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Beads on a string

I

There is no such thing as happy-ever-after, only moments that endure. Here's one, in London three decades ago. I'm in a packed bar with a half-pint of beer in my hand. A gasp has just left my mouth, but my friends are chatting and laughing and no one has noticed. My head is full of light. Just across from me, Will, the shy, bearded, somewhat overweight colleague who begins to be part of our group, bends his head to hear his neighbour. He is smiling, and to me he appears suddenly beautiful and good.

At times the riddle of love is so urgent, we believe we can solve it in a flash: we recognise something in a stranger and want to spend our whole life with that person. By luck or good magic, we're not always mistaken. From first kiss to break-up was less than four years, but Will is still providing me with clues.

II

Where shall I pick up the story? In Amsterdam perhaps, a few months into our less-than-four years, when my passion is still euphoric. I should like to say our passion, but Will is not a passionate man. Wise, honourable, kind, gentle, humble—I could go on—but not passionate.

Gradually, this will estrange us: I will push, he will accept; he will never push back. In a way he will refuse me; I will feel it as refusal. My passion will dry up, the riddle will restate itself. Eventually another stranger will catch my attention, and I'll be adrift again, seeking a different solution.

But for now it is deep winter in Amsterdam. The sky is iron grey. Leafless trees line the canals; the lacework of their branches shivers black against red and ochre façades and repeats itself, black, among the broken reflections of gaily-painted houseboats. Gloved hand in gloved hand, I wander with Will, in that lost state of bliss, pausing to buy chips with mayonnaise

(never sampled before) or a döner kebab (unheard of in England), or to sip coffee and kirsch at a table covered with red-patterned carpet. We catch and inhale the legal scent of marijuana, laugh at the iron urinals that reveal head and feet, stare at bendy trams, flocks of bicycles, Van Gogh posters in yellow and turquoise.

Then, in some busy pedestrian square, for a moment I lose Will. His hand slips from mine, or are my hands occupied with a kebab? I turn, but he isn't behind me. I scan the crowd for his tall padded body, his nose pink from the cold, his eyes. What colour are his eyes? Blue? Grey? Why don't I know this?

For a moment, he is gone: the world doesn't contain him. And then, he exists again, coming towards me. Unsmiling. Changed.

“What's the matter? What happened?”

“It's nothing.” He shakes his head.

I make him tell me, and what he says falls like an axe.

“Really, nothing. Just a man, asking for money. I told him, sorry. And he said, ‘I hope you get cancer.’”

III

“Wise” is not a throwaway word. Will always seemed so, and not only to me. He was known for saying little, allowing debate to rage around him until, pressed for his view, he offered some tentative, thoughtful, clarifying suggestion before withdrawing into silence again. Like all the best gurus, he never believed himself one.

And like all humble people, he grew wiser. Here is something of his from a few years ago. Our heads are close over a pub table—a half of Guinness for me, a pint of Special for him—while he draws a diagram on a torn scrap of paper.

high ego, high self- esteem	low ego, high self- esteem
high ego, low self- esteem	low ego, low self- esteem

As ever from Will, nothing contentious. It's a fairly simple example of the rule that there are two kinds of people: those who believe that there are two kinds of people, and those who don't understand the binary system. Some have massive egos, while others (Zen masters, for example) manage without; most of us are in between. Some love themselves well and steadfastly, while others doubt and self-damage; most of us rub along with ourselves after a fashion. These aspects of our personalities fluctuate from hour to hour, led by events, moods, thoughts, weather, the passing of years, the curses of beggars.

What Will suggests is this. We are, each of us, born into the bottom left-hand corner: high ego, low self-esteem. And the purpose of life (yes, The Purpose Of Life!) is to make our way to the top right-hand corner (low ego, high self-esteem) before we bow out. Each of us traces a different route for our journey, smoothly rising, or jagged with many zigzags and reversals. A few bubble up into the top left-hand quadrant and stay there (because it feels so good, why burst the bubble?). Uncounted millions crawl into the bottom right-hand quadrant, and sink helplessly. Most of us get stuck in the quadrant we started in, guarding our insecurities with a fine bristling show of bravado.

It's a relief to know The Purpose Of Life. There's great peace to be found in the top right-hand quadrant. I wish I could be in it always. Thank you, Will.

IV

When our less-than-four-years was running out, we found it hard to part company. We neither of us had a new partner, we remained friends and we continued to share the same friends. It seemed impossible to announce separateness, yet privately we were estranged.

