoping for movement or a sign. Anything to keep him from making that devastating choice. The nurse looked at her watch and then at Valentin. She sighed heavily.

"Mr. Ortiz, I think it's time." The nurse said.

"May I do something special for her?" Valentin asked the nurse; tears ran down his face. "I want to play her our wedding song." The nurse agreed, and he pulled out his phone. As the nurse readied to disconnect the machines, Val played the song and sang it to her, Karaoke-style, eyes darting between the phone and his wife. He gently caressed her face. As the song faded, the machines signaled the end. He kissed and hugged her one last time. Time paused, as did his body and breathing, and a volcano of emotions built up inside him. The nurse put a hand on him, showing compassion. His face turned red as small quakes of emotions pulsed through his entire body. Then suddenly, his emotions erupted like Pompeii's volcano.

"Why?" He yelled the tears gushing out in a river of sorrow and anger toward God. The nurse stepped back, overwhelmed by his emotions.

"Why send her to me when you were always going to take her away?" He tightened his grip on her hand and gazed into her eyes.

"He did not do that, you let me die." a voiced barreled. Shocked, he rubbed his eyes. In her place, sat a decomposed body resembling his wife. It lifted an arm, pointing at him. "You killed me."

"I killed you?" He repeated as he fell to his knees.

"You killed her!" he heard another voice say from behind him. He turned around and saw a reaper standing over him.

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He sat up, realizing it was a dream. He could still hear their words echoing in his head and felt the tears streaming.

Before sunrise, he woke up from the nightmare. The red orange sky on the horizon highlighted the trees swaying in the cold autumn breeze. The leaves and trash danced an intimate dance as the morning birds sang their songs for life's renewal.

He searched for his bottle and grabbed it. He tilted it, waiting for the bitter taste of cheap tequila. A drop dangled and fell onto his anxious tongue. He discarded the paper bag and bottle.

"You cannot even give me that kindness." He muttered to the sky, straightening out his dirty, torn coat and beanie hat. The bottle shattered with a loud crash as he sent it flying. Birds scattered as the homeless people under the bridge woke up. They uttered their annoyance in chorus as Valentin walked away.

He despised seeing families enjoy their life when he could not. All the joyous moments, memories, and future children were all taken from him. He blamed himself as much as he blamed God. Though people flocked to the park, he could never leave it. This was where he had proposed to his wife, and he haunted it like she haunted him.

He searched trash cans for discarded food and drinks. He stuffed them into his pockets to eat later. He became known as Brackenridge's Wildman, for his reclusiveness and odd behavior.

The days all became a drunken blur to him. He watched his life pass him by like a movie fast forwarding. Life was just an endless loop of white noise and shadows.

"Please, Lord, if you have an ounce of mercy for me, just end this misery." Valentin begged.

A homeless man approached him. The man wobbled back and forth as he walked, guzzling his beverage. "Hey, man, I heard ya from way over yonder." The man wiped spit from his lip, with a dirty fingerless glove. "It seems to me that you need to be reminded of the famous words from the man upstairs."

"What are you talking about, you drunk." Valentin fired back in a furious tone. He sent the man's hand flying off his shoulder. "What do you know of anything but stealing alcoholic beverages from the convenience store."

"I know." He paused belching, as if to get people's attention. "I know that He never turns his back on us, we are the one who turn our back to him." He raised his voice and arms, declaring to the world and stumbled back. He regained his footing and twirled with laughter.

"You are making no sense, and you are aggravating me." Val pushed him and the man fell on his butt. Furious, Val jumped on top of him, and grabbed him by the collar. Before he could pummel the man, he heard a whistle from far behind him. A police officer was steadily walking towards him and the homeless man.

"Take your fortune cookie talking drunkard self to your hole." Val said, grabbing the man's liquor bottle and jogged away.

"Damn, fool. If what he said is true, then why did he take my wife away." He pulled out the wrapped hot dog from his pocket and ate it.

Val had made his home in the middle of the dense woods away from people. This was his small hobo paradise and only ventured out in search of food and liquor. He hated this part of his life, not because he had to rummage through trash to survive, but because he had to be among them humans.

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The next morning, he awoke and ate his breakfast baguette, which was crawling with ants. He pulled them off, squashing them as he cursed. When he crawled out of his makeshift tent, he looked like a sasquatch with long mangled hair covering his face. The ground still had dew on it from the previous night, and the sun offered little heat.

He wiped the hair from his face as he growled. He moved to the edge of his encampment, moving twigs aside, and surveilling the area for park visitors. He decided to take the least traveled route of the park to find food.

