

Parting Clouds

Krista Wilson

Slow, careful steps took her out into the night, damp grass pressing up between her toes. A light breeze raised goose bumps on her arms and she clutched her nightdress around her more tightly. Wispy trails of silver hair drifted about her shoulders. Vaguely she wondered how long it would take this time for someone to notice she had gone missing and come to fetch her back to bed.

A scowl flickered across her features – until she glanced up at the sky. Her expression softened and her irritation fled as she breathed in the night. The moon, barely a thin crescent, politely refused to compete with the stars splashed across the inky blackness. Not a single cloud marred their beauty.

These were the kind of nights that called her from her bed. Her mind, so fragile and forgetful these days, seemed to clear just a little whenever the clouds did. So she waited for these moments. Savoured them. It was the reason she refused to sleep with the curtains drawn. Every evening she lay looking across at the corner of her window where a small patch of sky was visible from her bed. And every night she watched and waited. The nurses knew not to close those curtains, even after she had fallen asleep, lest she awaken and find them blocking the stars. Every night she lay in silence, waiting for something to part the clouds in her mind. Until she fell asleep, of course. Then she needed to wait no longer. In her dreams she was free. She knew that. Felt that. But not one of those dreams could she ever remember

upon waking.

She sighed, though whether from contentment or sadness she didn't know. Almost she felt she could grasp the reason for the sadness that lay curled in one corner of her heart. It lingered as it always did and she took a brief moment to acknowledge its presence, her lips pressing into a grim smile. How could she remember why she felt this way when she could barely summon the faces of her family anymore?

“You shouldn't be out here.”

She drew in a deep, exasperated breath, refusing to turn towards the softly chiding voice. The night was beautiful and she would not hurry back to her bed. Resolutely she ignored him, letting her eyes drift back towards the stars.

“I've brought you a gown.”

That was new. A small frown creased her already lined face and in spite of herself, she turned. Across the other side of the garden, near the door, stood a man holding her dressing gown draped over one arm. His silhouette proved him to be a tall man, but beyond that she was unable to see any other feature that might distinguish him. She leaned forward, peering through the darkness. The man stepped forward, pale light dispelling some of the shadows. She did not recognise his face though.

The clouds drifted in towards her mind once more and a wave of dread washed over her, mingling with a growing sense of confusion. In the way that she was sometimes unable to place many of the people who worked here, she was unable to name this tall man. That happened more often now. Names remained trapped on the tip of her tongue. Familiar faces morphed into feared strangers. Most terrifying were the times when she didn't know where she was at all. Or who she was – though truth be told, she'd had moments of feeling like that all her life. At her age she should know who she was, shouldn't she?

She clamped down on her fear, struggling to keep her thoughts ordered in her mind.

“Are you one of the nurses?” she asked hesitantly. “I took my pills before bed.” She took a couple of unsteady steps forward, trying to shore up her courage while hoping against hope that the clouds wouldn’t smother her mind completely. Last time that had happened... No, she would not run screaming from him. If she went along with the conversation for long enough, she was sure she would know him.

“I’m the doctor,” he said gently and held out her dressing gown. He took another cautious step forward as though approaching a wild animal. It seemed strange that he would be frightened of her – although if she were to be honest, there was something she liked about that too. It had been a long time since she had intimidated anyone.

She folded her arms across her chest and glowered at him, daring him to begin the speech about how she would catch a death of a cold if she didn’t come back inside. Rather than launching into that usual tirade, the man grinned widely, seeming to relax a little.

“Go on,” he coaxed, holding the gown out more insistently. “I won’t make you come inside. I promise.” He gave her a mischievous wink and she returned the look with a suspicious glare, stepping forward to snatch the gown from him. The movement was not as sharp as she would have liked. Her feeble grasp did not convey the right tone of displeasure that she had been aiming for. To her embarrassment, she struggled to get the gown on and the man moved to help her. She shrugged him off angrily.

“Come on. Let me help you,” he said, his barely concealed amusement annoying her all the more. What could possibly be so funny?

“Oi, I’ll do it myself,” she snapped, pretending not to notice that he was already settling the gown on her shoulders.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he said when he was done, looking away from her and up to the sky. The cold didn’t appear to bother him. At least, she assumed as much by the way he left his long coat hanging open. It billowed around his ankles slowly, the movement only

serving to emphasise his stillness.

