

**This is an excerpt from Short Stories of Love, Hope, and Laughter by Carlos Salinas due out in 2017. Thanks for reading!*

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Big Hands, Small Hands

The funeral had been a week ago and David still felt as if his world had ended. Nothing made sense or mattered; school was a drawn out lecture in a language he didn't care to understand, his friends were just bothersome, and everything he cared about before seemed pointless.

His grandfather approached him one evening when he was staring blankly out of the window.

"I know you miss your mom, I miss my daughter, I want you know that life goes on, and you can be happy again."

David's eyes watered from both grief and fury. *Why would I feel happy again? I lost the most important person in my life. And why isn't Grandpa sadder than he is?* The guilt from the thought of smiling, regardless of how long after the funeral it was, was a terrible weight to carry, especially on the shoulders of a 10-year-old boy.

"I have an idea of what may help ease your pain," his grandfather said as he sat at the piano. David had seen him tuning it earlier that week. "The soothing sound and feeling of playing will help distract your mind and soothe your heart."

David did not want to be disrespectful, as his mother always told him to mind his manners. He sat next to his grandfather on the bench, watching as the old man's fingers danced effortlessly over the keys.

After a short demonstration, the grandfather asked him to imitate his finger movements. David grew frustrated after failing for the fifth time.

“I can’t—I can’t!” David cried helplessly.

“Sure you can, just keep trying.”

“I don’t want to. My hands are too small; you can do it because you have big hands!”

The grandfather sat there looking at the keys and thinking about David’s frustration. “You know, a few years ago I had a little girl who wanted to learn piano but always complained that her hands were too small. After hours and hours of practice she was finally able to do that little thing I just showed you. If she can, you can, too,” he smiled.

Frustrated, David shot up from the piano bench and ran out to ride his bike down the street. He left in such a hurry and pedaled so fast that the driver had no time to react and swerve out of the way. The small car collided with David’s bike and sent the small boy flying for several feet.

II

The bright white light pierced David’s eyes when he awoke. He heard beeping, plastic objects being moved around, and people speaking indistinctly. Finally a nurse walked over to him and looked down on him.

“You’re going to be fine, but you gave us quite a scare,” she spoke softly and in a sweet tone.

“What happened?” David only remembered the piano lesson and being on his bike.

“You had an accident on your bike, but you will be fine. Just a small fracture in your ulna, but it will

heal very quickly because you are so young. You'll be playing baseball in no time."

"I don't play baseball."

"Well, what do you do?"

"I don't like sports, really. My grandfather wants me to learn piano."

"I love playing the piano; it's very calming," she spoke as she checked his injured arm. "A long time ago, I had a great teacher for piano; he's the reason I can play well. He never gave up on me even though I always told him that I couldn't play because my hands were too small."

The River Dragon

There was once a river dragon that guarded the sacred Mountain of Paradise. The little people that lived there had no way of crossing it without the threat of being eaten by the river dragon.

The little people had many legends and stories about what lay over that mountaintop: rivers of honey, fertile lands to grow food, and never-ending beautiful weather. Others told tales of gold mines and endless riches.

One day one little man was brave enough to get close to the river's edge, as no other little person had.

When the river dragon saw this, he was very curious and amused by the bravery the little man had shown.

"It is the first time anyone had dared come so close to the water's edge, and to me," said the river dragon.

"What's on the other side?" The little man asked.

"Let's do this," began the river dragon, "if you can solve this riddle I will let you cross unharmed and that way you see for yourself."

The little man agreed.

"I weigh almost nothing but can bring about heavy things; I can be above and beneath you at the same time, and I can change shape and color, what am I?"

The little man thought long and hard.

Finally he answered, "A cloud?"

The river dragon smiled and let him cross to the other side unharmed, as he had promised.

When the little man got to the other side he could not believe what he saw. He also couldn't believe what he didn't see; there were no rivers of honey, fertile lands, nor beautiful weather; there were not any gold mines nor endless riches. The little man couldn't believe it! What would he tell everyone when he returned? And why didn't the river dragon tell everyone the truth he had known for so long?

When he returned to his village the people gathered around him and asked him about his

journey what the other side of the mountain held.

"Is it as beautiful as they say it is?"

"Were there rivers of honey?"

"Was it paradise?"

These were their questions. The little man saw the hope and wishfulness in their eyes and it weighed heavily on his conscience.

The little man thought long and hard about how to respond. He glanced back at the river and could see the river dragon looking, almost smiling, at him. He realized what the river dragon had done and felt grateful.

"It is just like that," answered the little old man and smiled.

One More Cup of Coffee

I remember the conversations with my mother over endless cups of coffee. Conversations about what the future held and how one person could make the world a better place. Conversations about what scared me the most and what made me most happy.

She always had her coffee with one spoon of instant coffee and two of sugar.

"More coffee?" That always meant more conversation. More exchange.

She always wore a beautiful summer dress with flowers on it when the weather was warm outside.

“What am I going to do without you, Ma?” I would ask her.

“Oh, you’re not going to lose me for a long time,” she would say, smiling. She was beautiful.

II

I felt sick all over. Nothing made sense except this agonizing heartache. Nothing made me feel better and the time finally came for the funeral. We were all there. In black. She had told me the day would come.

I finally got some sleep.

III

I could see her sitting there at the table, as I walked up from behind her. Her dress was flowing in the most perfect way I had ever seen. “Shall I pour the coffee?”

The Girl at the Bakery Shop

The cars hustled by on the narrow streets in Latin America. It was truly amazing for the observer to see how cars could move so efficiently, coming within a finger's width of touching another car and not doing so.

He waited patiently for the cars to move and, while keeping an eye on the other streets feeding into that one, finally crossed the street.

He had almost everything he needed; all the major necessities for living were in his heavy bags already.

He now stood directly in front of the bakery; the sweet smell of the pies and cookies made his already growling stomach roar even louder. This was the last stop before he would get home and make something to eat.

As he entered the bakery he noticed there was no one at the register. The smell was even more alluring inside! The sweet cherry tarts were whispering sweet enticements from behind the glass door! The cinnamon rolls were batting their eyes at him!

Finally a girl came out from the back door and greeted him with a kind smile, "What can I get for you?"

"How much are those?" he asked pointing to small vanilla cakes in a glass display case on the counter. He was surprised by the low price. "Let me have three. And those?" he pointed to square cakes with an amber-colored jelly on top.

"The apple squares?"

“Yes,” he smiled. Again he was surprised at the bargain.

As he set his bags on the ground to get his money, he couldn't help noticing that she kept staring at the apple square cakes. He was not a wealthy young man, but there was no hesitation.

“Could I invite you to share an apple square with me?” he asked.

“Oh! No, thank you,” she blushed shyly.

“Please? Don't be shy!”

