

My teeth are crumbling.

Perhaps this is what happens when we grow old. Perhaps it is what happens when you are rotting from the inside, all of your past sins buried deep inside your heart, now slowly spreading through your veins. If all we are is who we used to be, each increment of time wrinkling our skin and graying our hair, revealing all past mistakes and memories, what are we to the world when we are gone? When there is nothing left? If all we are is what was, then what is now? What is next?

It's a horrible feeling.

Feeling yourself fall apart.

Yarn unraveling from its twisted knot, a spider unweaving itself from its freshly strewn web, a jigsaw puzzle crashing down on a wooden floor, the pieces spilling everywhere, falling into the abyss. Our bones are jagged as our skin stretches thin over the fragility of our skeletons. The one thing holding us up throughout our lives, since birth, is now disintegrating before our very eyes. Perhaps, this is what it is to *live*. Or maybe, this is what it is to *die*.

I dig my fingers under the sand of the beach, something that reminds me of an hourglass—always there, crashing down to represent the time that is passing, similar to the waves crashing onto the shore. Each wave is different, but water is all the same to me. It smells beautifully, we need it to survive, and I come here to watch each year. Yet, one foot in and I will fade away.

My tongue traces the fragments of my broken teeth, attempting to smooth out what is left. I grab a fistful of the white and black sand and feel it slipping through my fingers, watching it fall into my lap. A finger reaches my mouth and fishes out the grains of bone that fell onto the tip of my tongue. I place the remaining pieces into the sand and bury them, allowing the last part of

me to become one with the world I love. The one thing I love so deeply, one I always have and always will.

Love will not save us from the end. I've learned over and over and over. No matter how many times I come back to live in my body for just one more day, it never lasts. When this day is done, the world will forget about me and the body that remains on it. But that body is not me. It hasn't been me for centuries.

I hear a faint whisper and a bell, knowing that it is over. I close my eyes and lay my head on the ground. I want to run into the waves, riding each one until I am lost. I try to stand, but I cannot. I know what will happen. I know that I will wake up in the same void of the afterlife, just without the memory of being in this moment. I choose to be here, to live once more. I know nobody on this Earth after all these years, only the ocean. At five years old, my father held my hand as we dipped our toes in the freezing blue water. At twenty, my husband and I pushed each other in, laughing as we fell together. At seventy-five, I let go of his ashes in the breeze and watched them become one with the sand and the sea and the sky. At eighty-two, I laid down for the very last time and felt myself disintegrate, never feeling the water again.

I am stuck in this memory. Except, it isn't a memory at all. I am here on this Earth. I am here, my body is here, my soul is here. For one more day.

Only one.

For one day every century, lost souls of the deceased are allowed to live in their bodies as they were. We are able to go back and remember everything that we experienced on the day we let ourselves go, passing the threshold between reality and eternity. Many of us refuse, but I force myself to return. I would trade a million days in the void to be able to hold his hand once

more and to feel the saltwater freeze my toes. If I could, I would choose to live in this decaying body, my aching bones begging for release, just to fully remember what it is like to be alive.

Eternity is nothing more but an abyss frozen in time, nothing to look forward to and nothing to remember from before. When you die, you expect to be welcomed by those you loved while you were alive. I closed my eyes for the last time hoping to see his face and was awakened by a hollowness so potent that there was nothing else to feel but what used to be. It wasn't until I wandered the void alone that I realized that I didn't just feel hollow, but I was simply *nothing*. We are simple souls searching for a home in a new body, but when our souls become tired, we dissipate and get recycled back into the universe. I am not done. I refuse to let go of the world and what I knew of it three hundred years ago. My husband moved on without saying goodbye, but I choose to say goodbye each and every time. To say goodbye is to cherish what happened. It is the last reminder of the love you hold inside your heart. Even without a physical beating heart, it remains in the everlasting stardust of our existence. As long as we feel it once, we feel it forever.

The bell chimes again and again until I finally stand up, my brittle bones fighting against the need to collapse. The tapping of the glass is what wakes me from the dream. I turn around to see the golden mirror I know so well. The mirror that was once in the hallway of my home, which sat on the wall in front of my bedroom. I would look in it every morning, and he would come up behind me and kiss my head with a smile. I hated what I saw. I hated seeing my skin pruned up like a grape in the sun and how my freckles turned into ugly dark spots, and how my once skinny, pale legs turned purple from poor blood circulation. I wished each day to return back to the way I was. I missed my long brown hair that shone in the sunlight, my dark brown eyes sparkling with a bright hope that could no longer be replicated.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, knowing that I won't see it again for another hundred years. While being full of life, I did not realize how much hatred I held inside. I did not appreciate the blessing of growing old. Instead of admiring the looks I grew into, I chose to analyze with disgust. I no longer have the privilege to dissect myself because I do not have a body— a home for my soul to rest in— because I am not alive. Now, as I look in the mirror, I stare at it with pride for the very first time. I study each detail of my frail skin, smiling as wide as I can to see the remaining yellow teeth. My shaking hands reach my face to feel the tears streaming down, something I haven't felt in so long. My gray hair blows in the cold breeze and my toes grip the sand once more.

Suddenly, my head turns to the left at the sound of a young couple laughing as they dance to the sound of waves crashing with the moonlight radiating off of their young bodies. Their teeth are white and straight, their frames thin and tall. With my remaining strength, I smile.

Another chime and tap on the glass. "*It is time to come back.*"

I step through my reflection, the glass rippling as I break the barrier. As my foot goes through, I transform into each version of myself I was. From wrinkled, frail skin to small, energetic steps, I say goodbye to every part of my human body as well as every memory that it holds. The last thing I see before I return is my smile— a five year old's crooked teeth with large gaps between all of them. I turn around and my eyes trace each detail of the beach, how the sunset turns into a dark blue as the stars ascend, the raging waves calming, and the lights on the street click on. I will see it again. Whether it is a single day in the afterlife or the chance of another human life, I choose to live always and forever.

Before I know it, it all fades to black.

I blink, a single tear falling down, and once again:

I am gone.