“Yes,” she agreed, letting her irritation fade once more. She glanced at him from the corner of her eye as he stood at her side, staring up into the night. His eyes glistened brightly, pupils wide as they drank in the starlight. As she watched the breeze tousle his dark hair, a realisation dawned on her. He was in love with those stars as much as she was.

“You’re not going to tell me to go to bed, are you?” she said.

“Nope,” he answered, popping the ‘p’. He glanced across at her, left eyebrow quirking upward.

“What do you want then?”

The man sighed. “What do I want?” he said softly, tugging at one earlobe as he considered his own question. He raked one hand through his hair, making it stand even higher on end. “Oh, never mind me,” he said eventually. “How about you?”

“What do *I* want?” she asked, confused. She raised one hand to her head and it came away shaking. The clouds were back. What did she want? Had she asked for something? She felt her anxiety rising again and she turned fearful eyes on the man beside her.

“It’s okay. I’m sorry,” the man said, placing one hand on her arm. She stared at him. She still didn’t know him – but the way he looked at those stars...

“I want to be whole again,” she said softly, holding his eyes with her own. A strand of her hair blew across her face and she snatched it, tucking it behind one ear. The man's eyes softened as he watched her, waiting for her to say more.

“There is so much I can’t remember,” she confided in a low voice. “My husband. I can’t always remember what he looked like. Sometimes I don’t even recognise him in my photos.”

“He has – passed then?” the man asked gently.

She nodded, her eyes dropping to the ground for a moment. “Years ago,” she said.

“At least, I think it was years ago. I can never be sure.” She tapped the side of her head with one finger. “You people insist on calling it Alzheimer’s. More like *Old Timer’s* if you ask me. Ha!”

The man laughed weakly and reached out, clasping her hand between his own.

“Children?” he asked, holding her hand soothingly.

“No children,” she replied and wondered whether she should pull her hand away. She didn’t. Instead, she searched his brown eyes, trying to understand why she would speak with him so openly.

“I’ve had a good life though,” she added, feeling the strange urge to reassure him.

“Happy marriage. Loads of travel. Never wanted for money. I couldn’t have asked for more, but...”

“But?”

“But I’m lost, doctor...”

The man wilted, his eyes full of sympathy as he whispered her name. Something about the way he said it, the way he managed to keep his tongue at the roof of his mouth despite the syllables, made her smile. He really was a cartoonish, awkward-looking fellow. Gangly too. But his youthful face was belied by the age in his eyes. Those eyes looked as though he could have been as old as she. *Yes*, she decided. They were both so very old.

She felt the words tumble from her mouth.

“Sometimes when I think back on my life, I feel like there should have been more – that *I* could have been more. I shouldn’t want that though. Not at my age.” She stopped short of telling him exactly how old she was. That was none of his business.

“Oh, but you *are* more.” He smiled at her, his eyes burning with an intensity that made her breath catch in her throat. “You are *so* much more.” He reached out and lightly pressed one hand to her weathered cheek.

“Gramps used to say that to me,” she said. She might not always recall his face, but she could still remember spending cold nights out on the hill together – another man who loved the stars. The memory, so shockingly clear, tugged at something that lay buried deeper.

She stared at the man still holding his hand to her cheek. She placed her own atop it and drew it down so that she held his hand at her side. The wind blew more strands of hair into her face, hair that in her youth had been flame, but she didn’t let go of his hand to brush them away. She didn’t want to let go of his strangely subtle warmth.

“We’ve got a lot of life behind us, don’t we?” she said with a sigh and tilted her face back to the sky. The man didn’t reply, only nodded and lifted his own eyes to the darkness above. Together they stood like that, side by side in the night. A shooting star flashed across the sky.

“Those stars,” she continued in a hushed voice. “They make me long so desperately for – something.” She blinked slowly and felt her lashes damp on her face. “My whole life...” She trailed off and the man at her side squeezed her hand. She glanced across at him, eyes suddenly fierce.

“Something was taken from me.”

