

The Fall of Achilles

“There are darkneses in life and there are lights, and you are one of the lights, the light of all lights.” —Bram Stoker

*So tell me why you're here today.*

You know why. I guess you don't. You heard the rumors, maybe, no? It was in the news. I guess there's a lot of news.

I guess the first thing you should know is his name, which— or do you care about my childhood? Haha, like the movies— I lay on your couch and tell you awful things about how I grew up bullied, or whatever. It's a small backwater town, the place we eventually settled down in. Everyone's a little— I mean, it's not like here, in the city. It's a whole thing there, if you're gay. That's why he was such a big deal. He just... didn't care.

And I don't mean he wasn't interested in my life, or whatever. We talked for hours. He even met my mom. We were very connected, superglued at the hip, but it wasn't because we were gay. Does that make sense? We were together because we *worked* together, we *fit*, not because of our sexuality.

And I mean that— I know everyone thinks they fit with their significant other, but we really did. We had this rapid-fire dialogue that just worked. The first time we met, I mean really met, I said, ‘Oh, you're that British kid who corrects people's grammar,’ and he said, ‘Oh, you're that country kid who can't use pronouns properly’ and we had this whole debate on the use of the singular ‘they’. Which I won. But later he would tease me about it, say

things like, ‘Oh I’m just *that British kid* to you,’ and he’d kind of tug on my hair. He was that British kid, always, the one I couldn’t tear my eyes away from.

Can I tell you my favorite memory of him? There’s a lot, but— and I don’t think it’s a good thing to live in memories, I think we should enjoy life as a function of the present moment— but sometimes memories are all we have. He slips through my grasp like sand. Is that too melodramatic? It’s from a poem I wrote a while back. He slips through my grasp like sand in the wind, billowing out to an endless sea. Too cliché. Needs some development.

He helped me with my poems. It’s always a thrill, having someone hear my writing, but with him it was... harder. Better, but scary. He never was one for unconditional praise—he’d tell me straight up what worked and what didn’t. It made me stronger. The first time we went to a poetry reading, he clapped louder than anyone, but on the subway ride back to his apartment he told me that my motif was overplayed. “You don’t need to force your theme on the reader,” he said. Or something along those lines. I’m paraphrasing. “Gently lead them to it. If they’re meant to understand, they will.” He had this slow voice, a honeyed legato.

That’s not my favorite memory of him. My favorite memory is one late summer night, or early in the morning. It feels dreamlike— maybe it’s not even real, I’ve replayed it so many times. He’s drunk. We’re both drunk, lazy-soft and squishing in the corners of our skulls. I think I’d been upset about something, earlier. I think that was the day I got my first rejection letter. He traced his finger over the veins in the back of my hand and said, “We’re going somewhere.”

“Yeah?” I asked. I was too blurry to say much of anything, but in a good way. The room felt golden.

He said— and I remember this really well, even though I was drunk off my ass— he said, “We’re the people who are going somewhere. We’re the people who make things.”

“Thingmakers,” I suggested. I love that word.

He let go of my hand and hopped up on the futon, swaying slightly from the vodka.

“We are the thingmakers! Cheers!”

I’ll drink to that. I’d drink to anything he said. That was the amazing thing about him— he made the world feel fresh and exciting. We could do anything, me and him. We were thingmakers.

*It must have been very hard when he broke up with you.*

He didn’t break up with me.

Okay, well— I see where you got that from, I guess. We split up for a while. And yeah, it was hard, but I don’t dwell on that. Anyway it gave me time to focus on my writing. “When you touch me, let it be like the wind, let it be with fingers bristling blisters across my chiffon skin.” That was one of my favorite lines. He would have called it ostentatious.

We didn’t even split up, really. We just... drifted. I got super busy with the magazine and I guess he got... bored. He was always listless. Always drifting off to the next thing. Not bored with me, I mean, but just because I wasn’t there as much and— later I kicked myself for that. Not making time for him.

Don’t— don’t look at me like that. I’m serious. We never really broke up.

*But you said you drifted apart?*

Yeah. Okay, sure, we can talk about that. I'd rather talk about the other things— the way he looked in the morning, sunlight streaking down his face, the way he looked at night with the stardust pooling in his eyes. But yeah. You want to know the hard stuff, right? That's why they sent me here. It's not to make me happy, it's to understand what happened. He would have said that understanding is more important, anyway.

I can't decide. Would you rather understand, or be happy?

I guess that has to be rhetorical. This is my session— you just ask hard questions. Like what it was like to not be with him. It was—

You know when it's snowing, so thick the sky feels like it's biting, and the cold is sharp and hard the moment you peer outside? And then you take a step on the concrete, and the ice is slick beneath your boots, and there's a split-second of panic as you grapple with your feet and the air and the cruel snow. That's what it felt like. I was falling, not in a soft and gentle feathery way, but like I had slipped on ice. I was about to fracture on the pavement.

He felt the same way, I know. God, we were so stupid. We both wanted to be together, but he was too proud to admit it. He was always like that. I love him.

I begged him to come back. I apologized, over and over again. We both knew we would be happier together. Why couldn't he see that? Why—

But he did, of course. He knew I was right. That's why he agreed to come over.

*He came to your apartment?*

Yeah. Well, I guess no— we didn't really ever hang out at my place. But he invited me in. And we talked, we drank a bit. He drank. I wasn't drunk.

*Then what happened?*

That was it. It was a good night.

What else do you want me to say? We fooled around for a bit. He's gorgeous, you know. Eyes like blue porcelain, skin tanned from that sunshine hair. We made a good pair, don't you think? You never saw us. But you've seen me, my dark hair and molten eyes. I'm the midnight to his high noon. If this were ancient Greece, there would be songs about us.

