

The Promise

3285 words

I remember feeling a little cold even with a blanket over me. The faint barks of the neighbourhood dogs was the last sound I heard as my eyes closed... for the very last time.

- 6 months earlier *

“Hurry up, James! She hasn’t got all night you know,” I exclaimed.

Waddling into the room while clutching his book, James plops himself next to me on the couch and waves at the screen in front of us.

“Hey, Kiddo! Sorry for keeping you,” he said

Our daughter, April beams back at us through the screen. “Mum. Dad. I wanted to tell you this in person but I just couldn’t make the trip,” she said.

“What is it, dear?” You’re not in any kind of trouble are you?” I said.

Holding an unidentifiable object between her fingers, she places it in front of the screen. James adjusts his glasses and peers closely. “Kiddo, what’s that? Is it a fancy pen?”

Suddenly I grasped his arm and a hand flew over my mouth, eyes wide with anticipation. “Is that... Are you...We’re gonna...” I stumbled. My words could barely form into complete sentences. April is now grinning from ear to ear.

“What is it, Darling?” James looks at me with a puzzled expression. I let out a scream and then laughed which startled James. By now April has also joined in my hysteria. James looks to and fro, perhaps he thought we were a pair of crazy women!

“We’re gonna be Grandparents!!!!” I shouted as I did a little dance while seated. James shoots right up and punches the air. He quickly sits back down and embraces me. “Our little girl is gonna be a Mom. Can you believe that, Kelly? Our baby is gonna be a Mummy!” he whispered.

“Simon’s parents are over the moon as well. First Grandchild on both sides,” April said.

“And where is Simon?” I asked.

“He got held up at work. But he really *really* wanted to be here as well. Just bad timing,” she replied.

“Well, Kiddo, we’re both so proud and happy for you. We already can’t wait to meet the little guy!” he said.

“What if it’s a girl?” I said.

“I can bet on my prized Star Wars collection that it’s gonna be a strong and handsome little guy. I can feel it. And you know me, I’m never wrong!” he boasted.

“Yeah, except when you always get the wrong bread from the bakers.” I mumbled.

“Oh come on, Kelly! Bread’s all the same...just comes in different shapes and sizes,” he retorted.

“But...” I started.

“OK, enough guys. I gotta go start dinner now. Great seeing you two. Take care. Bye. Love you!” April said.

“Love you too!” we both said.

As April disappears from the screen, we both look at each other and erupt into a fit of giggles like silly little kids.

The next morning as I sat at the kitchen table, I watched James preparing breakfast. I remember how when we were dating he’d always try and impress me with his cooking skills, something that he claimed he learned while watching Master Chef. And yet being together all these 50 years, I still appreciate that he insists on cooking for me.

My eyes followed him as he pranced around with such youthful vigour. One second he’s buttering toast at the counter, the next he’s flipping over omelettes and pancakes at the stove. Mother said she loved him when I first brought him home. Dad was quite old fashioned and believed men shouldn’t be playing with rolling pins and frying pans. Eventually he warmed up to James when he discovered they both shared a passion for Star Wars. Dad would then pester me to invite James over just so that they could watch re-runs on Netflix and enjoy their bromance. I was quite jealous honestly!

I was broken out of my reverie with the delicious plate of aroma and fresh coffee James had laid in front of me. He then sat across from me and gave that smile which never fails to make my heart flutter. I can’t believe after all this time; he still had that effect on me!

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, still gazing at me.

“About us,” I replied.

“Us?” He chuckled. “Is there something I don’t know?” he said as he took a bite of toast.

I ate a mouthful of omelette. “That I’m still so madly in love with you after all these long years,” I replied. “How we first met, got married and became parents to four beautiful children. And now we’re grandparents to our first grandchild.”

He looked at me. I could see his eyes well up. “Life’s been good to us. The good Lord has blessed our family. The greatest gift He gave me was you.” He stretched out his hand and held mine.

Later that night, the sound of thunder roared as rain pelted outside. We sat in our armchairs side by side, reading.

“Do you know what this storm reminds me about?” he asked.

“What?”

“Our first kiss, silly.”

I looked at him, trying to recall the memory. He put down his book.

“We stayed at my family’s cabin for the weekend. I think we’d been dating 3 months. There was a storm like this one and we were doing some cleaning when a loud thunderclap boomed and you suddenly ran into my arms. I just couldn’t stand the sight of you being so scared. Then I kissed you. It felt right,” he explained.

“Oh!” I giggled at the memory.

'Oh? That's all you can say?' he feigned offensiveness and took a sip of his tea.

"I didn't see it coming. I always thought a first kiss should be magical. Now when I think about it, it couldn't have been more perfect," I gushed.

"I can't believe you didn't remember our first kiss!" he said.

"No, I do remember. How could I forget? I just had to think for a bit.

"None of the kids were scared of storms."

"Yes, they loved it. I remember how they'd get their pillows and blankies and camp by the windows watching the grand display. Can't believe how quickly they've grown. Seems just like yesterday when they'd be running around the house."

