How Forever Ends

I’m convinced I’m going to live forever. And if you had told me that would be my future when I was a child, I would have cheered and jumped in the air with the knowledge of immortality weighing in my bones. I would have celebrated; would have done all of the things I was too afraid to do before because now I knew that nothing could snuff out my flame.

I wish I could tell my younger self that all those feelings of joy and triumph were stupid. I wish I could have understood then that life is shit, and I wish I could say then you die but you don’t and that fucking sucks too. Maybe that’s what sucks the most.

Earlier this week I drove my car out to the edge of town and stepped on the accelerator until the nose of the car met the rock wall that ran alongside the road. Yesterday morning, I woke up and put on my pants, went to the same bar I always go to and drank until I felt my liver would give out and my life would cease to be. But instead, I found myself lying on the side of the street, looking up at the godforsaken sky that screams promises of infinity and adventures only to lie and leave me stuck in this hell. Like the great poets before me, I laid there in the gutter wishing for the pain to end, but the difference is the universe extended them mercy where it has only given me more suffering. The difference is that when they drank themselves into oblivion or chopped off an ear or decided to be no more then they were given the gift of a legacy, and the only thing I seem to be given is the ability to live the same day over and over again.

The people around me continue on with their lives. Never aging, never slowing down to the call of time. They seem to have found contentment in a life frozen in the universe, doomed to live small-town life for the rest of their days. But this isn’t what I had wanted, and I’ll be damned if I let it take me into complacency as it has them. The bartender often watches me with glee, in constant interest of the way that I continued to search for an escape. And as the days turned into years, turned into decades, now I fight to find a way to just not wake up again. If death is the only thing to assure a lifetime of living out nothing, then so be it.

So, I continue on my road of self-destructive behavior, and he continues to watch me from across the bar with interest and laughter. So is the way of our lives.

Until everything changed that is.

I wish I could say she walked in like a hurricane, blowing wind, and bringing storms. I wish I could say her eyes lit up the room like sapphire and spoke of the fire raging within her soul as she told me the way to escape this never-ending Groundhog Day. But reality is very often not a grand love story meshed with a fantasy novel, and so that’s not how things played out.

Instead, she walked in with her head high and her eyes dull. Her skin sagged across her face, bringing wrinkles to what was once a probably okay-looking woman. But now she was a grandmother figure, striding across the bar and ordering a whiskey with all the “I don’t give a fuck” behavior of a 19-year-old boy. She matched the bartender’s excited gaze before smiling softly and throwing back her drink with feminine ease. Her eyes, probably once a golden honey, now seemed to hold the weight of the world in those irises. The wrinkles around her eyes spoke of a life lived, out there in a world where change is inevitable, and loss is imminent.
And both I and the bartender watched her with intense interest. Because she was new, and that meant something. She had not previously been stuck here, and I felt myself brimming with the excitement of knowing that if she could enter this hell, then maybe I could exit it. And so, when I crossed the bar to talk to this mature figure, I figured she would be soft-spoken and kind and eager to help me in my plight of constant damnation. I was fully prepared for her to think I was insane, but to perhaps be overrun with the motherly instinct to help me nevertheless.

I sat beside her, flopping down on the chair with all the excitement of a child being told they are going to meet their idol, and before I could form the words to ask her for help escaping, she spoke to me.

“This ain’t some pickup situation kid, and I’m not interested in whatever you’ve got”

Those words stopped me cold, not at all the vision of how I had hoped this conversation to begin. She spoke with an accent thick from the south, something that sounded like my sweet auntie who had grown up in Alabama and was the kindest person I had ever known. But even with the accent, her words had a sense of rebellion to them. They spilled from her mouth uninhibited by the expectations of southern hospitality and sent a strongly worded letter to anyone that dared tell her she might be softer or sweeter.

“I….” the words froze in my mouth, the excitement still right there at the surface but held back by a new interest in this elderly woman that was not quite right in so many ways. The more I looked at her, the more the subtle discrepancies came into the picture. She was in all ways everything I would expect of a woman in the final years of her life, but she held life and defiance that was more commonly associated with preteen boys.

I took a deep breath, tried like hell not to read too far into the situation, and spoke my peace: “I wanted to ask for your help”

Once the words had tumbled from my mouth, there was no stopping them. The proverbial plug had been pulled, and now what tumbled forth were messages of entrapment and eternal damnation. I had to warn her, and we both had to get out of here. Maybe whatever portal had opened to allow her into this town was still able to let us out. I didn’t know. I had been stuck here for so long, and no one had ever entered after me.

“I’ve been stuck here for twenty years,” I told her, words rushing from my lips of their own volition, “I’ve been 24 for twenty years. I’ve tried to leave, but it won’t let me. The town I mean, not the people. Some supernatural force, I guess. Hell, I don’t know. And I know that all sounds crazy, and maybe it is, but you’re the first new person I’ve seen in twenty years and maybe if we leave now, it’ll let us. Or maybe we’re both trapped here forever because no matter what I’ve tried I can’t. I can’t even die here. It’s like an eternal hell but we have to try to get out. We have to go. Right. Now”

She took that all in, processing it faster than I thought she might have. Faster than any sane person should have. There was a moment of shock and distrust on her features, but it melted fast. Almost too fast. And it turned into a small smirk that didn’t make sense to me. There was
knowledge in those eyes, a sense of understanding more than she should, and believing everything I had said.