Here's a moment. In winter again. Will has fled to New York for Christmas, visiting his teenage-sweetheart-turned-pen-pal. It's the first evening he's back, and we've met up, not at my flat or his, but on neutral ground, for a pizza in Hampstead. Our table is in a window overlooking Heath Street, where the festive lights glitter reproachfully. I gulp wine and match his reticence for once, as our conversation barely rises above friendly small talk. Underneath I am bubbling, up in the top left-hand quadrant because, while Will's been away, a stranger with whom I am newly in love has leapt into my arms.

But how shall I break this to Will?

Albinoni's Adagio plays. We have almost finished the wine. I swallow a last mouthful of pizza and make myself speak. And suddenly he is speaking too, eagerly. He hasn't known how to tell me. His pen pal just broke up with her boyfriend. She saw Will off at JFK airport last night and, as his flight was called, asked him to marry her.

"And you said yes?"

"I said yes."

Albinoni gives way to a jolly trumpet concerto. We order another bottle of wine. We toast each other's happiness.

V

Would he have married me if I'd asked, then or before? I don't know. Somewhere around year two, I decided I never would ask him. Somewhere around year three, I stopped wanting him to ask me.

Between these two uncharted events, here we are one weekend afternoon, I don't know the season, pottering in my flat. For some days we've shared the knowledge that my period is late—those were the days of “the coil”, a medieval torture instrument whose main contraceptive efficacy was in making me feel too lousy to have sex—but there's no sense of crisis: we've been discussing the meal we are cooking. Will and I haven't spoken of options, but gradually I've asked myself the question, and answered that I can't possibly abort Will's child, and I'm in a weird state of contentment. Now, I come out of the bathroom, and I say to Will, “There's no baby.” And before we smile, and rearrange our heads, and carry on cooking, I see in his eyes a microsecond of something that may be disappointment. Or is it a reflection of my own? Anyway, we don't speak the word, and we don't set about making a baby; we carry on cooking and let the less-than-four-years run its course.

VI

Another moment, months later, same flat, dead of night. I've been in unspeakable pain for some hours; my womb has decided it wants rid of the coil and has been attempting to achieve this with futile contractions. I have an appointment with the doctor tomorrow. Will has managed to sleep, but now he wakes to find he's alone in the bed. He discovers me in the bathroom, stretched out on the floor, white and cold, with my eyes staring open. For a moment he thinks I am dead.

VII

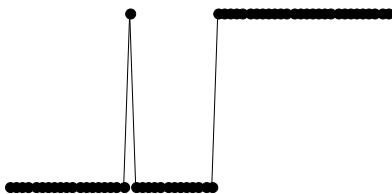
The riddle of death. Albert Einstein and Kurt Vonnegut have solved it. Here's a quote from *Slaughterhouse-Five* that says all that we need to know:

The most important thing I learned on Tralfamadore was that when a person dies he only *appears* to die. He is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at his funeral. All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look back at all the different moments just that way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them. It is just an illusion we have here on Earth that one moment follows another one, like beads on a string, and that once a moment is gone it is gone forever.

I agree, except it is not very silly to cry, because I am not a Tralfamadorian, and I can't live the moments again. I am sitting at my keyboard, aged sixty and a half, and I am separated, by the Atlantic Ocean and by nevermore, from Will, who is dying.

Vonnegut is comforting, though, because he speaks true. Einstein says the same thing. In his physics, the "world line" of any object is its unique track in four-dimensional space-time, which, though it is inerascably out there, we limited humans lack the capacity to "see." In pop-physics, dispense with two space dimensions and, voilà, it becomes visible, a person's world line is their history mapped by time and place.

Here is Will's world line.



He's done a lot of travelling, widely within Europe, and to Delhi, Beijing, Sydney, Alaska, Iceland, the British Virgin Islands, and to many places he's never told me about. I've left all that out. This string of beads

maps only the two places that Will has called home—London (at the bottom) and New York (at the top).

You can't easily count them but there are sixty-one beads on the string, one for each of his birthdays, from age zero in 1947 to age sixty in 2007. Between school and university he spent a summer in New York and met a girl. In 1980 he married the girl and settled there permanently.

VIII

Did he find happiness in New York? Did my new stranger offer me a lasting solution? Yes, no, no, yes—answers are not simple, and anyway those are separate stories that don't affect this one. This one is as it is. Has to be.

Will likes Part III of this—the matrix—the only bit I have shown him. He says, “I can't help feeling that your mention of my wisdom is a bit over the top, but you might say that is characteristically humble of me, to which I would reply not humble just true.”

He has shared it with his children. His elder son says it is kind and true. His daughter is enthusiastic, likes the matrix, says it must make him feel as if he is in the top right-hand corner. His younger son wants to know why I give his father *his* name, not his father's own name. I write back, “Strangely, I chose the name Will because it felt right somehow, before it occurred to me that it's your son's name, which just made it seem righter.”

