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Not Enough

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Not Enough

Joshua Treadway

A fire roars in the drawing room, providing a cozy escape from the chaos of the ballroom. Charles leans against the wall right under a portrait of his family. It's one of my favorite portraits, because you can see how he clearly favors his mother. He has her strong bone structure, her eyes, green like the first leaves of spring, her flaming red hair; all things that I had been immediately drawn to. He pushes off the wall as he sees that I've joined him.

"James, I was hoping you'd notice I had vacated the party." His father had just been selected Lord Speaker of Parliament, and one can only feign excitement for so long. "You always know where to find me."

I close the door behind me and approach him, "How could I *not*? You always seem to find solace in the same place." I tug at the lapel of his coat and urge his lips to mine, but I feel him hesitate. I lower my hands. "Is something the matter?"

"No, no, nothing is wrong! There's just," he backs away and wrings his hands, looking more nervous than I've seen from him in years. "I have something I need to discuss with you, and I cannot risk getting distracted."

"Oh, alright then!" I drop unceremoniously onto the loveseat near the fire, "Mind if I make myself comfortable then?"

"Of course, dear." I expect him to join me, but instead he paces the room, gnawing at his cuticles. "So, I love you an—"

"Charles, I thought we had already established that," I deadpan.

"Yes, but do you know that I cannot bear to live without you? Do you know that every time your father takes you on those barbaric hunting trips, I crave your return like I crave oxygen?"

"You know that I feel similarly...." They are the only words I can force in the moment.

"You do?" I nod. "Alright then," he falls to one knee and reaches for his coat pocket. Oh no. "James Fair—"

"Charles get off the damn ground right now, or so help me God." Mumbled under my breath, the threat is not enough to stop him.

"James Fairworth, I have loved you my entire life and I cannot ever stop now," He pulls a box from his pocket and opens it to reveal a polished wooden ring, one he probably carved

himself. “Marry me, run away with me, love me forever like I will love you.” I knew he was going to do it, but I cannot believe he *actually* did it. When I don’t respond, he grabs my hand and, voice wavering, says “Please.”

I cup his face with my other hand and feel the gentle scratch of his stubble, “Dear, you know how much I love you but... marriage? It could never be, it’s not even legal. And... and what of our reputations? It must be easier for you, you’ve always had it all, but think of me. I’ve just started working my way up in the bank, finally getting a good start in the world! Think of what people would say!”

“But I—we don’t have to be married in the eyes of the law, or the eyes of God, or whoever else feels the need to know about us. Who cares what they say? What of what *I* say? Of what we feel!?” His eyes light up as he tightens his grip and shakes our joined hands. “I just want to give up the façade and love you! I want to scream it from the rooftops, and if the only means of that are running away, being outcasts, hell, joining the circus, whatever it takes, *that* is what I want. I just want you, and I will do anything to have you, don’t you see that? Do you not feel the same?” He’s crying now, his face red, and saliva collecting at the corners of his mouth.

“You know I love you, but there are just some things that are impossible for us, we’ve known this. You’re wanting me to give up my life here, to give up my job, leave my family, not to have children, and redirect my entire life for you? I know we’ve talked like this but I—I never imagined you could be genuine about it. Do you understand the weight of what you’re asking for? The irreparable, irreversible implications that this would have?”

“Yes James, I understand, and I mean every word. I thought you would understand! You hate your family, you hate your job, you hate this Goddamn polluted city, and you love me, so what the fuck is keeping you here?!” He crumples in on himself and begins to sob in earnest. “I just want you to love me as I love you, forever. That is *all* I want. We can go off to the lakes like all the old poets! I can use my parents’ money at get us a quaint little cottage! Romanticism does not have to die with Wordsworth, it can live on in the two of us!”

“Charles, you know how much I love you, but we can never be *real*.” I can feel a tear coming dangerously close to falling from my own eye. “These dreams, or plans, or whatever you think they are can’t be real. *This* can never be real. We’ve always known this arrangement has had an expiration date.”

“Ah,” he snuffles, “I see then. In that case, uhm, I think it may be for the best that *this* is over. I cannot bear the thought of—” He turns away from me, dislodging my hand from his face, and licks his lips. “I cannot allow myself to fall more in love with you than I already am, just for you to decide later that what we have now is *too much*. The nation is entering a new age, I guess it only makes sense that we do too.” He lets go of my hand as if it has burnt him, getting up off the ground and beginning to walk to the door

“Charles, wait!” I jump from the couch as he grabs the handle. “I love you and you know that, please don’t be foolish. It’s just,” I grab his forearm and turn him to face me. He relents. “This is as far as we can go, but I want this, I want you, for as long as possible. This has worked for nearly a decade, who’s to say it can’t continue? If you’re feeling neglected, I can show you more attention; we can go for more afternoon strolls in Hyde park, we can travel, whatever you want, but that is all I can give you right now. My love is all I can give you. Is that not enough, is now not enough?”

I lean into him and press my lips to his. He doesn’t engage with the kiss at first, but when he does, he is ravenous. The kiss is deep, passionate, and hungry, reminiscent of our school days, and I can tell that it will be our last. I can taste the salt of his tears as he opens his mouth to mine. He digs his fingers into my shoulders as I place mine at his hips and pull him into me.

Moments float into my memory like ashes from the fire, all warm and welcoming and dangerous: sharing secrets in my attic, stolen kisses in school hallways, our seemingly innocent travel year to Paris, fog on the windows of his parents’ carriage, nighttime walks along the musty Thames. Very suddenly I’m torn from my trance as he bites my bottom lip before pushing me away.

“I’m afraid it can’t be enough for me.” He says as he wipes his tears on his shirtsleeves and leaves the drawing room.

I feel a single tear roll down my cheek as I watch him leave to rejoin the party. And as I stand alone with the crackling fire and his family portrait staring right at me, I gaze into those bright green eyes which I have turned tired and lifeless. I hope that he won’t make a scene, though I know he has every right to.