

Fiction-toothbrush

Sometimes something runs around in my head until I write it out. I do not lay claim that any of this is good; it's just what is there sometimes. These pieces will tend to be snippets without much background. They have nothing to do with any part of my life. I just seem to need to write them.

"You can leave your toothbrush here," he said as he walked by the bathroom. He took three steps down the hallway and waited.

He heard her choke on her toothpaste, rinse, spit.

"What?" She came into the hall.

"You heard."

"You don't like clutter. I'm leaving tomorrow to go home, which is fourteen thousand miles away. Why would I leave my toothbrush?"

"Maybe you'd come back sooner."

She stood in front of him, head tilted slightly up. "I thought you were coming to visit me next."

"Four months is a long time. It's symbolic. You know you have a place here."

"I don't. You are my friend. I don't leave toothbrushes at friends' houses."

He reached up and brushed his fingers across her cheek. "He was my friend. I miss him. Despite that, I somehow managed to fall in love with you."

She looked stunned. He looked worried.

“You waited until the day before I have to leave to bring this up?”

“I didn’t even know I was going to tell you until last night. Now if you decide you can’t stand me you only have to deal with me for another twenty-eight hours.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just think about it. I needed you to know how I feel about you before we go back to emailing as our main communication.”

He held out his arms, just a little, as he had done so many times before, and she leaned in for a hug. His lips touched her hair. They both stepped back at the same time.

“So,” she said, in a purposefully normal tone of voice, “what are we up to today?”

“Well, first order of business is definitely breakfast. I have waffles ready to go whenever you get hungry.”

She smiled up at him. “Let me get through a shower and I’ll be right down. Do the waffles have walnuts?”

“They can!”

He went downstairs. She watched him go, shook herself, and retreated to the bathroom.

The morning was as normal as they could make it. Waffles for breakfast, swimming, hiking, lunch. They talked about light subjects and teased each other about silly things – his irritation with anything out of place, her frustration when she ran out of things to read. They made it through lunch, then found themselves sitting, looking out at the vast landscape, content.

“It’s peaceful here.” She looked over at him. “I have to work to fit peaceful times into my life, and here it’s just...” she

waved her hand at the scenery "it's almost unavoidable. The cars are all on the other side of the hills, and you have this land that just keeps going. If you hold still, the only noises are bugs, birds, and breathing."

"It takes a little bit of getting used to. When I moved here, I was restless a lot, but it's gotten so I miss it when I'm out in the rest of the world. I'm around people, at school and work, but I can always come back to this place, where it's silent if I need it."

"It would be easy to grow to need this."

"I was worried about you coming to stay for two weeks because I thought you would take away the silence, but you've kind of sunk into it and accepted it. I thought I'd be happy to see you go, just like I have with everyone else who has come to visit, but I'll miss you."

The silence was suddenly less comfortable than it had been.

He reached over, touched her hand, and got up.

"I'm going to go work on the piece for a while."

She nodded.

He went to his studio, saw her head out to her favorite spot under a tree. He began to paint, layering colors and textures to get the effect he was looking for. He didn't notice when she came in almost an hour later, sat down quietly on the floor, and watched. She stayed, still and quiet, until the sun began to set and the light changed too much for him to continue. He looked around, blinking, and swore quietly, then jumped as he saw her.

"I didn't see you! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to abandon you. It was just coming together."

She smiled, stood up. "Don't worry about it. I enjoyed getting

to see what you do.”

“I can’t usually focus as well when people watch. I guess you are an exception to a lot of rules.”

She smiled her crooked, not-sure-how-to-take-that smile that he’d seen before.

“Take it as a compliment,” he said, and watched her smile grow into a grin.

“I like what you are doing with the colors. I’m not good at colors or almost anything artistic, but I know what I like, and that just appeals to me in a kind of challenging way, if that makes any sense.”

“Not really, but that’s ok. I’m glad you like it.”

She took two steps, suddenly in his space, and he looked down at her, startled. Her arms went around his neck, and he wrapped his around her waist. He jerked back too late to avoid getting paint on her clothes, but she steadied him. “The clothes don’t matter,” she murmured, and his arms went around her again. She rested her head on his shoulder, tucking her face into his neck.

“I still miss him.” She didn’t speak loudly.

“You were with him, and happy, for ten years. Of course you miss him. I think I’d be worried if you didn’t.”

“I don’t know how to love anyone else. We matched, and where we didn’t, we worked it out. We didn’t fight because we worked through things. I don’t know if I can love you without hurting you by missing him. Which is convoluted.”

“You don’t want to let yourself love me because you miss him?” Amusement and a certain gentleness were in his voice.

“I didn’t say it made sense. That’s just where I am right now.

You matter a lot to me, and you helped me through living with his death. I just never really expected anyone to be interested in me again. Especially not you,” and now her voice was amused, “the famous artist who could have anyone he wanted.”

His arms tightened around her. “You’re the only one I’ve wanted for a long time. I just didn’t figure it out fully until about a week ago. I’ve gone on dates in the past six or eight months, but I end up feeling dissatisfied. I’ve spent two weeks with you, together almost constantly, and I’m happy.”

She leaned into him.

“Maybe I will leave my toothbrush.”