“Oh no, I couldn't,” she avoided his eyes.

“Well, then, for later,” he smiled as he took an apple square out from the bag she had packaged them in and placed it in front of her on the counter.

She looked down and smiled, “thank you.”

He nodded with kind eyes, picked up his bags and was out of the bakery. With that apple square he did not simply feed her for that one day, but fed her love for people for the rest of her life.

My Father and Me

I remember being nine years old and walking through the forest by our house with my dad. It was filled with adventure and seemed to go on forever. It was always an adventure! I always felt safe because I knew my dad was there if I faced any real danger.

“Why is grass green, dad?” I remember asking.

“Because it has something called chlorophyll. It helps plants make their own food.”

“Like we make sandwiches?”

“Ha-ha, similar in a way,” he rubbed my head.

I came across a dead bird and was very curious as to why he died and why the ants were all over him.

“What happened to him?” I asked.

“His life ended.”

“Why?”

“Because everyone’s life has to end sometime.”

My father was very calm talking about a completely new idea to me.

“Us too?” I asked in a fearful tone.

“Everyone, son; you and me, that’s life. But it will not happen for a long time.” He smiled and hugged me.

I felt an ugly empty feeling in the pit of my stomach. My dad was my hero and I had just learned that my hero would one day leave me. How was a child supposed to react to that?

I remember asking him questions about everything: why birds flew instead of ran, who named the animals, why were trees so tall and why they lived longer than us, why fish couldn’t talk, and why some animals died when others lived. I guess I was already thinking life’s most meaningful questions in a kid’s innocent ways.

My father took all these questions with noble patience explaining that each animal had a role in the world and they just knew what to do.

“They just know?” I asked.

“That’s right; just like you knew how to cry when you were little, and just how mom knew what to do to make you stop crying.”

“I love Mom.”

“I love Mom, too.”

I thought for a bit, just staring at the grass and the river. I saw a flower growing by the river bank and it reminded me of a girl at school that always wore a flower in her hair. “What about girls?”

He chuckled, “What about them?”

“Why are they here?” Looking back now I realize what a silly boy I was, ha-ha.

“Ha-ha, one day you will see why, but what makes you ask?”

“There’s a girl that always wears a flower in her hair at school. She is very...”

“Pretty?” he asked. My father had figured me out.

“Yes,” I said kicking rocks into the river, avoiding his eyes.

“So she’s pretty special, huh?” he asked kicking bigger rocks into the river with me.

“I guess,” I responded, trying to sound indifferent. “How do I show her?”

My father thought for some time and kicked a few more rocks into the river. He finally spoke, “How would you show Mom?”

“Buy her flowers?”

“You can do that, or you can just pick ‘em,” he smiled as he answered.

I understood. Now, as a grown man, I can see all that my father taught me. I would not be the man – the husband and father – I am now if it had not been for him. The other day my son asked me what we would do together that day, to which I replied, “I know a forest that is filled with adventure and it seems to go on forever.”

I Love Dragons

“I want to love her, Grandma.”

“And you will! And she will love you back in a way that will make you very happy.” His grandma replied, with a confidence that only comes with age.

“What do you think she will be like?” asked Leonardo.

“She will be amazing- an angel just for you.”

An angel just for me? Leonardo thought to himself. Nothing would make him happier. Nothing would fill his teenage heart with joy than a girl to love. He would write poems, addressed to no one in particular, but always with some vague idea of whom she would be. His love existed only in his imagination.

As he lay in bed that night, attempting to sleep, his imagination was led by his heart. *What will her name be?*

He thought about his girl as he lay in bed, trying to calm his mind. Would she be everything he hoped she would be?

The next morning, Leonardo woke up with the idea of getting more books from the library. That was his passion-books. His best friend Paul joined him for the trip.

“What books are you getting this time?” asked Paul.

“You already know -dragons.”

Leonardo and Paul walked to the library in the cool breeze of fall. The leaves rustled and chased one another as they reunited on the edge of the street. The library was a short distance from the house and was always a pleasant walk, in any weather.

“Hey! What are you doing here?” They were greeted by a beautiful girl as they entered the library.

“Hey! How have you been?” screamed Paul as he reached out and embraced her.

“I’ve been fine, really busy,” she answered, smiling as she gave Paul a firm hug.

“We should get together and go eat or something,” Paul said, seeing the way Leonardo reacted to her presence. “This is Leonardo,” he pointed to his friend.

Leonardo smiled from ear to ear. She smiled, “Nice to meet you.”

“Yeah, that sounds like fun,” she said.

Once she walked away, the interrogation began.

“How do you know *her*?” Asked Leonardo, obviously smitten.

“Her mom gave me piano and singing lessons when I was younger,” answered Paul with a grin.

II

“Leonardo?” It was Paul on the phone.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t think you should come to eat with us, it’s gonna be boring.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve been looking forward to this all week.”

Paul paused. His plan hadn’t worked; his excuses were futile compared to Leonardo’s determination.

“Look, she’s bringing her boyfriend,” Paul’s voice was flavored with guilt.

“Oh, ok.” Leonardo was confused, obvious by his staring at the phone for minutes after the call was over. He wasn’t angry; it was no one’s fault. He just found it curious. *Destiny? Perhaps. Now I at least get to start my books*, he thought to himself. A perfect evening; hot tea and good books.

Making his way into the kitchen he noticed that it had started raining. His grandparents had gone out for the evening and he would have the house to himself for some quiet reading. It was time well-spent for Leonardo.

As he stirred the tea packet into the steaming water, the doorbell rang. *Back so soon?* He thought. His grandparents must have changed their minds because of the rain.

When he opened the door, there stood a girl holding a colorful package in one hand and an umbrella in the other. She was smiling.

“Hi,” she started, “this came to my house by mistake, and it’s addressed to Leonardo, 2 houses up from us. Are you Leonardo?” Her eyes were a

beautiful chestnut hue; a color only achieved after being roasted to perfection.

He nodded; a little embarrassed that his late birthday gift from his aunt was wrapped in colorful children's wrapping paper decorated with dragons.

"I love dragons!" She said enthusiastically.

What These Old Eyes Saw

As I sat there feeling the warm vapor from the coffee caressing my face, I saw them walk in. They could not have been older than seventeen and were completely oblivious to the world around them. They quietly sat down in a booth near my table as I took a bite from my cake and watched them sit down.

They laughed and laughed. His eyes danced with hers in graceful steps, to a melody only they could hear. There was no doubt in my mind that it was beautiful music. His lips kept kissing her hand caringly as he whispered something in her ear, making her giggle.

They murmured things back and forth to each other, interrupted only by their laughter. Their tenderness with each other was something people much older than they could only hope to one day have.

