

## A THOUSAND FUNERALS

They were on the phone when it happened.

A boy named Patrick and a girl named Marie—the two of them lingering in that no man’s land between adolescence and adulthood.

Patrick had felt sick all week.

“Maybe it’s glandular fever,” Marie suggested. She’d suffered the same symptoms a few weeks ago, and they’d still kissed like she was healthy—timid pecks at first, and then full-blown, gross making out.

She heard Patrick’s mother helping him into the bath. Marie stayed on the phone.

“Mum says I should go to the hospital,” Patrick said afterwards.

“I’ll stay on the phone,” Marie replied. She wished she could go to him, but that was the worst part about being in a long-distance relationship: you couldn’t always be there when the other person needed you.

Soon enough, she could hear the beeping of machinery and the quiet chatter of medical professionals. Noises she’d come to recognise and commit to memory—like the deep resonance of Patrick’s voice, the warm lilt of his laugh.

“One of the doctors said they’re testing for leukemia. That can’t be right...”

*Leukemia.*

The word floated through Marie’s childhood bedroom. It was something too big and too foreign for her to fully understand.

Eventually, Marie sat up in her bed. All the feeling had drained from her hand and arm—the ones connecting her to her phone, to Patrick.

“I’ll stay on the phone,” she told him.

...

The first time Marie visited Patrick in hospital after his diagnosis, he was still wearing his own clothes.

He had pink stuff on his arms, and something called a ‘PICC line’ connected to the veins in his chest. But his hair was still long. And his navy singlet was still familiar. And he looked so much like himself that Marie wanted to cry.

She didn’t.

“I brought you some things,” she told him.

It was just a bag of clothes and some chocolates, but Patrick’s mother looked at her like she’d done something miraculous. Later, Marie realised that the look had nothing to do with the stuff she’d brought him at all.

It was a *You’re here* look.

It was a *You’re going to stay* look.

It was hope, and gratitude, and relief that she and Marie were going to share the load. This woman who had raised Patrick for nineteen years, and the girl he had only been dating for three months.

...

For Marie, things got easier as the days went on. Things like being the only dry-eyed person in a room full of crying people, or seeing Patrick’s divorced parents forced together like broken puzzle pieces, or having to discuss things like infertility and semen samples even though the latter words still made her blush.

She visited Patrick as often as she could. The hour’s drive to the hospital was better than the two-hour-and-seventeen-minute drive that usually separated them. (Patrick lived in northern NSW, and Marie was a Brisbane girl.) At least this way they were in the same State, and no longer hindered by the complications of a long-distance relationship.

Of course, they had a new set of complications now: things like thinning hair, impeded privacy and something called ‘neutropenia’ (a low white blood cell count). But at least now they had somewhere to be together—a temporary little home, and what should have been the bleakest 36 days of Patrick’s life were awash with tenderness. Long laughs in the cafeteria. A series of aborted sexual advances (the doctors never remembered to knock). Falling asleep to the glow of a laptop screen. Smudged Polaroid pictures by the windowsill. Extended goodbyes outside the elevators. Fighting over flirty nurses just to feel like a normal couple.

It was strange, and new, and intimate in a way that neither of them had ever experienced before—and something they knew they would never experience again.

After all, most nineteen-year-old kids don’t have to shave their partner’s head, or clean their armpit for them when they can’t reach it, or buy beanies in the thick of summer and then laugh when the checkout girl looks at them funny.

Patrick and Marie didn’t care. It was just thirty-six days, after all. Thirty-six days in the long stretch of a lifetime.

And when Patrick finally went into remission, they knew they couldn’t be apart anymore.

...

Six months after Patrick’s treatment ended, he and Marie decided to move in together. They signed a twelve-month lease for a place in the Gold Coast, just seven minutes from the hospital. It was far too small—small enough to drive a normal couple insane, but Patrick and Marie weren’t a normal couple. They knew they could happily exist in small spaces, that they could have fun anywhere.

And they did have fun. For a while...

Marie decorated the house and Patrick pretended to like the ugly gold vase she'd bought from an op shop. They went to the beach even though it was too cold, and they came home with shells to put on the kitchen windowsill—a reminder of all the promises they'd made in hospital. Patrick got a job at a surf store and Marie was so proud she wanted to cry.

Maybe that was the feeling: pride. Or maybe it was something else making her chest ache just that little bit more than usual. Maybe it was the fact that Patrick never talked about his day, or that he didn't want to go out anymore, or that sometimes Marie felt like they had been happier in that hospital room than they were in their own apartment.

"I'm just tired," he'd always say. And that scared Marie more than it should have. Because Patrick was healthy now, and they were supposed to be happy.

Why weren't they happy?