People walked around the Japanese Tea Gardens, stopping to take selfies among the flowers and Koi fish. A small child caught a glimpse of him and stared. Val stood frozen behind a rock pillar as the memory of his daughter, Natalia, filled his mind. His expression softened, and a memory morphed into view. Where the child stood, now he saw Natalia at the age of five. She jumped up and chased a butterfly, "Nat, why did I turn my back on you?" he said, wiping away a tear.

The sound of a parent calling the child brought him back to reality. As he jumped out from behind the pillar, he let out a loud growl, sending the child running back to his parents. The dad tossed a bottle of water and Val caught it. "Why. thank you."

Val walked off, angry for getting sentimental at Natalia's memory. "Damn, memories. That is all she is, a memory." He sent a trashcan toppling over from the force of his kick.

"Val, what makes you think she even remembers you?" he asked himself. "What makes you think you deserve to be in her life?"

He convinced himself that he was unworthy of anyone's love. "God, I give up."

He strode to the edge of the sidewalk, looking at the bus down the street. He breathed in, closed his eyes, and stepped forward. The wind blew in his beard, as if encouraging him to take his last step. The last step that would end his miserable existence. The bus barreled towards him, and he shifted his weight forward to meet the bus. "I am coming home, and God, you have some explaining to do."

As he stepped out, the bus blew its horn and brakes screeched loudly, screaming to get out of its way. Suddenly, a strong tug on his long coat pulled him backwards with force. He stumbled and heard a female voice. "Are you alright, sir."

The female voice sounded sweet and full of concern. Her eyes widened as he gazed upon the most beautiful face he had seen in a long time. A pair of the deepest green eyes, exquisitely trimmed eyebrows, light bronze skin, and accented by two delicate lips painted with a hint of shimmering light burst tinted gloss stared back at him. The sweet scent of strawberries tickled his nose, and he forgot his current condition.

"Sir, you stepped out in front of the bus." She told him with concern in her voice. You could almost hear the smile on her face if that were possible. She dusted him off and snapped her fingers in front of his face.

"Uh-huh." Val muttered, shaking his head as if reality slapped his senses back. His eyes and bottom lip curled like a mad dog. "What the hell is wrong with you, broad?" Her mouth dropped and eyebrow curled up in disbelief. "Well, I am glad you are ok." She shot back in heavy sarcasm.

"Ok?" Val shot back. "I would have been ok, if not for you."

"You know what?" She said shaking her index finger at him. "Have a good life, troll."

She turned around and started to walk away, instead deciding to give him an earful. "Oiga me senior."

"Skedaddle. chimoltrufia." Val retorted, and surprised himself by using the word, chimoltrufia. A nickname he had given to a friend when she was in a bad mood. He waved her off and turned to walk away, but she grabbed him by the shoulder.

"What did you call me?" She asked, looking deeply into his eyes. "Nobody has called me that in years."

"Ugh."

"Do I know you?"

"No."

"Papi. You do not scare me." She laughed. "I grew up in the westside of San Antone."

His eyes widened, a surge of energy rushed down his spine and realized who she was. Blood rushed to his face, turning it a light shade of red but quickly gave way to anger.

Tears quaked in her eyes, threatening to overflow like a river in a heavy downpour. "No!"

His heart pounded; breath quickened as his eyes darted looking for an exit. At the first sight of one, his legs rapidly moved as he pushed her aside. The sound of quick steps accented by boots pounding the pavement like a herd of horses could be heard behind him. The sound faded as he disappeared in the distance.

"Wait, please, wait." Her cries echoed. People ran to help her as she stumbled on a trash can, drowning out her words.

"Why? This is not what I asked for." He shook his fist and disappeared into the woods. "I asked for you to end my misery, not this."

"Val!" An anguished voice called out to him from the sidewalk. "It has got to be you; I know it."

Behind the tall stems of weeds and bushes, Val stood watching her. Every fiber of Val's body told him to run to her and let himself be saved, but his guilt did not allow it. A small, faint voice whispered to him from the furthest recesses of his mind. *Child, do not tell me what you think you need. I know your heart.*

"Val, chavo." He heard her call him. " I am going to find a way to get through to you. You know I do not give up easily."

Frustration set in, knowing that she would not give up. He saw her sitting on a bench, wiping tears away, and talking on the phone. He balled his fists and stomped towards her. He could feel her eyes examining him, making sure it was not a case of mistaken identity. "Go away, will you."