I keenly observed them from my table for no other reason than sheer astonishment. How could two young people know how to love each other with such deep love? It was visible through only the smallest gestures, the smallest of words whispered in the softest of voices, the mildest of caresses given in stolen moments.

It started raining outside, as if the skies had conspired with the two young hearts. They didn't stay long; they got up and walked to the door and before stepping out, he covered her with his jacket. He walked beside her in the rain, still smiling.

I had to record what I just saw. Searching my person, I found a piece of paper in my pocket, a list of some sort, took out my pen and began writing:

As I sat there feeling the warm vapor...

Victim or Fighter

His head hung low. He felt defeat. He felt completely useless.

The old man spoke first, “What are you going to do?”

He sat there staring at the ground. “What *can* I do?” he finally uttered.

“You have 2 choices: be a victim or be a fighter. Which one do you want to be?”

The Voice

“What will you do?” There was silence.

“What if I fail?” the voice finally asked.

“Try again.”

“And if I fail yet again?”

“Try yet again.”

“Everything you need you were born with. Now use it.”

It fell silent.

“I can think of a million reasons not to.”

“I can think of a million reasons *to* do it.”

Silence.

“I-I’m scared.”

“Everyone is, but you can conquer it. Conquer fear and nothing can conquer you.”

Love in a Hopeless Place: The Diary of Calantha Mora

September 12th

I don't know what to believe anymore; "love" is dying all around me. No one I know has what I want in life: love. Am I a fool for still believing that there is love out there somewhere? My parents and everyone else around seems to have no love or an empty shell of love they cling to avoid loneliness. My aunts, uncles, cousins –everyone seems to just settle for someone. It seems like being with anyone is better than being alone. Is that all life is meant to bring us?

I cannot imagine going through my entire life without a man to be there for me to make the world seem less scary and to make each night and day sweeter. Maybe I am a foolish girl to have these hopes. Why should I believe that I will one day find this? What makes me more deserving than everyone who does not have this? Even with all the likelihood that I may never find this, I cannot lose all my hope.

I have tried. I have *really* tried to get this “false” hope out of my heart and squeezed out of my soul. I cannot. I know that without hope, life is meaningless.

-Calantha

September 13th

Love is the enemy here, though I may betray on the battlefield. It is a beautiful struggle. Why is it so elusive? It seems the more I search for it, the more it hides. Perhaps, though, if it were easy to find it would not be as special as it is? They say too much of a good thing is not good. Not in my heart, though. Drown me in love! I cannot imagine a more noble way to die.

-Calantha

September 14th

Rafael is a guy that is truly something different. I met him through my friend, Julianne. I haven't known him very long but he already stands out compared to the others. It's in the way he speaks to me. His eyes seduce mine, and mine can't break away from his. I stammer over my words. Every little thing he does for me I notice. Maybe it's because no one has done these things for me before. He holds the door open for me, always lets me talk first, and asks me about how I am. It's not just a question, either. He listens as if it was his own story. He always greets me with a smile and I smile differently when I'm with him. It's a more honest smile than any other. I have to smile with other people –I don't want to be rude. With Rafael I can't help *but* smile. He always grabs my chin when I smile and tells me how truly beautiful I look when I smile.

All of this and still I cannot shake my fear. I want to let myself fall for him –I can't see him doing anything to make me cry. I will cry but it will be of

happiness, I know. What makes me and him different than everybody else?

-Calantha

September 17th

I am growing closer to Rafael, and I don't know how I feel about it. It's like every time I see him, he does something else that inevitably leads to me falling even more for him. I do not think he does it on purpose, it is very sincere and from the heart, I know. He talks to me and I feel as if I was the only person near him for a hundred miles. His hand brushes against mine in the most unexpected moments and I pull away, by instinct, not by choice. I cannot ignore what I am starting to feel for Rafael. I wonder if he can tell. Could he? I try to hide it as much as I can, but tell me, diary, how do you hide back a smile when you feel it come from so deep within your soul? How do you stop a look of complete adoration when the very seed of that adoration stands right before you? I do not know how.

-Calantha

September 19th

I had a very eye-opening conversation with my friend's grandmother today. She asked if I had ever been in love:

"I'm not sure," I answered, but the look in my eyes said otherwise. I knew she knew, but was too polite to say anything.

"There's no special boy in your life, a pretty girl like you?"

I felt my face burn with blood. "Well, love doesn't exist," I finally stated.

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"Because it never lasts."

"Hmm. I know love that has."

I felt uncomfortable. How was this lady going to change my mind on such a personal conviction? She didn't know me.

"Let me ask you something. You say you don't believe in love because it doesn't last forever?"

I nodded with a feigned confidence –I wanted her to change my mind.

“So when you die, does that mean you never lived?”

I was confused, perhaps by choice. “What do you mean?”

“When one day you finally die, does that mean you never lived because you didn’t live forever? Or, if the great flower bed outside is one day no longer there, does that also take the beautiful scene it paints now?”

I couldn’t answer her questions; I just stayed staring at her.

“You see, even if love doesn’t last forever, it doesn’t mean any less when it *was* there. The memories you make are kept safely up here and in here,” she motioned to her head and her chest.

After what felt like an eternity, I finally spoke. “But...What if he hurts me?” This was the hardest question to ask, but the fact that she was a stranger made it easier to ask her. “He can really hurt me if my heart is his.”

“Has he given you a reason not to trust him?”

Rafael had never given me a reason and I could not even fathom the possibility of him ever giving me one. “No ... not yet.”

“Yet?”

“I can’t see the future.”

“No one can, but does that keep people from living their lives?”

I hated rhetorical questions.

“So you are afraid of something that is nowhere to be expected or seen in the future –makes perfect sense.” She smiled. She wasn’t being rude, just honest. How could I answer that? “My dear, if he were the type to hurt you, you wouldn’t have fallen

for him, especially a smart girl like you.” Her voice was so calm and soothing –like she sang to a child. And I *was* a child for the questions I was asking and for the fear I hid behind false reasons. “If he truly deserves your heart, he won’t do anything to hurt you.” She smiled kindly.

That was our conversation. How could I fear something that was so unlikely to happen? Rafael up until now has never disrespected me or neglected to make me feel special. He is the measure of a man that I could only have dreamed of; a gentleman in every way; a true knight in shining armor.

-Calantha

September 20th

I asked my family for advice on what to do about Rafael. They dismissed my feelings as silly teenage whims of the heart.

“Even if he does say he loves you, he’s too young to know what love is,” was my aunt’s response.

“You are too young to be thinking about such things,” was my cousin’s response to my asking her. I knew she had had very bad relationships in the past. I knew that it had tainted her image of love.

Why does everyone want to kill what we have? It seems that everyone wants us to be as miserable as they are. They may be right. *When one day you finally die, does that mean you never lived because you didn’t live forever?* The grandmother’s words struck a chord with me that could finally reconcile my heart and my brain to finally take a chance.