She felt shock at her own words, a tangible thing that awoke the sadness locked away inside her. It unfurled from that corner of her heart and spread slowly throughout her body, the hairs on her arms rising in response. She had never dared to utter those words before, had refused even to acknowledge the deep, visceral understanding that had summoned them – until this very moment. Something *had* been taken from her. She knew that with a conviction matched only by her certainty that it was the man standing beside her who had ignited that awareness.

“I’m so sorry,” he breathed.

She felt her brow crease in confusion and watched as the enigmatic man wrestled with

emotions she couldn't define. That face was still a mystery to her. Yet the comfort of his hand in hers, and the depth of knowledge in his downcast eyes, made her feel as though she should know him.

“Who *are* you?”

The man pressed his lips together, the corners of his mouth edging downward as he set his jaw determinedly. He stared out into the night, refusing to meet her inquisitive gaze.

“Tell me,” she demanded. She tore her hand from his and balled it into a fist. “I know you. I do!”

The man leaned back as though expecting her to punch him. She had considered it, of course, but pain unlike any she had ever known exploded in her mind. She clutched at the sides of her head and the man threw his arms around her, holding her to his chest.

He held her like that, telling her that he was sorry – so, so sorry – until his voice calmed her and the pain began to recede. When it was over, the clouds were back, but she was too exhausted to care that she rested in the arms of this complete stranger. She leaned into him, shivering and catching her breath.

“You’re right,” he whispered suddenly, so softly that she barely heard the words. Slowly, she drew away from him so that she could look into his face. He licked his lips and looked down at his feet.

“I did take something from you. I had to.”

He turned to face her, his brown eyes beseeching her for understanding and she drew away from him further.

“I had to,” he repeated. “I had no choice.”

She stared at him and abruptly she had the strongest desire to slap his face. It seemed that he noticed it too. His eyes widened and he recoiled, holding his hands up defensively. For some reason, she wanted to laugh at that.

“Give it back,” she said instead.

“What?”

“You heard me,” she insisted.

The man ruffled both hands through his hair furiously and dragged them down the sides of his face. Then he clicked his jaw shut and stared at her.

“Oh, I should’ve expected that from you.”

A thrill of hope shot through her and she caught his eyes, knowing instinctively that she was finally getting somewhere. Those eyes looked back at her, unfathomable pools of starlight swirling with secrets and sorrows within.

“Please,” she whispered, hardly daring to breathe.

The trees around the garden swayed as the wind picked up, the rustling leaves so loud in the silence.

He grabbed her hand again suddenly. “You don’t have to do this.” He leaned in closer, the grip on her hand tightening. “If I do this, you won’t survive. This is not a game.”

She smiled gently.

“I’m an old woman. I am *not* going to die before I understand what the hell is going on. You hear me, doctor?”

The man’s lips twitched into an amused grin and she thought back over her words to try to figure out what had made him smile in such a way. Abruptly his grin fell away.

“It will hurt.”

“I know,” she whispered, and even as she said it, she knew it to be true. “Please,” she said again. “Do this. For me.”

The man held her gaze and the wind died down, the trees falling still as though waiting for his response. The night paused, resting in the space between breaths. After a moment, the man slowly drew her around to face him. She returned his nod, gently

encouraging him. He reached out, resting his fingertips lightly on either side of her head.

And the night exploded.

Stars whipped past as she was drawn through a vortex of shining light that burned in her mind. The pain lanced through her, stabbing into her thoughts. She shuddered with the agony, the light tearing her mind to shards. Her memories shattered into a million pieces, tinkling like glass as they fell apart and reformed again. She gasped. Each sliver held an image, a memory that tumbled through her mind and became a part of her.

Fire erupting from a great mountain. The smell of sulphur. Ash in her hair. She hurtled through space, sometimes drifted, orbiting around unexplored worlds. Twin suns rose and she watched as a new day dawned over another alien landscape. Creatures and beings from another place. People and cultures of another time. Running. So much running. And a blue box like no other...

“Spaceman?” she cried out, her eyes brimming with tears as she searched out the man she had lost so long ago. Her eyes fell on his face, and finally she knew him.

“Earth girl,” he whispered, cradling her in his arms as the last of her strength gave out.

Donna felt her frail body go limp. He was right. She *had* been so much more.

“Thank you, Doctor,” she whispered.

The smile remained on her lips as the clouds parted for the final time and she drifted off to join the stars – whole once more.