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Time and All of His Friends: A London Interlude

Mikaela Eackles

You stand outside of a quaint brownstone bookstore in Hampstead.

The usual garish crimson color of the shop door appears far duller than you remember. Perhaps it is the afternoon light, you think. The sun shies away behind a cloud, painting everything a mousy sort of gold.

A small advert displayed to the right of the shop window catches your attention. You can make out the words, **"*The Promise* National Book Tour 1981. Get Your Own Copy Signed Today**!" in bold, gaudy print.

You divert your gaze when it lands on a photograph of the author, the feeling similar to being burned.

You flex your left hand instinctively and crack each knuckle until you've run out of fingers. You bite your lips until they're raw. You're stalling.

Your father used to call you *soft* when you were a child; it was almost always accompanied with an exuberant air of disdain. He and your mother were the only two people to ever refer to you by your full name. While your name from your mother's lips would be as soft and caring as a caress, your name from your father's would typically be said in a condemning tone or be screeched in anger.

As a child, you were affectionate and gentle and astonishingly kind. Your tenderness exuded from your center like the sun, yielding blooming flowers in your wake.

Things changed when you were eight. It was a few weeks after the death of your mother, a few months before you would be sent off to school up north. You were slumped in the

porcelain, clawfoot bathtub watching your father shave his sandy beard with something akin to wonder. Your big eyes followed your father's movements, observing closely as he dragged the razor across his pointed jaw. Your mother used to do this for your father each Sunday. It had become somewhat of a ritual – your small family huddled together in the first-floor powder room, your laughter bouncing off the chalky walls until your bellies ached. You were always together, the three of you. You were always laughing.

Your father hadn't touched his beard since she died. It was only the two of you now, and there was no more laughter.

You watched your father rinse the razor in the basin, and you hadn't a single idea what he was feeling. You noticed that your father's eyes were glassy as he blankly took in his reflection in the mirror. You had never seen him cry before.

You were suddenly overcome with the desire to comfort your father. You rose from the tub and embraced the man affectionately, your short arms wrapped around his middle, your head nestled against his soft, round belly. You felt your father go rigid underneath your touch, but it only made you hold on tighter still for fear that he may slip away.

Large hands grabbed your shoulders and tugged you off, big thumbprints left bruises on your unblemished skin. Your father lifted his right hand, the motion not unlike that of a wave. A *slap*. A burn to your cheek so fierce, tears prickled in your eyes.

A single second of your childlike tenderness was mistaken for weakness. From that day forth, you vowed to be so tough that your father would never again call you soft.

You're not sure why you recall this memory just now, as you stand outside of the shoddy bookshop. You feel as though you're on the precipice of something significant. One step forward and you're at the point of no return.

London is dreary in April. Thick raindrops cling to the shop's awning and strike the dark cobblestones. You stare at your reflection in the bookshop's window, at the countless copies of *The Promise* that are displayed one after the other like the trophies from an undefeated sports team.

You take in your appearance: you are of shorter stature with soft, chestnut-colored hair and warm, blue eyes. Clear rimmed glasses rest delicately on the crook of your nose like the gentleness of a kiss. Your jumper is frayed, two buttons are missing on your denim jacket, and your trousers are cuffed generously above your ankles to compensate for your lack of height. Your very own copy of *The Promise* rests in the crook of your elbow precariously, as if the whisper of a breeze could blow it away.

You close your eyes, inhaling deeply. When you open them, you reach your free hand towards the shop door and feel the coolness of the metal knob against your warm skin.

You contemplated for a long time as to whether you should bring your own copy of the book. You feared someone might catch a glance at your impassioned notes in the margins, the ones that line the spine and blur unintelligibly with the print. It was equivalent to looking into your heart. Yet it somehow felt worse still to show up to such an event empty handed. After all, you knew you had nine more copies of *The Promise* collecting dust in your flat. You haven't found much use for them as of yet besides the comfort in knowing that they're there.

The whirling wind from an impending storm dances through the trees, tossing your overgrown fringe across your forehead and mixing amongst your eyelashes. Your hand lingers on the doorknob. You woke up this morning feeling rather confident after a considerable amount of self-deliberation, assured in your decision to attend a reading of your new favourite book. But now, trepidation courses through you instead of certainty. You feel it down in your toes and in

the tips of your fingers. Sweat forms on your upper lip, and your heart rate increases with every passing second as if it's about to burst out of your chest cavity.

You saw an advertisement for the book tour in the paper just two days prior. Your teacup had slipped out of your hand and shattered all over the freshly waxed hardwood when your eyes fell on the name of the author. It was a name you hadn't seen in seventeen years. That same evening, you went to the bookshop across the street from your flat, and just six minutes before closing, bought every copy of *The Promise* that was left in store. The elderly lad at the till gave you a curious look when he rang you up for ten copies of the same book.