-Calantha

September 24th

Rafael and I kissed today! He took me to see the stars with his telescope. He is so smart; he explained how the planets moved and told me about some guy named Galileo. I could listen to him talk about anything. After eating, we went to the park just as the sun was setting and the stars were gorgeous. I love to look at the night's sky but it felt very different seeing them with Rafael next to me. I put my head on his shoulder and although it was not as soft as a pillow, it was much more comforting. He kissed my forehead and I did not see anything else but him after that. The moonlight covered us in a pale blanket of luminosity and the stars seemed to put on a show just for us. They twinkled more than I had ever seen before. Everything seemed to make more sense: the patterns of the constellations, the cool breeze blowing, and the harmony of the crickets. Before the crickets had just made noise; now they played an orchestrated symphony.

It wasn't until the very end of our adventure that he leaned in to kiss me as he left me at my door. It

was incredible! The smallest kiss made the biggest difference in my life.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“For what?” he asked.

“For showing me that princes *do* exist.”

I do not know what will happen or where he will lead me, but I know I am not lost.

-Calantha

The Writer

In the dead of night, an idea strikes.

In the cloak of darkness, without concern for anything but the idea, the writer seeks a paper and pen -anything to write with. The idea is crystallized in the forefront of the writer’s mind. The characters, the plot, the setting, and the dialogue –the pieces of the puzzle fall together perfectly. While the world sleeps, the story begins...

Gold or Aluminum?

The man walked into the jewelry store. His eyes strolled over the large collection of rings. There were some that really caught his eye. He had enough money for any ring he chose.

“May I see that one?” he asked the attendant, pointing to a gold ring with 3 diamonds encrusted in the center. “It’s beautiful –I’ll take it.” The size was a fit as well. He paid and left with his purchase.

Another man walked in and his eyes gleamed over the large collection of precious metals. His eyes were fixed upon one in particular. He had enough money for any one that he wanted, much more money than the first man. He motioned to the attendant to take it out for a closer observation. With a surprised look, the attendant took out the ring and walked over to help another customer.

“I want this one. It’s perfect,” the man said after a few minutes.

“Very well, Sir. What size?”

“Six, thank you.”

“Very well, Sir, Aluminum in size six. It will be ready in two days.”

Even though it may be attainable, not every person wishes for the same things in life.

The Oven Light

“I need a 25-watt light bulb, please,” Emily asked Mark.

“Sure, I think we have some in the back.” Mark came back empty-handed, “We are out, but they should be coming in any day now.”

“Ok, great, I’ll be back tomorrow, thanks, Mark.”

Emily knew Mark from school; they had several classes together but had not really had a conversation together that went past the normal topics: school, the football games, and teachers. Still, Emily knew there was something special about Mark.

The next day, Emily was back at the hardware store promptly at four in the afternoon. Mark saw her walking in and shook his head. She smiled and nodded and waved goodbye as she walked out.

The same happened the next day. On the third, she came in and waited for Mark to help her. He was running back and forth between the aisles carrying large boxes of screws, wrenches, and other tools that were unknown to Emily in their use and names.

“Are they here?” Emily asked, her eyes shining with hope.

“Wait-a-minute,” Mark replied curtly. He was clearly under a lot of pressure. He was solely responsible for the inventory of the entire store. “Look, I’ll call you when they come in, OK?” he called from the last aisle where the sound of shuffling boxes came from.

“OK, thanks again, Mark,” Emily called to him and went home.

Mark continued stacking the boxes of screws, wrenches and other tools that were unknown to Emily in their use and names. “What a way to spend a birthday,” he sighed to himself. Mark “celebrated” his 18th birthday that day.

After a grueling day of checking lists, calling suppliers, and helping customers, Mark was ready to just go home and sleep. It was a dreadful way to spend a birthday, especially for such a young man.

After the long walk home, Mark could finally see his house. He would make a sandwich and then fall right to sleep on his bed, or couch, whichever he fell on first.

As he approached his house he could see a plastic container sitting on his door step. It made him walk a little faster. He finally picked it up and saw there was note with the cookies in the container. It read:

Dear Mark,

I’m sorry for hounding you for the light bulb for the past few days; it’s just that I can’t see what I’m

baking without the light bulb for the oven. I have to keep checking and opening the oven door to make sure that what I'm baking is not burned. The cookies are a little burned at the bottom. I'm sorry –it is the 3rd batch I baked. Happy Birthday!

Emily

A Fable: The Ant, the Bee, the Firefly, and the Worm

One day, the lowly worm invited his friends to eat with him. Among his friends were an ant, a bee, and a firefly.

After their meal, there began a discussion of who was the most important based on their abilities.

“I am the most organized and my army can move things many times its size and weight,” said the ant.

“I am the most important, for I make honey, the sweetest of all things, and I can deliver a fierce sting,” said the bee.

“I can light up the way myself on the darkest of nights, therefore, I am the most important!” exclaimed the firefly.

The lowly worm remained silent throughout all of this.

He finally spoke, “And I am the wisest of all, because I have friends that can do all these things.”

To Change a Painting

She stared at herself hard in the mirror. She wanted to change something about herself but she didn't know exactly what.

“I am going to get a tattoo on my face.”

“Why?” he asked.

“I need a change.”

He remained silent.

“You wouldn't like it?”

“Would you like to smear paint on the Mona Lisa?”

Small Price to Pay

A young boy always bought his friend things: food, candy, drinks, and more things. He eventually started to realize how much he gave and how little, if any, he got back. And it wasn't that the other *couldn't* give anything, as everyone can give *something*. This bothered him so much that he finally brought it up with his grandfather.

“Grandpa, what do you do when you give and give and give and the person doesn't do anything for you?”

In his wisdom the grandfather sat there in thought for a few seconds. “How much do you think you have spent on this person?”

“Not much, really.”

“Then consider it a small price to pay to discover what kind of person they really are.”

Fable: The Brightly-Colored Frog and the Snake

Resting by the lake, a brightly-colored frog was approached by a snake.

“Are you poisonous?” asked the snake.

The frog, thinking quickly and fearing for his life, hurriedly replied, “Yes! Of course!”

The snake, thinking the frog may have lied, decided against eating the possibly-poisonous frog. He knew there were more non-poisonous frogs and fish on the other side of the lake.

When the snake had gone, the frog relaxed and continued resting by the lake. A hummingbird, having seen all this, asked the frog, “Are you truly poisonous?”

Seeing no harm in a hummingbird, the frog confided, “No, I am not, but if I had been honest I would be dead.”

Imperfections

“May we have a bottle of *Gattinara*, please?” asked Lara.

“Of course, Madame,” replied the waiter.