“So, I did make it,” she said, the softness I had initially expected filtering into her voice now. Alongside that was something else, something that made me sick to my stomach. Alongside that softness, was wonder. “I thought it was all lies. My colleagues told me about a place where time stood still, and you could live forever. I thought it couldn’t be true”

“Well…it is,” I told her, choosing my words carefully. Suddenly afraid that this was not how a conversation like this should go. Had she sought out this town? Had she wanted to enter this godforsaken hell in an attempt to defeat the death that was coming for her so quickly these days? “But it’s not what you think. It’s not worth it to live a meaningless life” I told her, searching for the words to make her understand why I needed to escape. But how could I rationalize with her? She had lived her life. Had probably gotten married, had a career, children, and had built a community of people that loved her. She had gotten the chances that had been stolen from me.

Of course, she would want to live forever, because she had already lived the excitement that I wanted. It made me sick to my stomach. And even more than that, it boiled the blood in my veins, seething rage making me want to reach out and strangle the life from her. But I couldn’t do that. Not that it would matter anyway, she probably would just wake up tomorrow and live this day over and over again for eternity. How sad.

But she chose this for herself.

“Is it?” she questioned, hiking an eyebrow, and leaning into the bar to watch me with her head resting in her hand. “Why is that?”

“You wouldn’t understand” I spat, suddenly seething with the expectations of why she had sought out a place like this. “I want to leave. Tell me how you got in here and I’ll just try to escape myself. You can live in this hell; I don’t want it”

She smiled, and at first, it appeared soft. But when you watched her more closely you could see the darkness around the edges. The way the gesture didn’t meet her eyes, the way she was completely calm, and yet muscles were engaged for movement at a moment’s notice.

“Oh I don’t plan on living here,” she told me, “But I do know how you escape. If the stories are true”

Those words caused my rage to subside. Caused me to pause and stare at her in wonder before I shot forward and grabbed her arm, surprised that there were muscles there and not only sinew and bone. “Tell me” I demanded, desperation clawing just beneath my words.

Her smile was wry, tame but wild. She watched me with cool interest before she shook her wrist from my grasp and leaned in.

“You can die,” she told me, her voice barely a whisper. “Not by suicide or accident…But if the rumors are true, you don’t come back if you’re killed”
That stopped me in my tracks. I stared at her open mouthed, questions on my tongue and disbelief rattling in my brain. She reached underneath her light-colored blouse to withdraw a large blade. It was sheathed in leather, and the hilt glinted in the dim bar lighting.

“I didn’t come here to live forever kid,” she told me, tone flat now. “We all have dreams. You could say mine was…. too far from societies standards outside of this town”

I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing she was crazy. Hell, I was crazy. This whole damn town was. But I was willing to accept crazy if it meant escape too.

“Soon” she whispered to herself, setting the knife on the counter. In front of us, the bartender was frozen, eyes wide as if he was an animal caught in headlights. Even from where I sat, I could see the tremble of his fingers as he pretended to polish a glass.

Curious. Why would he be shaken if her words were not true?

“Run,” she told me, standing up and leaning over the counter to posture at the bartender before us. I saw him hesitate, saw him want to run but contain himself for only a moment as his chest rose and fell with the cadence of a man that was unsure of what to do next. She reached for the knife, cold eyes dragging over to me. When she spoke, her words held no threat but shook me to my very core. Without knowing why, I knew that things were changing at that moment. That the never-ending continuance of day-to-day boredom had been broken by this elderly lady in the easter colored blouse: “Let the killing games begin”

Somehow, this wasn’t a threat but a promise of something bigger. And I was surprised to feel survival kick in as my instincts told me that this was not how it ends. For too long I had sought out death, but here in this bar on a day that had seemed mundane only twenty minutes ago, well I found something I had forgotten existed. I found the desire to survive.

What kicked me into motion I’ll never know. It could have been the way she drug the blade across the bar, mere inches from my arm. It could have been the stillness in the room, all of the air drained from my lungs as I watched in disbelief. Or it could have been the moment a southern grandmother ninja-starred a knife over the bar and the sick sound it made as it connected with flesh. The bartender fell, and years of running track saved my hide as I threw my body into hers and we both went crashing to the ground.

I hoped from the bartender to make a noise, to signal that he was coming to my aid. But no help came, and it was the sickening crunch of breaking bones that shocked me back to the moment as the heel of her hand connected with my nose. I was on the ground now, doubled over in pain. She was pulling herself up, grabbing for something hidden in the waistband of her Levi jeans.

I wondered if she had kids, or if she had grown up on a farm like my auntie from Alabama.

Then there was nothing.

All things come to an end. Even the promise of forever.