

Romance with Ray

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She stands there glowing under the Southern California sun. A quick breeze lifts her sunhat to reveal her face in half-shadow. The red brick of Royce Hall looms behind her. I take a photograph that will bring me joy and sorrow in equal measure.

“Live forever!” Ray cried. We were enraptured, watching my hero sit in his wheelchair raising up his gnarled hand in the air, providing both blessing and benediction to the crowd. The energy in the room was intoxicating, we all hung on his every word, this frail looking old man with his hidden, tenacious power. He pulled us by hidden marionette strings—one way to laughter, one way to tears. I looked at her with tears in my eyes, tears of love for the man, tears of love for the life I was so fortunate to live.

The night before we came to see him speak, I read to her “The Last Night of the World.” The husband and wife finishing one last, quiet night before the literal ending of the world. We both cried. I remember lying next to her in our big California King-size bed, her warmth and her scent so powerful in that space lingering after sadness. We spoke a bit of our fears about the end, about death. I didn’t have any sense of it. I felt too young, too assured of a long life that death was only a concept, one that sometimes kept me awake if I thought about it before falling into sleep. But she had opinions.

“Death is not the end,” she said, “but the beginning of the soul’s journey.” She seemed very sure. I know her fiancé had passed only a few months before I had met her. She alluded to messages from beyond. I was a callous atheist with very little tolerance for nonsense then. “Well, I’m not too sure of a soul. I think that when we go, we go. What we leave behind us is what’s important. Things that people will remember.” She looked at me with bemusement—maybe pity. “You know Christopher, I know exactly how I am going to die.” My eyes opened wide. “Tell me,” I implored her. But she shook her head no. She looked into the distance and I could see in her eyes that she believed she knew how, if not when.

“Let’s play Scrabble.” The distraction tactic. I gave in and pulled out the board, a nice game (I would *let* her win), we would make love, and go to sleep. Drive out that morning to UCLA and see Ray Bradbury speak. It would turn out to be a lovely day. Walking through the campus talking. Telling her about how Ray wrote *Fahrenheit 451* in the basement of the library, stuffing dimes into rent-a-typewriters. Of course, he would tell the story himself on stage later. But she loved to see me passionate. She leaned in and gave me a big kiss that made me blush, like every kiss she gave made me blush.

I was a shutterbug. I took pictures of everything, of fascinating faces, or architectural details. Of Ray on stage. It was serendipity that I was able to

capture her in that fantastic light. I showed her the photo on the computer later that night, and she told me she looked fat. Of course she looked radiant. I kept it as the wallpaper on my cellphone for years. When we moved from Southern California to the Pacific Northwest to endure seemingly endless rain, just seeing her smiling face would make *me* smile no matter the weather. But eventually new photos took its place. New memories crowded out that one specific moment.

Then she wasn't feeling so good. She put off going to the doctor. I told her it could be appendicitis. When we finally went to see her PCP, the urgent CT scan showed she had cancer. I remember sitting in the little room as he showed us the images, I remember how my heart sank into the center of the earth. How I knew from working in healthcare for years that there was no way out of this. I could see her face through my tears, taking it in. She was optimistic to the end, and I pretended so well that she thought I was too.

She wanted to be cremated so I could keep her close to me. Her sister had been buried in Colorado and no one took care of her grave. "Promise me you'll keep me close." She passed on a couple of days after my birthday. She left me as I told her it was ok to go, that I would be ok. Her favorite song played at that moment and I *knew*, knew without doubt, that her soul would go on. She sent me messages only I would know.

I had bought a carved, rosewood urn with a spot for a photograph on its face. I was so distracted with all of the aftermath that I forgot about it. When the funeral home called me to let me know she was ready...I wasn't. I looked for a photograph that would capture her, capture her love, her beauty, her heart, the other half of my soul. And then I saw it there, stored as computer data, that moment in time after we had seen Ray Bradbury: that smile shining in the light I missed so much. Her holding on to her hat so that it wouldn't blow away. A moment of romance with Ray.