It was a routine now; the bottle of wine and the weekly updates of life with her mother over their favorite Italian plate.

As the conversation continued, Lara could not help noticing how truly symmetrical and beautiful her mother’s lips were. She inherited genes for perfect lips and had them –until the accident. It wasn’t anything life-changing, but it did leave a scar, both on the right side her upper lip and on her perception of herself. She continued watching her mother’s mouth move as she formed her words.

“I don’t want to frighten you, Lara,” her mother began jokingly, “but that man over there is staring at you.”

“What? Where?” Lara demanded anxiously. She was not used to that sort of attention, much less in a public place.

“He’s at that table over there,” her mother tilted her head to the left of the restaurant.

“I don’t see anyone.”

“Don’t worry –he’s coming.”

He leaned over the table and smiled at the ladies. His brown eyes looked over their meal and he casually asked if they enjoyed it.

“Yes –yes, it was very good,” Lara started, making sure only her left side faced him, switching glances between him and her mother.

“I couldn’t help but notice your gorgeous smile from across the room; it lights the whole room up – truly.”

Lara could not believe what was happening, while her mother was just smiling and staring at the man. *Of all things* –she thought –*my smile?*

He continued, “You seem like a very nice person and would love to treat you to dinner –Italian if you’d like,” he handed her a business card with his name and phone number.

Lara was still in shock as he walked away. Her mother was looking at the business card, held tightly in Lara’s hand.

His name was Caesar and he was in the banking business. Lara was most intrigued about the way he approached her in front of her mother. His approach stayed in her mind as she text-messaged him for the first time. They exchanged texts for several weeks and they both discovered they both had much in common: they both attempted painting but decided to admire the art from afar, both had dogs and loved them dearly, both had a passion for literature and exchanged bedside books with one another under the condition that the books not be written on or dog-eared. Their first meeting consisted of a simple cup of coffee and hours of conversations about the books they lent each other. The second was at the zoo and their predictions of what the animals would do next. In all of the outings, Lara was able to keep the right side of her upper lip out of Caesar’s sight. *He’s too kind to say or do anything regarding my lip, but what would he think?* She thought to herself.

It was around the fourth meeting that they decided to go out to see a play. It was Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.

"How did you like the play?" he asked.

"I loved it; Shakespeare was a genius!"

"I thought it was brilliant that he had the 'foolish' jester make some of the wisest remarks in the play."

He was intelligent and funny, making Lara laugh with his last comment. She laughed heartily and quickly hid her right side of her face by jumping to his right side, only exposing the left side of her face. Caesar had noticed her quick movements since their first meeting but did not want to say anything; he thought it was adorable. It was another part of her quirky personality that he was falling in love with.

"Can I ask you something?" Caesar asked.

"Anything," she began. *Except that*, she hoped.

"Why do you move around suddenly when you're with me?" he inquired kindly with a grin.

She expected that question at some point. She thought long and hard how to answer. *Should I tell him the truth? Would he understand?* She finally reasoned with herself that if he truly cared about her, such a thing as a scar on her lip would not affect his feelings toward her. She positioned herself under a lamppost to allow him to see what she was about to tell him.

"The truth is ... I have a scar ... on my lip and I am very self-conscious about it," she took a deep breath.

His eyes looked at the small scar on the right side of her upper lip. He gently touched it with his right hand and smiled. "Is that all?" he sounded relieved.

He lifted his right hand up in front of Lara. “When I was thirteen I had a pretty bad baseball injury on my right hand,” he began, pointing to the ring and small finger on his hand. “My fingers and knuckles never healed properly and now I can’t bend them all the way, see?” He tried to bend all four fingers down but only the index and middle fingers were able to do so. Lara smiled.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice,” she started.

“Well, now I know and it doesn’t matter,” he looked into her eyes and kept them there for a while. Lara still looked embarrassed and unconvinced. “Do you mind about my hand? Does it affect the way I caress your face? No, the same way your kiss still sends me out of this world. You are you –and that includes all the little ‘imperfections’ you think you may have.” He motioned his fingers to signal quotation marks. “See? I can’t even do that right!”

Lara chuckled and he kissed her mid-laugh. There’s something special, Reader, about a kiss that is given in the middle of laughter. I could leave you with more details of what happened after that night, but it may suffice to say that they remained happy for many years.

The Little Messenger

I have been getting chocolate from my sister and Cristian. They give me candy for delivering some papers to each one from the other. It's a pretty easy job, maybe I can become a professional messenger –I never read them. I can't read that well anyway. Viola gave me a letter to give to Cristian so I ran and took the letter to him quickly as I could. I secretly hoped I would get more candy.

June 5th

Sweet Viola,

I miss you! Your brother is a great messenger. I wonder if he reads our letters. Seeing him brings me joy –for I know that words of love draw near. He is our Cupid! And with his wings he brings sweet honey in writing! I wish I could see you today but I know your parents are very strict and I respect that. Do they not know that the more forbidden the fruit the more intense the longing for it? I cannot describe what I feel for you, my Viola, and though we are only 15, these feelings you stir in my young heart are as old time itself. They have been felt by both people much older and much younger than I. Love really has no age. I eagerly await your letter.

*I love you,
Cristian*

June 6th,

My dear Cristian,

Thank you for the letter! If only you knew how deeply and effectively you have captured my heart. Every moment we are apart is a slow torture for my heart; a torture only remedied by the hope and knowledge of getting to see you soon. My parents do not know or understand what we feel. Perhaps they do not remember what it was like to be in love as we are. They say it is just young, silly love. But part of me wonders if they are they right. Are they?

*I love you dearly,
Viola*

June 7th

My Sweet Viola,

Of course they don't understand, my Love, how could they? This doesn't happen every day and no one else can understand what we feel.

When can I see you? I miss holding your hand and kissing your soft cheek. Looking at you looking back at me and everything around disappears. Did you know that? You have consumed my entire world and it has become a better place for it. I don't remember what sunlight looked like before I met you. I can't remember music sounding as sweet or water tasting as refreshing. The moon lights a path with a purpose now: to guide me to see you.

*I can't wait to see you,
Cristian*

June 8th

My Cristian,

I count the hours until I get to see you again. You make every day feel special, even more so when I get to see you. Just being with you brings me the purest of joys. I would love to see you tonight. Please come well before dusk, as I have to be home before dark. Hurry, my Love! Time flees and waits for no one.

*Truly yours,
Viola*

I took the letter and candy that Viola gave me, placed it in my satchel, and was walking home when a girl interrupted my task as messenger. She was pretty, with dark black hair and fair skin. She looked to be around the same age as my sister and Cristian.

“Delivering a letter, are you?” she asked with a smile.

I nodded and continued walking.

“Would you like to make your sister even happier?” she offered.