You laid awake that night, forgoing sleep as you poured over the novel in one sitting. All 22 chapters. All 317 pages.

The prose was lucid and rich and hauntingly beautiful, just as you remembered the author's writing to always be. The story was about a young man plagued with the power to travel through time, unwittingly and without the ability to stay in one place for very long. He falls in love with an artist born 150 years before him, and the novel follows his escapades over hundreds of centuries as he makes every effort to be reunited with his lover. Time is his one and only enemy.

After you finished the book, you stared at your ceiling fitfully.

You wept.

You felt like you were outside of your body.

You wondered how you had made it to that very moment. How each minute decision you had made throughout your short 33 years had led you to that singular instant. How it could make you feel suspended in time.

Your childhood came back to you in pieces, similar to the feeling of waking up from a particularly deep dream. The death of your mother. Growing out your fringe as a guise to conceal the deep blues and purples and greens that littered your cheekbones. Being sent off to school when you were a young child, simply because your father didn't want to be a father anymore. Illicit copies of books hidden under pillows. The Beatles. A kiss shared in the darkness of the corridors. Finding comfort in the arms of another. The same arms that held you when you cried. The same hands that wrote you so many love letters, they became a fire hazard stacked up on the windowsill. The same fingers that traced the lines of your face like one would commit a marble sculpture to memory. Soft skin. Green eyes. Dimples. Curly hair. A voice, sweet like honey, that would murmur kind words in your ear. Lips that would press into each freckle on your skin with a kind of gentleness you thought only existed in the books you had read. Dreams that were only whispered in the placidity of the night because saying them in the light of day somehow made them more real. A tyrannical father. A *promise* to always find your way back to one another.

The door to the bookshop opens abruptly, the hinges creaking unpleasantly as a young woman exits with the book in her left hand. You can see that the cover has been signed with a black marker.

You greet her with a kind smile, the shopkeeper's bell chiming above your head as she moves past you.

Leaves fall from the surrounding trees and make music on the cobblestones below your feet.

Your hand falls from the doorknob.

You cross the threshold into the shop.

The door slams behind you.

Your gaze remains at your feet for fear of what you might find if you were to look up.

You succumb.

You register who's before you right as your blue eyes meet my green ones. Dimples. Curly hair.

It's been so long.

Suddenly, you're 16 again. It's the beginning of the spring term of 1964. You rouse from a blissful sleep, my warm body pressed against your back, my soft hand splayed across your chest, resting tenderly over your heart. You hope that I can feel it under my palm. You told me once that it beats just for me. Our legs are tangled together in the sanctuary of the single bed. It's impossible to tell where you end, and I begin. The rising sun bleeds through the blinds, first light just barely gracing the edge of the windowsill. You wonder if you could reach out and grab the sun – hold it in your palm – if you could suspend time. The clock beside your head ticks incessantly. It's late. You should be heading back to your own boarding house by now. Someone could catch us. You feel my lips at the nape of your neck. Your eyelids feel heavy. Sleep comes quickly.

The book begins to slide out of your grasp, and you find yourself catching it awkwardly before it hits the tiles. Your cheeks flush an embarrassing shade of pink, your eyes cast down towards the linoleum floor. People begin to shuffle around you like pieces in a methodical chess match, each of them appearing as if they know exactly where they're meant to be. You feel a bit like the pawn. You're painfully aware that you're blocking the door. You think you can hear the faint sound of piano crooning from a distance. It sounds familiar. Debussy's "Reverie," perhaps.

You redirect your gaze to who's in front of you before the bookshop consumes you whole. You blink.

I’m taller than you remember.

My eyes are still that same arresting shade of green, you notice. Specks of gold line my pupils and burst into stardust when my gaze is on you. You find yourself death-gripping the book in your hands to keep yourself from doing something foolish, like running your fingertips all over my face, or pressing kisses onto my eyelids. You just want some confirmation that I’m real.

You are suddenly dreadfully aware of how close we are. How if you were to lift your palm just so, you could reach out and touch me. You wonder what would happen if you did it. You imagine me turning to gold beneath your fingertips.

I move towards you slowly, as if in a haze, my gaze unrelenting. That stardust again. It disarms you immediately.

You’ve been here before. In this exact moment. Every time you shut your eyes and rest your head on a pillow. Seventeen years, and the dream remains the same.

You smile warmly. How I’ve missed that smile.

We regard one another with mutual amusement.

“You kept your promise,” I say on an exhale – with a voice just as sweet, even after all these years.