Maybe Patrick wasn't used to this new normal. Marie had watched the way he'd floundered through life since he left the hospital. For a moment, everyone in his life had been centred in one place—a place of love and care and suspended reality.

Now it was just him and Marie.

...

When Patrick got leukemia again, Marie realised the real reason he had been so tired.

Patrick had lost his surf shop job a few months ago. The most social they'd been was at a party the weekend before his relapse, but they'd both ended up crying in the bathroom.

*We're that couple*, Marie had thought, her face tucked into Patrick's shoulder. *The ones who fight in public.*

She held his hand. She listened as the doctor explained that this treatment was going to be longer, at least a year, but that he'd have monthly breaks in between. He wouldn't even have to stay in the hospital during his treatment this time.

Strangely, a part of Marie wanted Patrick to stay in the hospital. A part of her wanted the long laughs in the cafeteria, the smudged Polaroid pictures by the windowsill. The extended goodbyes outside the elevator that were never really goodbyes.

Once, Patrick told Marie thought that God was punishing him for something he'd done throughout his life. Marie didn't believe in God. And even if she did, she knew that what Patrick was saying wasn't true.

Patrick was the best person Marie had ever met, and she knew that had to count for something.

...

They were at the beach when they realised it was over.

Long before that, Patrick's test results after his relapse treatment had come back negative. He wasn't sick anymore, but it still wasn't enough to bring them back to normal.

They were quiet for a long time. Marie stared at their legs, entangled on the sand. A part of her wanted to stay like this forever, but she knew that was impossible. Their most innocent moments had faded away, and Marie knew they would never come back quite the same.

"Do you remember our first date?" Marie asked.

Patrick held her hand. "How could I forget?"

"You said that kissing me felt different."

"It did," Patrick said. "It hurt to drive away from you."

Marie closed her eyes.

"I thought you were so beautiful. And I hope I didn't screw anything up. I prayed very hard."

Marie still didn't believe in God. But it was nice to think that someone prayed about her. That someone thought she was that precious.

She will never tell anybody how much she cried on the drive home. She'll never tell anybody how she prayed.

...

When Marie moved back home to Brisbane, it felt like all the colours had drained from her life.

She hadn't realised that *grey* was an emotion—that her heart could feel bloated and empty at the same time. Sometimes, when she drove to the Gold Coast, she'd take the wrong exit on purpose and sit outside her and Patrick's old house. It looked bigger somehow, peaceful even. Maybe that's just how things look after you let them breathe for a little while. Maybe some things only make sense when you're looking back.

"It's heartbreak," Marie's mother told her. "It hurts like hell."

Marie listened to her mother's heartbreak experiences. She told her about all the ways she'd become undignified in her pain, and they laughed at what a fool she'd been over the years. She told Marie the story of a man who led her on after she separated from Marie's dad, and Marie wondered if it was funny that people still experienced heartbreak in their fifties.

Maybe it was the funny sort of sad.

...

Six months later, Marie was scrolling through a blog when she came across a quote by Heidi Priebe. She wrote that *to love someone long-term is to attend a thousand funerals of the people they used to be.*

Marie wondered if this quote applies to self-love, too.

Maybe these funerals we have for ourselves are unconscious. Maybe, as we move through life and experience new things, we shed versions of ourselves without even realising it.

The girl who kissed her boyfriend while she had glandular fever.

The girl who blushed at the words *semen sample*.

The girl who shaved her boyfriend's head.

The girl who lived on the Gold Coast.

The girl who bought an ugly vase from an op shop.

The girl who cried in the bathroom at a party.

The girl who held her boyfriend's hand when he found out he was sick again.

The girl who stood by his side.

The girl who believed in God.

...

With each year that passed, Marie attended more funerals for herself, and funerals for those around her too. She attended the funeral of the mother who loved her father, and the one of Patrick and Marie who promised to still call each other.

They don't call each other anymore. For a while after a break up, talking feels good, and then it starts to hurt.

Marie knows Patrick is doing well. She knows that he's okay. And sometimes it feels like that's all she gets to know. It is the privilege of loving someone to know such intimate details. Details like what he had for breakfast or what's making him laugh on TV.

Someone else knows these things now. And one day, Marie will know these things about another person.

But she'll never forget Patrick.

She'll never forget the burnt toast or the things that used to make him laugh, because love means keeping all of these things. Forever.

Love means letting go, over and over. Love means funerals and smudged polaroids and sickness and health. Love means trying again.

Marie might be lonely now, but she knows she's not alone. She knows that as one door closes, another one always opens—and what looks like the end is only the beginning. Another love. Another heartbreak. Another dream.

She knows that life isn't supposed to be easy—it's just supposed to be lived. One foot after the other. One long series of funny and sad moments.

...