"No." She got up defiantly and stomped her foot too. "What happened to you?"

"I killed my wife." He growled, looking at his hands as if blood were dripping from them. "This is my punishment and I deserve it. Now, go."

"I refuse to believe that." She shook her head and grabbed his. "Listen, we can figure this out and get you help."

"I do not need you to save me." He raised his voice with growing frustration. " I do not want to be saved."

"You know me better than that, Val." She responded. "I find solutions, I do not give up."

"Stop calling me Val." He made a choking motion at her. "That man is dead."

"You have always been a bit dramatic." She giggled. "I am leaving but not for good. I will be back with a solution; I have finally found you and I am not done with you."

"I am done with you, lady." They both walked away, Val to his isolation and her to find a solution.

"Ahh, but I am just getting started, Val." She mocked him. "God has made you, my challenge. And I will tear down your walls of Jericho."

He threw up his arms, frustrated. She had woken up something in him, something familiar yet forgotten, a spark of life. He spent the following days trying to fight his memories of

family and friends. The more he struggled, the more he ached for them. He remembered his parents, his friends and especially his wife and daughter. He called out to them in his sleep.

When he woke up, he slowly ventured out, making sure she was nowhere around. He sighed in disappointment when he did not see her. He settled back into his routine of being invisible and went on his way searching for food. A family was celebrating a birthday party when he heard glee. The adults were supervising a group of kids trying to break a pinata and did not even notice him. Slowly, he inched towards the table that contained food and drinks. He stole a plastic bag and filled it with hotdogs, patties, drinks, and small bags of candy. He had struck gold; this was a treasure of goodies. He raced to a secluded part of the park and ate his bounty of goods. He watched them, cheering them on in silence as the pinata broke open. As he bit down on a juicy hot dog, a soft tapping started behind him.

"I told you; I find solutions. I am, just as stubborn as you were, if not more." The female sat next to him, giving him a determined look.

He continued chewing the hotdog, shaking his head wishing she would leave.

"Val, you need to understand that you did not kill your wife, it was the cancer." She softened her tone. "God did not punish you, you turned your back on your loved ones."

A surge of sorrow filled him, his heart sank, and he sighed.

"Please, Val, allow me to help you." She inched closer, attempting to put an arm around him. He got up and tossed the hotdog.

"I do not need your charity, dammit."

"It is not charity and you do need me." She was determined to save the man she still loved after all these years.

"Listen to me, V."

"No, you listen to me, Elane!"

"You remember me."

"I am done with this little intervention of yours." He turned his back on her and walked away. "I refuse to listen to your idiotic trash."

"Fine, then you leave me no choice but to bring your past to you." She motioned for someone who had been standing just barely out of view.

"My past is dead, imbecile."

"Dad!" A voice boomed from behind him. A voice that sounded so familiar that it froze him in his tracks. His heart and lungs seized, at the mere sound of her voice. It reminded him so much of his wife in her youth. A lump formed in his throat and a tidal wave of tears overflowed running down his cheeks. The spark he had tried to kill came exploded into flames as he turned around and saw his daughter, Natalia. Her soft tender hand cupped his face lifted it slightly. Her thumb caressed his cheek and they both cried at finally finding each other.

"Daddy, I missed you." Natalia embraced him, and his heart melted. His walls came tumbling down with such force he fell to his knees.

"I am sorry, mija, please forgive me." He buried his head in her hands, begging forgiveness.

"I forgive you, Dad." She spoke.

The darkness surrounding his heart faded and he felt as if he was looking at the sun for the first time.

"Elane and I have prayed for so long to find you."

"God has answered our prayers," Elane hugged both.

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"And that, son, is my testimony that God does answer our prayers." Valentin assured the young homeless boy who stood at the bus stop crying. "God is writing your story right now. And though it may not seem like it, he has not forgotten about you." The boy wiped his tears and nodded ok.

"Do not give up on him, just yet." Valentin assured him. "It is going to be an epic one, I promise."

"The boy smiled slightly and looked up at the sky. The cars raced by as people arrived at the Cathedral in their Sunday best. At the top of the stairs stood Elane Carrillo, in a blue flower print spring dress, with a white pillbox hat accented in sky blue, and white pumps. Giselle shades covered her eyes and stood next to Natalia. Natalia's yellow spring dress fluttered in the coolness of the spring wind, and she wore a huge smile. She waved for Valentin to hurry up so they could get good seats in the front row.

"You can find me at this church volunteering, look me up when you are ready to come back to life." Val reminded him and hurried over to Elane and Natalia.