James and I looked at each other and smiled. Our days were mostly like this. Eating together, reading together, reminiscing together, we'd sometimes go for a walk or have ice cream from the corner café.

When I was growing up, I'd go to many weddings. I love when the bride's father would lead his daughter down the aisle and hand her to the man who would take over in looking after her. I love how when she's walking towards him, his eyes are set only on her. But my favourite part is the wedding vows. I think there's nothing more beautiful in this world. To pledge your eternal love for one another in front of everyone. And when he lifts her veil up, it's like he's seeing her for the very first time.

Since then I would dream about my own knight in shining armour, my Prince Charming. James was the first man I'd ever fallen in love with. We met in a supermarket. Mushrooms were on sale that day and there was only one packet left on the shelf. He was standing there reading the label on a bottle of pasta sauce. I came whizzing down the aisle hoping to get a pack before it ran out. From the distance I could see that one pack just sitting there. Just as I was about to grab and go, he also reached out for it. I remember thinking, "wasn't he looking at pasta sauce?!"

He offered it to me instead and I felt bad. When I didn't want to take it, he took it off the shelf and placed it in my trolley. He said, "why don't you treat me to a coffee? I heard it's pretty good. Hopefully after that you won't feel so bad."

Pointing to a little café outside, he smiled that smile that would eventually be a part of my life. And just like our wedding vows we've been through good and bad times, sickness and in health.

On one particular morning, I felt too ill to get up. James made soup for me but I didn't have any appetite. "Don't worry," I assured him. "I'll be better soon. I just need more rest." It was the third day and I still didn't feel well. I also began to feel nauseous. Despite my protests, James took me to the hospital. And what the doctor told us was something we both were not expecting.

"Mrs. Hays, I'm sorry to inform but you're showing early signs of stomach cancer."

Hearing that, I fainted in James's arms as both he and the doctor's voices echoed as my eyes closed. I awoke a few hours later, admitted to the hospital

with James asleep by my bedside. He snored gently. I gazed at him; sorry for the pain I put him through and wished I could make it all go away.

“James?” I said, patting him on the shoulder. I tried again and this time he stirred. He looked up and after 5 seconds, he quickly registered the events.

“Kelly!” he exclaimed as he pulled me into his embrace. “Oh Kelly, my Kelly!” he croaked out as he stroked my back. I could hear the crack in his voice. He sat back down and I could see the tears in his eyes. Clasp my hand with his both, he opened his mouth but no sound came out.

“Stomach cancer, huh?” I said. Hearing myself say those awful words sent shivers down my spine.

“The d-doctor says since it’s still the early stages, you’ll... you’ll be able to p-pull through. S-surgery is the best option. The sooner, the better,” he struggled. James looked as if all the energy’s been drained out of him.

“Darling,” I paused. Looking out the window, I could see the little birds hopping along the tree branches and the sound of a slight drizzle. “You know there’s no money,” I finished.

“I could get a loan from the bank. I’m sure Ben wouldn’t mind helping us out. Maybe the kids could...”

“No!” I said, a little too loudly. Startled, James looked at me with questioning eyes. “Lately, I’ve been thinking about life and death. About how you and I will pass on. I’ve always found the idea of a couple just dying hours from each other so romantic. One cannot live without the other. “

“Why were you thinking about these things?” James asked. I thought I heard disappointment in his voice. Maybe even slight anger.

“I guess I had a feeling something like this would happen,” I replied.

“Well, sorry to burst your bubble but you’ll be getting that surgery. No one’s dying anytime soon. Not on my watch!”

“I don’t want it,” I whispered. I could feel James loosen his grip on my hand as I struck him with those four words. I looked at him. Shock was all I saw. I felt as if I just shot an arrow into his heart and pierced it into a thousand pieces.

“What do you mean you don’t want the surgery? Don’t you want to live? Don’t you want to see your first grandchild?” James shrieked as he completely let go off my hand and stood. He walked over to the window and held the sides for support.

“Don’t do this Kelly. Please don’t do this to me. I beg you...” he whispered. He began to sob. I felt tears prickling at my eyes, threatening to also overwhelm me.

“I don’t want the children to know. I don’t want them to worry about an old woman like me. I’ve lived my life and it’s time for me to go.”

James turns around, face all red and tears streaming down. He walks to my bedside and sits down.

“Why are you doing this? Can’t you see the pain you’re putting me through?!” he cried.

“I’m sorry, but it’s what I want. I don’t want doctors opening me up and poking me with their needles. I don’t want us to be in debt with this surgery. I don’t want to burden the children. I don’t want to see you like this but I can’t help it. I’m truly sorry... I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me for my decision.”

Without a word, James stood up and left the room. I half expected him to slam the door on his way out but he closed it gently. I replayed what just happened in my head and finally I couldn’t hold on any longer. The tears fell hard.