I should have been Achilles. Can you see him as Patroclus? Swinging a sword from the back of a chariot, the beach of Troy thick and blood-rushed. Achilles didn't falter until Patroclus died, so that's how it is, that's how I'm Achilles, haha. I'm not making sense now. I'm not Achilles. But I do love him.

He loves me too. We have a love to rival the ages. My paramor, my muse— I wish I could carve him into stone and keep him there forever. I wish I hadn't— was it his tendon, that severed? Yeah. In battle, Paris shot Achilles in the tendon that ends in the ankle. But Patroclus was Achilles' real heel. Did you know that? It's there, if you pay attention to the story. Achilles doesn't go all battle-fever crazy until after Patroclus is slain.

Not that I'm crazy. Not that we don't all do what we have to. I'm sorry about the wall, but I was scared— I was so scared. Maybe a little angry.

*What about the wall?*

I punched it. That's why I'm here. I punched the wall.

Patroclus was— too white, too blue, in the eyes. But I think they were closed. Yeah, closed eyes, still blue. I was angry that he wasn't talking to me— he's my love, I don't get angry often, but when I do it's for a good reason— we were trying to have this conversation, trying to make up, kiss and make up. And that's when we fooled around. But I guess— it's fuzzy— there was a point when I was angry and— and that's when I punched the wall. That's why I'm here. They think I have anger issues.

*You're here because you punched a wall?*

No. I'm here because of the anger issues.

And I guess that's true. I used to get mad a lot when I was younger. It wasn't so great, moving around so much, and sometimes I acted out.

That was another thing that was so great about Patroclus. I was a little jealous actually, haha. He had this great, idyllic childhood in Yorkshire. Loving parents, happy Christmases, trips to London on the weekends. He promised me that we were going to go to London one day but we never did. What I loved was that fantasy world he carried with him, all his sunshine. Bright and happy. A golden man.

I always wanted to be like him. I got over my anger issues after one argument we had. It was something stupid. He found poems I wasn't ready for him to read yet, and my photo album. He yelled at me and I yelled back and then we just kept shouting until I flipped the table over. That shut him up. I felt— awful, instantly, like I was all shadows inside. Of course I apologized and said I'd burn the album and then we kissed and everything was okay again. But yeah, I'm over that now. All that anger, I'm passed it.

*What happened to the album?*

The police took it. Fuck the police. It's none of their goddamn business.

Oh, you're thinking I should have burned it. I couldn't. It would have been like burning him, and I could never hurt him. He's everything to me.

*Tell me about the night he died.*

One day, we went to an amusement park and sat on a ferris wheel together. That was my idea. He was afraid of heights, but I convinced him to go. We encouraged each other like that. He hid his face in my shoulder the whole time, until we go to the very top and I told him we were almost at the bottom, and then when he looked he screamed.

*Tell me about the night he died.*

*It's important that we talk about this.*

*This is why you're here. What happened that night?*

He's gone. He's gone, he's gone, he's— I don't want to talk about this. I want to remember that day by the lake, when he wrapped his golden hand in mine. Everything was perfect. And then he had to leave, and everything got awful, and now he's dead.

*What happened that night?*

I want to think about the moments drowning in his blue eyes. They flash like strobe lights when he blinks. I want to write a poem and tuck it in a pocket over my heart and keep him there forever. I want to keep him in poetry like I want to hold his hand— tightly. I want—

You don't give a damn. You're just here to make me relive that night. Again and again, they want me to relive it, and everytime they ask they're killing both of us. We die infinitely. Paris will never be satiated.

He died, okay? That's what happened that night. He's dead. He's dead, he's dead, he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead he's dead dead dead. You can say a word enough times and it stops sounding real. Dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead. If I remember it enough times will it stop being real? He's dead dead dead dead, those blue eyes barred behind his dead eyelids, that dead heart stopped mid-beat in his dead chest. If I say it enough will you go away? Dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead dead— don't touch me, don't touch me, okay I'll stop.

Okay.

That's what happened. Are you happy now? I told you what happened. Does that make you feel good? You did a good job today, you heard an awful story that you'll never have to live with. You'll never know. How could you? Our love was like nothing that's ever existed.



*How did he die?*

Not this again.

I can't.

I won't.

Don't make me— look, you already know how he died. Don't make me relive all that. You know it's the one thing I can't write about? I can't— I can't. Let me tell you about that day by the lake. We were under a willow tree, the branches dripping low across the water, a froth of foam crusting the surface like a second skin. He was so soft, so soft next to me. Breezy t-shirt clinging to his chest, all of him golden in the beaming sun. He leaned over to me and whispered like I was the world,

“I love you.”

*How did he die?*

That was the only time he said it. Romantic, right? We didn't need to say it. Well, he didn't. I said it a lot. But he showed how he loved through his actions. Like one time, after I came down with the flu, he called my mom and got her chicken soup recipe. He didn't end up making it because he had to stay late at work, but it was still so sweet— and he said it was really good when I made it for both of us a week later. It's the little things I love about him.

*How did he die?*

Shut up! Shut up shut up shut up shut up! I don't want to talk about how he died! I—the bottle just— his blue eyes— they were so bright and angry and he wasn't talking to me. We were so in love and he just sat there, not talking to me, and then there was the bottle in my hand and then there was the bottle shattered on the floor. He looked so shattered. He looked so...

That day, by the lake, he told me he loved me. He loved me. He loved me. He *did*. We could have been so happy together, should have, would have, and he just— he was going to throw our world away. He was going to—

I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let him leave everything we had. You understand, right? He is my Patroclus. He is my Achilles' heel. I need him like I need light.

If the sun was fading, wouldn't you do anything to keep it with you?