He asks to see the rest. I can't make up my mind if I should send it.

IX

One day all too soon Will will have his “last moment.” But here is the one I put first and last.

Soft rain is descending through a canopy of deciduous trees onto the hood of my yellow cagoule. The fairytale ruin of Kilchurn Castle floats on the surface of Loch Awe. There's a posy of wet wild flowers in my hand. I have that feeling of bliss, of enduring peace. Amsterdam is not planned yet. It is the autumn of 1976.

Will isn't here in the pattering forest. I don't need him to be. I can scoop up a portion of the bliss and carry it with me when I'm apart from him. The bliss multiplies in the Scottish air, in the gentle falling rain that dimples the loch and runs in miniature rivers from the deserted road.

Will is back home in the cottage we've rented through an ad in the *Times*. A cottage complete with orange cellular blankets, open fire and Wellington boots. With thick dust and spiders and flyblown mirrors. With dominoes, three-dimensional noughts and crosses and *Poetic Gems selected from the works of William McGonagall, Poet and Tragedian*.

Will is sleeping. I've left a note on the pillow. "I've gone for the fish."

He doesn't snore when he sleeps. His breathing deepens. Roughens. That's all.

He beats me every time at three-dimensional noughts and crosses. I feel baffled. Outwitted. Unable to see what must be obvious, what reveals itself as obvious when he places his next piece.

Losing to Will is fine: part of the mesmerising tranquillity. Though he likes to win, he doesn't crow. Just smiles each time and says, "Gotcha."

Gotcha. I can hear his voice now, seeping into my soul like syrup into rice pudding.

We make love. Sleep. Chop wood. Stoke fires. Simmer porridge, grill fish, open tins of rice pudding. Play noughts and crosses. Take turns at declaiming *Poetic Gems*.

*Oh! ill-fated Bridge of the Silv'ry Tay,
I must now conclude my lay
By telling the world fearlessly without the least dismay,
That your central girders would not have given way,
At least many sensible men do say,
Had they been supported on each side by buttresses,
At least many sensible men confesses,
For the stronger we our houses do build,
The less chance we have of being killed.*

A van is trundling towards me through the mist. Black as a scarab, alone on the drenched Oban-Dalmally road. I put out my hand as though hailing a bus. The van draws to a halt beside me. The driver climbs out.

“Hello. Two mackerel, please.”

X

Or no. Perhaps this?

A few days later, we surprise ourselves by climbing a mountain. We’ve been gazing up from loch-side or rented car, wishing we could do it, never for a moment imagining it’s possible. Neither of us knows how. Then, a hill-walking friend of Will’s arrives and offers to lead the way.

Beinn Eunaich, we decide. It rises steeply to the northwest of Loch Awe, no messing about in foothills. And from the summit, three thousand two hundred and forty-two feet above sea level, we will look out north over miles of glen and loch and highland peaks empty of a single road or dwelling.

Three thousand two hundred and forty-two feet. The next day, after porridge and sausages, we pack Mars Bars, map, compass and spare socks, lace our walking-boots tightly, and set off.

Two hours and the Mars Bars later, Will’s friend has disappeared above us and I’m doing my best not to whimper. Squalls of icy rain beat down from the summit, like eagles protecting a nest. I bow my head, seeing only sodden ground and my boots, which I drag left, then right, then left again. My knees ache. My gloves are wet. The cold in my hands is excruciating. The ground steepens and becomes a fall of scree that disintegrates as the boots try to climb it. I fall forward onto hands and knees.

“Side by side,” Will shouts in the howling air, “so we don’t bury each other in stones.”

His body bumps against mine and away again into the freezing rain. I want to be by the fire, playing noughts and crosses, reciting poems about freak storms and disasters. I want to be under the orange cellular blanket

with my arms around Will. My will is weak. My body is pleading with me to collapse, turn my back to the wind and weep.

I tighten the hood of my cagoule, lose all sense of Will beside me, force myself to toil up the endless purgatory of rolling stones, one hurting hand, one bruised knee at a time.

And then the ground grows firm. The gradient eases, and so, miraculously, does the rain. The wind changes too, comes round behind me and lifts me towards the top. We are walking upright at last and finding new energy. The mountain has given way. It is flattening. Widening.

I have never imagined this feeling. All around me, the mountain falls away. The summit is so small, the world is so vast and wild and beautiful.

I can breathe and see. My pain vanishes in a golden, green wilderness threaded with silver rivers and streams.

And Will is here, too.

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