I was intrigued; I did love my sister and if I could make her happier I would. If only I had known then what I know now. The girl put out her hand and asked for the letter from Viola and gave me another letter in exchange and told me to take it with urgency to Cristian.

“This will make them both very happy. Does she like surprises?” she asked.

“Yes! She does.”

“Perfect.” And with that she disappeared into the distance.

I walked to Cristian’s house, delivered the letter, collected my treats, and headed back home. I wondered about the girl all the way back.

June 9th

My beloved Viola,

Is what the letter said true? Is there another man you love more? My heart prays that this is not true but my mind troubles me by doubting. I can promise you that if he should build you a house, I will build you a castle; if he should fight a beast for you, I will fight a thousand more; if he should bring you a flower, I will bring you a garden; if he should promise you a star, I promise you all the heavens above. I pray that the winged Cupid delivers this letter swiftly to you, my lovely Viola.

*I love you,
Cristian*

Cristian seemed very troubled when he caught me in town playing in the park with my friends. I was instructed to take the letter home at my fastest possible speed and then he gave me twice as much candy as he had before. He told me to head home right then and give the letter to Viola. I placed the letter in my satchel and

headed back home at full speed as soon as he finished speaking.

Just around the corner from my house, I saw the biggest serpent I had ever seen. I set my satchel down and proceeded to try to catch the snake. I coaxed it with a large tree branch I found on the ground but it slithered away into a small hole in the ground. I spent about an hour trying to bring it out of the hole. I even brought a dead mouse I found to try to lure it out. No luck. I finally gave up and walked home. I went inside, set my satchel down and took a nap.

When I awoke I continued to play as any other day and spent the days as any other days. After three days, I reached in my satchel to bring out my book to read and I saw the letter. The letter! With all the strength in my small legs I ran all over the house trying to find Viola. I finally found her sitting under a tree in our yard.

“Viola!” I screamed.

She turned to look at me with a glum look on her face. I knew it was because of the delay from Cristian. “Has he sent me a letter?” she asked with oceans of hope in her eyes.

“Yes,” I answered I hope she would forgive me for forgetting to give her the letter.

I eagerly watched her; waiting to see her face light up with joy. Instead I saw it filled with confusion and worry. She jolted up and started running down the street towards town. She was headed to see Cristian.

When she arrived at his house, he wasn't there. She walked to where she knew he would find him: the small river that divided the two neighboring towns.

She saw him standing on the edge of the river bank appearing to be preparing to jump in. He had already convinced himself that what the fraudulent letter had said was true. He no longer had a place in Viola's heart and that killed him inside.

He jumped into the river just as Viola ran to the river's edge screaming his name. Cristian had heard her calling his name, but ignored her for he could not bear to hear the words from her mouth; in her voice. Viola feared that he would drown because of the strong rains that had swelled the river. Cristian, on the other hand contemplated ending his life in this river. *What do I have to live for now?* He thought to himself.

"Cristian, please come!" It was Viola's voice that was drowned by the river's ferocious currents. "Please!"

Cristian continued swimming in the rivers when he entered a strong whirlpool underneath the surface water of the river. He kept his head above for some time before the current pulled him down further. His head only came up a few times before his legs were intertwined with the weeds growing at the bottom. The savage waters devoured him as if he were a paper boat.

Viola watched in panic as her true love was being drowned by nature's fury. Without hesitation, she jumped in and swam to him. She struggled with bringing him back up to the surface by pulling the weeds that held on tightly to both of his legs. The water choked every breath they attempted and with its claws it dragged both of them down.

By a stroke of luck or divine intervention, they both were thrown out of the whirlpool and swam back to the river bank where I watched from. They coughed and coughed in each other's embrace.

“What were you doing?” she asked him.

“Trying to clear my mind —I’ve been going crazy, Viola. Is what that letter said true? Do you love another?”

Viola stared at him in complete bewilderment. “What are you talking about?”

“The letter you sent me –it said that there was someone else...”

“I didn’t write anything like that.”

“Really?” he asked with tears in his eyes.

“Of course, you know I love you; my heart belongs to you and you only,” she pushed forward and kissed him deeply.

Cristian knew at that moment that she did love him, as he loved her. *Who sent the letter?* Cristian knew who it had been –Cynthia. She had been trying to steal him away from Viola for some time now. But Cristian did not want to worry Viola; they were meant to be together, and nothing could stop them now that he knew exactly how they felt about each other.

Walking home, they found Cynthia giving me another letter for Cristian. There was nowhere she could flee to. It was all three of them face-to-face.

Cristian’s eyes were gleaming with fury, his shoulders tense, and his nose flared. He stood facing Cynthia with my sister at his side, with a slightly confused look on her face.

“What are you trying to do?” Cristian’s voice roared. With good reason, in my opinion; she was trying to take something dear to his heart.

Cynthia eyes pierced the happy couple. She scowled at Viola since she was the person, the obstacle, between her and her love.

“Your problem is with me –not her,” Cristian asserted.

Cynthia’s gaze returned to him.

“We could never be together, I’m sorry to tell you, and if I hurt you, I am sorry for that as well, but I cannot give you false hope for you and me to be together one day. That day will never come.”

Cynthia’s attempts to withhold her tears were futile; they were streaming down her face by the end of Cristian’s last word. Her eyes looked pleadingly over at Viola, as if supplicating to let her have her Cristian. My sister just stood next to Cristian, holding his hand. I had backed away to allow them some privacy. I didn’t want to leave, though.

Cynthia tore up the letter she was going to ask me to deliver, which I would have torn up myself, and stormed away. She never once looked back at where we stood.

“What was that all about?” asked Viola.

“She just wanted to have something that belongs to someone else,” Cristian told her as he kissed her forehead.

At the doorstep, I left them outside while I went inside. I still know what happened though. Cristian hugged her tightly and gave her a long,

passionate kiss. He asked, “When can I see you again, Viola?”

The silence was broken with, “It will be in my next letter.”

Of Humans and Birds

And the student asked the master, “Which is more important to a human, love or knowledge?”

The master then asked the student, “Which is more important to a bird, the right or left wing?”

Three Voices

“I was sick when I woke up,” said the first.

“I was hungry when I woke up,” said the second.

“I was just happy I woke up,” replied the third.”

The Old Fisherman

The fisherman loaded his small boat and set out into the restless sea; the sun would be rising any minute. His silver hair would be glistening in the morning's first rays.

The other fishermen, who were fishing in groups, pointed and laughed when they saw the old man's small boat being tossed by the tides.

They continued to mock him as he prepared his simple bait: shrimp. He carefully baited his hook and dropped his line into the sea.

"You're not going to catch anything with that!" and the jeers began.

"If you catch anything, it may be bigger than your boat!" said another.

The old man quietly went about his work and within minutes had a fish. It was not huge but it was the first catch of the day.