I looked at the wedding ring on my finger. I remember the day he got down on one knee and proposed. We were walking through the park. A man was blowing bubbles as the little ones happily tried to catch them. Couples hidden in their secret corners. A woman sat on a bench feeding the pigeons. We stopped under a giant tree; the afternoon sun trickled through the leaves. He looked deep into my eyes and tucked a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

“Kelly Matthews,” he said. Before I could respond, he dropped to his knee and pulled out something from his pocket. I saw the most beautiful ring I could possibly imagine. It was his grandmother’s. “With this ring, I ask you to be mine. Will you do me the honour of accepting this helpless man’s proposal?” he finished.

We’ve had a wonderful life together. What more could I ask for?

There was something cold against my chest. As my eyes fluttered open, I saw the nurse with a stethoscope.

“Good morning, ma’am. Your vitals are steady. How did you sleep?” she inquired.

“Morning. I couldn’t really sleep. I’ve got a lot on my mind. ” I replied. Glancing around the room, I then asked, “Excuse me, have you seen my husband? He’s about this high (I stretched my arm upward), wears glasses and has the nicest smile.”

“Well, your husband sure sounds like a lot of people here,” she chuckled. There’s a man sitting outside though... been there since last night. Maybe that’s him?”

“What was he doing?”

“Nothing. He just sat there and seemed to be lost in his thoughts. I went by a couple of times and he’d either be wiping his eyes or blowing his nose. Now that I think about it, I should have asked if he was alright. I don’t know why I didn’t...”

Just then the door opened. James’ head popped in.

“You can come in, sir. I’m done here.” When she had left, James was at my side again. He sat down and looked at me. Tired eyes I saw. Eyes that had not had a good night’s sleep.

“Are you absolutely sure that’s your final decision? You don’t want the surgery?” he asked.

“Yes. It is my will to not go through surgery. I sincerely hope you understand why I’m doing this.”

James held my hand, affectionately stroking it. He then lifted it up to his lips and kissed it. I remember the first time he told me he loved me. He was on his

way to the bookstore when he saw a man abusing a dog. The dog was on a leash and tried to get away from the man. Whenever the dog did this, the man would drag it back while kicking at it. James immediately intervened without second thought and reprimanded the man for his actions towards the poor creature.

Offended, the man lashed out at James and punched him several times before passers-by stopped him. I rushed to his apartment after he called about the incident. By the time I got there, he had cleaned up his wounds. I held his face and examined it. I could feel his gaze burning into me as I traced my finger over the injury. All of a sudden, he said those three words.

I stumbled back a bit when I heard his confession. I guess when you hear something like that from someone, you're bound to be in some kind of shock I suppose. Especially for me.

"Fine then. I accept your wishes. Even though it's so hard for me. I can't believe I'm even doing this. I keep trying to tell myself that it's just all a bad dream, a dream that I can't seem to wake from." He then began to cry. "What will I do without you? How do I go on living?"

He got up and hugged me ever so tightly. "I want to hold you like this forever and never let go. I wish I could protect you from this disease," he whispered. And without a word, a single tear slid down my cheek.

It's been weeks since I was discharged from the hospital. I begun to lose weight and had difficulty swallowing. Soups were what I mainly had. Whenever one of the kids Skyped us, James would either tell them I was

asleep or watching my favourite Korean drama on TV. Of course, they asked about me but I didn't want them to see me like this... in this sorry state. I felt bad but it was a consequence of my own decision. There were times I felt regret but I instantly told myself it was for the better good.

One afternoon, James and I sat out on the porch. I lay in his arms, eyes closed. I listened to the singing of the birds; their tunes which never failed to cheer me up.

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

"Of course. How could I ever forget about you accidentally eating a chilli and having to drink lots of water to relieve yourself! We both laughed and sighed at the memory.

"I was so nervous and scared. And that mortifying moment had to happen! I thought you wouldn't want to see me again," he said.

"No, you were cute and funny. I thought you weren't afraid to be yourself and didn't go all out to impress me."

"Remember when Aiden was born? You squeezed my hand so tight that I almost thought it would fall off!" James said.

"Yeah and you had to watch a YouTube video on how to be a father. I found that so sweet."

"You feeling hungry? I can go prepare dinner," he said.

"Not really. I just want to stay here like this. It's so nice."

“How about we come up with some name suggestions for April? If it’s a boy, I’d go with Christopher. If it’s a girl, Annabelle.”

“I like Arthur and Elizabeth.”

“Have you ever regretted anything in your life? For me, it’s not being able to take you to travel the world. I know how much you love travelling.”

“James, as long as I have you, I’ve got no regrets. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I just can’t imagine what life would have been like if I hadn’t been so adamant in buying those mushrooms on sale that day. I love you, James. Always have, always will. Until the end of time, my darling.

“And so do I, Kelly. If given the chance, I’d choose to go through life all over again with no one but you.”

Silence.

“Kelly? You asleep?” James gave me a little shake. Realization suddenly hit him, as he finally understood what just happened. He gave me a final kiss on the forehead and whispered goodbye.