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Beauty and Its Beast

Rachelle Kersten

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Rain pours from an immeasurable bowl, coating the windows and air with crystallized numbness. I am inside, pacing a room built out of fear, a room dripping with scared people, wishing the rain could reach me here and pacify my anxiety. Stark white walls scream at me the history they contain, the horror and glory they have seen and heard. A haunting silence has kept me hushed as I await the dreadful or jubilant News. All I need is to be in that rain.

But I must wait, as if hearing the verdict from some oblivious, impersonal doctor will help me, will heal her. After searching for someone, anyone, to put a heroic end to this insanity, mounting like an inevitable tidal wave, while we watch, immobile, from the edge of the shore. After it is too late, and she has already taken matters into her own aching hands, and I have only begun to understand.

I could see her dangling her spindly legs over the edge of the apartment building fire escape. The last day of seventh grade had just finished, and I had made my way to Janna’s for our ritual afternoon get-together. She was fine then, as far as I was concerned. At times I wonder if she isn’t fine yet, and I am the one answering to everyone for what they do not know and cannot accept. But she seemed fine to me, and that was all I needed to keep me happy. Funny how she knew that, and lived with it. She sat upon her fire escape, longing for a fire, just to make her day all the more dramatic. Janna was always being dramatic, so I assigned myself the role of a spellbound audience, or else I became her critic, and closed down the play, even if she was starring. I did that when I begrudged her the spotlight—truth being
that Janna never needed the spotlight to perform well, just as she never needed me. Eventually her whole life turned into a single act, but by then, I couldn’t stop her, and I couldn’t watch. She knew that, too, and lived with it.

Another hour. A tireless session of threadbare people pretending, glassy-eyed, parched-mouthed, to have hope. For the first time in my life I am incurably claustrophobic, and I bathe my eyes in the rain, just inches from my window-pressed face, and I remember.

"Peter, do you think I’m beautiful?" she once asked—not to hear me say yes, of course you are, but because she wanted an honest answer. I figured she had been insulted by some relentless bully as she often was for her atrociously red hair, which hung like wispy coils upon her. But I was hunched over an algebraic formula, intent on discovering the world-impacting answer to the equation, and I yelled. Why couldn’t she be normal, like I was, and stop hoarding my attention? Why couldn’t she leave me alone? I didn’t care—couldn’t she hear me—I didn’t care! I yelled as if she were subhuman, unable to translate a simple reply, barely glancing up from my paper.

Janna’s eyes flashed—though not in anger—but in impassioned response. She was not capable of throwing tantrums as I did, of shredding our friendship with the biting sarcasm I loved to employ. Her whole body simply caught the fire of her feeling, her hands trembling slightly as she quietly spoke. "You can hardly stand to look at me now because I remind you of how you feel inside, Peter."

Somehow I stared hollowly back, unable to focus upon her taut face. I couldn’t argue, couldn’t apologize—not for the truth. The words were forced down into my throat, like a brick had been lodged there, so that I could scarcely breathe. Janna gave me little comfort when she rose to leave without waiting for me to futilely explain. I didn’t follow. I didn’t deserve to.

A doctor approaches and startles me from my disheartened daze.

"How is she?" I manage to swallow the lump in my throat. My voice hangs like a cobweb mid-air, limpid and stale.

"Fine, just fine," he facetiously smiles. I instantly hate him, cowering behind inch-thick glasses that magnify his nervously blinking
eyes, and his high-pitched, scratchy voice, ringing with rehearsed insincerity. I follow his directions to her room.

Standing alone within the corridor, before the darkened doorway containing her, I refute my last chance to escape into the rain. I can see her lying, sunken like a cavity in the middle of the sterile sheets, unaware of my presence and the thoughts plaguing my mind. Here I meet the monster who has ravaged Janna’s body with anorexia. It was as if one day she suddenly lost thirty-five pounds, thirty-five pounds mysteriously missing, perhaps since that morning. Who knew? How could we not know? And how can they put a name on it, some Greek derivative, as if she can be classified, tagged and shoved back into some forgotten recess? This is not a disease, but an entity, pulsating within her fragile porcelain figure, seeping into her mind and eyes, poisoning the way she sees herself. Why did she do this—but what a question! Why didn’t I see it sooner? I pose this over and over again, denying the answer I know so very well.

She had told, cried, explained to me why many times before, but I never listened to what I didn’t want to hear. I needed her to be fine for my sake, so that my world would remain free from pain, so that she would carry on the only way she could, alone.

We often sat in a dimly lit corner of a local cafe, relishing the warm, spiced atmosphere, our hands enveloping oversized mugs of frothed milk, our conversation edging around one another.

"What do you want to be, Peter?" Janna once asked.

"I don’t know. Maybe a doctor or something. I’m not really sure. You?"

"I want to be beautiful."

"Why, what’s wrong with you now? You’re fine, just a little skinny. Probably crazy, too."

"Probably," Janna clenched her eyes as if she had taken a punch to the stomach, but her voice never wavered. "Don’t you understand? If I were beautiful, like everyone wants me to be, then I could do anything I wanted in the whole world, because no one can say no to a beautiful person."

"Well, who wants you to be so beautiful?" I nagged in nonchalance.
"I don’t know, Peter, that’s part of the problem."

A narrow fluorescent light perched above the metal framed bed emits a dull green glow. Janna pulls herself up to greet me with a wan smile.

"I hope I didn’t wake you. I don’t want to interrupt your sleep if--"

"Oh, Peter, you’re always apologizing. I wasn’t really near sleeping. These nurses have been poking and prodding me nonstop ever since I came. I feel like such a child."

"Hey, don’t worry."

"Hey, I don’t." An unfamiliar twinge of cynicism reaches her voice. Suddenly I am facing a stranger.

"How are you feeling?"

"Peter, please. Do you know how much I’ve been asked that in a single hour? You don’t want to know, trust me," Janna half-smiles again.

"Well, you certainly sound like yourself. Mean and crabby," I chide, groping for some pathetic kind of comic relief. God, I am claustrophobic! I can hardly move.

"Maybe I should try to get some rest. Maybe you should go," she says to the ceiling.

"I was just kidding, Janna. I want to help you. That’s why I’m here—for you. It’s okay."

"No, Peter. Can’t you see? It’s not okay. You can’t keep pretending as if nothing has changed when it will never be the same. Please leave. I’m sorry, but you’re not the one who’s sick."

I look at Janna. Small beads of sweat line her forehead, and her rough, red hair now hangs in limp ringlets around her ghostly white face. She focuses too intently upon the bare ceiling, her sickness waiting for me to acknowledge defeat. I know she means what she said to me so I turn to go.

"Janna, I’m going to come back and see you in just a little while, all right?" Somehow she no longer seems able to manage her half-smile for me.

"Goodbye, Peter."

"Okay, Janna?"
"Goodbye."

I pause once more before leaving the doorway. Through a window across her room I see the rain beckoning to me. Janna lay down within the metal bars of the bed, within the grueling reach of the thief of her youth, within the unbreakable grasp of something larger than her and I. Upon my cheek I feel the moisture of my fears condensing into reality.

"Goodbye, Janna."