"That is all you will catch today, old man!" the other fisherman laughed at the size of the fish.

He then caught 5 more fish then another 6 more. The other men were stunned at the amount of the fish the old man had caught. The little boat, which was now full of fish, was being weighed down much more than before.

As his tiny boat neared the dock, he looked back at the other fishermen, who were watching him keenly, and smiled.

A Conversation with Grandparents: Love

“And what of love?” asked the grandson.

“Do not be fooled by beauty. Beautiful faces are easy to find, they are everywhere. A good, kind heart on the other hand, that’s a true treasure to find. It’s a shame that when it comes to love, or at least dating, most people follow their pride instead of their heart; they’re more concerned with not wanting to appear desperate or ‘needy’—not allowing themselves to feel the most natural of human emotions. To miss a person you like and to let them know is natural. They do not allow themselves to be vulnerable with another person for fear of getting hurt. To not experience the closeness that vulnerability can create between two people is a greater loss than any pain that may come after being vulnerable,” said the grandfather.

The grandson revered the grandfather’s opinion on everything he asked him. He spoke in slow, certain sentences that commanded attention from anyone within earshot.

“Most people do not love until given a reason to when they should love until given a reason not to. Love is not about chasing someone; it’s not about being chased *or* being the one chasing. It’s about chasing after dreams and if in that pursuit someone runs parallel to you, that is love.”

The grandson nodded and smiled.

“To the people that claim to hate love I have one thing to say: remember that the thing that hurt you was a person, not love. If it had been love, they would not have hurt you. Beware that many things masquerade as love: obsession, jealousy, control,

and loneliness are just a few. Love is the greatest thing on Earth, along with her sister, Hope. True love is not giving power to the other person, but instead is empowering you to make that person happy. Are you listening?”

The grandson nodded once again.

“And remember; in life don’t be sad when something good or beautiful leaves you. Just like in the sea, another beautiful wave will always come; you just have to be ready to see it. However, not everyone plays fairly in love. In love, it is good to swallow your pride but *never* your dignity.”

“Thanks for the talk, Grandpa.”

Love in the Kingdom of Wales

In the Kingdom of Wales, in the 12th century, there was a prince named Wolfgang and his sister, Diana, around whom this tale centers around.

I am bored, Wolfgang thought to himself. He noticed the chambermaid, Clara, staring at the messenger approaching the castle. Pressed against the cold, dewy stone walls, he observed Clara, who was watching the messenger, Octavio, draw closer to the castle riding his horse.

“Oh, my—my Octavio,” she said quietly to herself, believing no one to be around. Wolfgang had to withhold his laughter for fear that she would hear him, even though he was the prince. The embarrassment alone would kill her.

As Octavio entered the main hall of the castle, Clara feigned to be sweeping the hall’s floor. She swept side to side in a brisk motion keeping her sight strictly on the path of the broom.

She was an attractive lady, middle-aged, and infatuated with love. Before Octavio, she had been in love with the lead chef of the castle and before that she had even fallen in love with a gong-scourer. Imagine that –falling in love with someone who had the worst tasks, and the foulest stench, of everyone in the castle. Clara was in love with being in love. She would fall in love with anyone that was kind to her.

Idle hands truly are the Devil’s play things, for this is where Wolfgang saw his greatest opportunity: to play a trick on the love-struck chambermaid.

“Good morning, Clara,” Octavio smiled and bowed in front of her.

“Oh! Good morning, Sir Octavio,” she uttered coyly. Octavio had never been knighted but the

assumption that he had made him gleam with pride. He walked away smiling and was heading towards the meeting chamber looking for the king. A paper was rolled neatly in his hands.

Clara stood with both her hands on the top of the broomstick and her cheek resting upon her hands. She had the sickness of the heart, and it was in an advanced stage for Octavio. Wolfgang wasted no time.

“Clara?” called Wolfgang leaving his stealthy vantage point.

“Yes, my prince?” she bowed as he entered the hall.

“I bring the most joyful news!” Wolfgang began his cunning maneuver. “It concerns Octavio and his truly beloved.”

Clara’s expression transformed from excitement and joy to pain and sorrow within seconds.

“He has admitted his love for someone—”

Clara moaned.

“—for you! But he has sworn me to secrecy. However, such a noble secret cannot be kept for long—nor should it be.” Wolfgang smiled slyly.

“Oh!” exclaimed Clara in a moment of love-struck elation.

“Clara, you must not tell him that I revealed his secret; a man’s word is his honor.”

“Of course!”

“He is just waiting for the right moment to tell you,” explained Wolfgang.

Clara’s face glowed with joy.

“Also, he likes it when a woman is coy and not too eager to return his love. It just drives him wild!”

“Oh?”

“Yes!”

Clara stayed quiet for a few seconds. She wondered how she would feign ignorance of the information. She also wondered how it would be to be the fox instead of the hound. *This will be a nice change!* She thought to herself.

“I must go, farewell, lucky lady!” Wolfgang’s voice had a sincere tone in it.

As he left, Octavio returned from delivering the message to the king. “Adieu, Miss Clara.”

Clara ignored him and continued sweeping the floor.

“Adieu!”

The sweeping continued.

That is odd, Octavio thought to himself, *she was very joyful to see me not even an hour ago!* With a confused look on his face, Octavio walked outside the castle, mounted his horse, and rode off.

Clara could barely maintain the charade. “How to pretend that I do not love you, Octavio!” she murmured to herself. “If only you knew!” She rested her head helplessly on the broomstick.

Overhearing all of this from the adjacent chamber was Princess Diana. After Wolfgang departed, Diana nonchalantly walked into the hall.

“Good morning, Dear Clara.”

“Good morning, Princess!”

“You seem very joyful this morning,” Diana feigned ignorance.

“I have just received the most delightful news!”

“Oh? Is that so? May I partake in your delight?”

“I shouldn’t...well I suppose since you’re not— Octavio loves me!” She leapt into the air with the broom still in her hand.

Diana made a confused look upon hearing the news. "That's strange."

"What is?"

"How did you come across this strange information?"

"Your brother, the prince—why is it strange, Princess?"

"Well it's just that Wolfgang had let me know a secret—"

"A secret about Octavio? He just told me."

"—a secret about *himself*," Princess Diana finished. "Wolfgang loves you! He didn't know how to tell you so he devised a plan to see if he would see the spark of desire in your eyes when he mentioned another man longing after you. He would probably use another man from the castle to test your devotion to him."

"Octavio!"

"So he chose the messenger—Octavio?"

"I suppose so..."

"He even wrote a love poem about his devotion to you—I saw him write it in his chamber."

"What would a prince want with a chambermaid?" Clara inquired with a curious tone.

"Clara! Love knows no names, posts, nobility, or peasantry—love transcends all of that."

