

Still Beautiful When She Screamed – Hailey, Year 11, NSW

In the city. A new life. Or what he thought it would be. A nine to five job and freshly cooked meal each night. At least, that's what he was told. What they would have to call home was never going to be such. *Would it be enough? Would it be enough if they did not love each other like truly beloved should?* He thought of the girl. *It's for the best. We're a good match.* Hardly. And he knew it. Holding hands. Yet so distant. He knew what he was taking from her. He knew the hatred he would feel from her children. Perhaps he didn't want one of his own, for it might despise him as well. Perhaps if his father had died before the ceremony, they would not be there. Instead he would be with his true love. The one he was forced to leave behind. The one he was forced to forget. His head drooped, dangling from his neck. Like a fish at the end of a line. Wiping the emotion from his mind like chalk from a board, he straightened his posture and inhaled the crisp winter air. "I do," he breathed. But wondered if he truly would.

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Her blood was still fresh in the city when her father-in-law passed away. His quaint little farm with half a dozen cows and a handful of sheep was all left to her husband. It was part of the deal. And so was she. So, by the end of the month, she could once again breathe. She was relieved they were simply too busy to attend the funeral.

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It was the first day on the farm. He showed her the room where he used to lie when he was young. And where they would lay now.

Come the first dawn, he stirred awake. Coffee beans filled his nose. On his bedside table sat a steaming mug.

He took a sip. Outside, his wife, whistling while tending the cows. He half raised his eyebrows and turned around back to bed.

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Each day, when her husband went to work at the bank and her children went to the local primary school, she whistled while she milked the cows, sang while she collected eggs from the new chickens, and spoke to the plants she tended in the small garden her husband thought she should grow. Young at last.

Now and then she caught him looking at the woman in his pocket watch. She knew they were once lovers. She knew he still loved her. Whoever she may be. One day, she was caught watching him as he drowned in the black and white photo. He turned. Blank with so much sadness. He told her their story. How it was never to be. By the right of the woman's own

father. Just like his own. She squeezed his hand, releasing a tear down his cheek. He sniffed the thought away, pulled out his hand from hers, and walked out of the room. She looked at the drooping flowers on the mantelpiece, a natural mirror. And a tear fell down her own cheek.

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By the end of the summer, his child was born. *A girl he would never let go.* He bent down and kissed his wife on the forehead. His tears ran through her hair.

Her children were so excited at the sight of another. She was another friend to join in their farm yard games. *But not for a while,* their mother had explained.

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She watched him from the balcony. Baby, asleep in her arms. She thought of last month when he came home announcing he had quit the bank for good after taking a couple of months off to help with the farm and the baby. *Was it for her? Or just him because the bank was so dull. The children? Did he like the children? Perhaps so.* She didn't know. He looked up at her from down on the field where he was teaching the children to pick carrots from the ground. He glowed in the afternoon sun as he waved and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Their laughter twinkled as they ran. So eager to show their mother what they had found. She smiled as she felt her soul grow warm. Perhaps so.

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She is rather beautiful, isn't she? He could drown in her long hair. Or melt into her creamy skin. So majestic compared to him.

Always so happy. To work, to see her children. *To see him? Surely not.*

She was beautiful.

She was still beautiful when she cried for their daughter.

She was still beautiful when she screamed.

Still when she tried to squeeze the life back into their little girl.

18 months. And snatched away. Straight out of their hands. They had no hands.

It was too cold. Too much sickness in the town. It was inevitable. They didn't want to know it.

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On the day of the funeral. *What could they do?* But to be forced to greet what seemed like the whole town. All sympathetic. All blind.

So blind.

How could they know? How could they know the pain they suffered? How could they know their fear for the new baby?

Their tears, blood from a stone. Everyone else, a river.

How could they know?

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He sat on the balcony, silent in his grief.

Empty.

He watched her as she plucked a handful of flowers from the bed of her blooming garden.

Daffodils. Silent in their grief.

She placed them in front of the wooden cross. On top of where...

She kept some in her hand as she ran her other over the grave. Burying her fingertips in the dry dirt. He thought, *perhaps she wished she was there too.* In the dirt. For he thought the same. Their children stood behind her. Silent. But their eyes, a river.

She stood up, bracing her stomach. She held her children as they walked up to the balcony. She handed him the rest of the flowers and positioned herself under his arm as they sat there, on the deck swing. Rocking back and forth.

Back and forth.

Their children sat on the steps in front. All silent in their grief.

Some time had passed before he reached into his pocket and pulled out his watch. He handed it to her. Confused by his gesture, she looked at him, then opened it. Looking back at her, was a picture he took not two months ago of her and their five children. He squeezed her tighter. And they cried. They truly did.