Clara smiled from ear to ear. "Me?"

"You, and you must hurry, I saw him walking into his chamber carrying a dagger. Saddened by his unrequited love he may take his life tonight!"

"Tonight?"

"Tonight!"

Clara thought about the way Octavio did not respond to her coyness. She thought to herself, *that*

does not work, and so I will pursue the prince with all my heart!

Prince Wolfgang had taken a letter opener, what could also be misperceived as a dagger, and walked to his chamber with the letter from his beloved Rosa. It read:

My love,

My family and I will be very pleased to join you for dinner tonight. We will arrive shortly before dusk. I miss you very much.

*All my love and truly yours,
Rosa*

Clara had seen Wolfgang take the ‘dagger’ from the small table in the hall outside his chamber. “No! My love!” she exclaimed.

Out of sheer fright, Wolfgang quickly ran into his chamber and read the letter while Clara hurried after him.

Striking the thick, wooden chamber door, she shouted, “My Love! Do not take your life, I love you, truly, I do!”

What? Wolfgang wondered in his head. *Does she believe me to be Octavio?*

Clara continued, “We can be happy together, Wolfy, I can be the perfect princess for you!”

She’s knows it’s me but for sure she has gone mad!

“We have such a lovely life to make together! I know your feelings and I love you too; do not take your life, my sweet Wolfy! I’ll...I’ll...I’ll sing to you!” Clara began to sing a sweet lullaby for babies.

Oh my, I just may kill myself! Wolfgang covered his ears.

Clara continued her singing until a thought interrupted her melodic assault. *I must look my absolute best for my love tonight at dinner.* With intense excitement she scurried off to prepare her dress and the food for dinner that evening.

Down the hall, Diana was watching and laughing hysterically. *It serves him right; playing with love as if it were a game,* she thought to herself.

Dinner time had finally arrived at the guests were arriving in their finest clothes. Rosa looked especially stunning; her honey-brown hair was done up, showing her skin on her neck, adorned with a beautiful necklace of pearls. Her eyes held a special glow as she embraced Wolfgang before being seated. Clara’s eyes never left Wolfgang, even as she served the dinner and tended to the guests.

Rosa and her parents made small talk with everyone at the table; her father was talking about the state of the kingdom with the king, her mother

was speaking to the queen about their children, and Wolfgang and Rosa were acting coyly in front of their parents. Diana interrupted them from time to time, since she had no one to talk to.

“Why is Clara staring at you?” Diana asked Wolfgang facetiously.

“I don’t know,” Wolfgang answered nervously.

“Well, she hasn’t stopped since you walked in the room!”

Wolfgang grimaced.

“I think she’s in love with you,” Diana smirked.

“Who’s in love with whom—?”

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Clara began, “I want to share my joy with all of you.”

“Oh, my,” uttered Wolfgang.

“I have a secret admirer and have found a poem that he wrote me but I would love to share with all of you now:

Your eyes are gorgeous,
Your smile, a truly beautiful sight,
I think about you all day,
And dream about you in the night;

You are my night’s moon,
You are my evening star,
It would take me a thousand years
To describe everything you are.

This lovely poem was written to me by W—”

“William! The cook!” exclaimed Wolfgang.

Clara looked at him, puzzled. “William?”

William, the cook, came in after hearing all the commotion about his name. Clara eyed him suspiciously. “You called?” he asked.

“Did you write this poem?” Clara asked him.

During all of this, the king, queen, and guests were in shock at the drama being performed in front of their eyes.

“I am not a studied man, nor a man of words; but I am a man of love, and I have loved you for a very long time now.”

Wolfgang’s mouth dropped open, and Rosa laughed. Diana was enjoying the show as well, nearly choking on her drink.

“Well...I don’t...I don’t know what to say, William,” stammered Clara.

“There’s no need for words, my beauty, just meet me tonight in the garden, after dinner.”

“Well, of course.” It was the first time anyone had complimented Clara’s looks.

After the theatrical performance, Diana was laughing hysterically. “You should have seen the look on your face, brother!”

“And why exactly do you find this whole thing so funny?”

“Perhaps it’s because I saw what you planned to do with Octavio and Clara and intervened.”

Wolfgang looked confused and slightly angered.

“I heard you tell her that Octavio loved her so I the tables, so you wouldn’t kill yourself from the grief,” she smirked. “It serves you right anyway, playing with that poor woman’s heart is not a kind thing to do.”

“And you did no different!” Wolfgang shot back under his breath.

Diana remained silent, looking at her plate.

“Well I now realize that a truly beautiful and potentially vicious thing, and nothing to be toyed with.”

Rosa took his hand as he finished his comment, and quietly asked, “So who wrote the poem?”

The Old Man and Death

And Death approached the old man in his bed one night. The old man awoke just as Death was entering the room and greeted him.

“Hello, Death.”

“Hello, Walter. You seem very calm to see me.”

“I am calm, I was expecting you.”

“Really, now? You are not the least bit worried of where I am about to take you?”

“No...”

“And why is that?”

“You can take my body but I know my good deeds will live on through the memories of those that love me. So in a way, I am immortal,” he smiled as he got out of his bed and walked towards the door.

Between Death and Life

“He’s gone! No! I can’t believe he’s gone!” I wailed as I clutched my husband’s chest.

My William’s body still had a temperature that matched that of a warm bath, but nowhere near living. My boy and I looked into each other’s tearful eyes and held one another. I couldn’t believe it was actually happening.

Soft whimpers came from both me and my son as we watched the doctors do their work.

“Clear!” Jolt! “Clear!” Jolt!

My son jumped out of his skin every time, with his curly brown hair swaying in front of his glum face. I wish he hadn't seen it.

“Clear!” Jolt! “Clear!” Jolt!

With a detached look, the lead doctor looked at me and said, “I’m sorry.” His stare was endless. I felt my heart sink into my stomach and my son had become numb to my increasingly tight holding.

He always took care of us, I thought. He always brought in wood from the forest to make a fire and keep us warm. Yeah we had electric heating, but his fire was from the heart. He loved us more than anyone else ever could. I remember once asking him to get me coffee from the market, after he had been working all day on his feet. It wasn't easy being a lumberjack. Without an opposing word, he cloaked himself with his jacket, which had just been unbuttoned, smiled and kissed me as he said, “I’ll be back.” I hope I was good to him. I made the salmon he caught the very next day just the way he liked it. His pipe had always been cleaned and tobacco was never hard to find in the house. I laid out the news section of the newspaper, his favorite, across his favorite corner of the couch. Now he was gone. Who would take care of us the way he had?

The doctors hurriedly collected the useless equipment that failed to save my William.

“Please take your time, Ma’am,” the young nurse said to me, in a sweet voice. I could tell she didn't know what expression to show so she simply hid her face.

The doctors collected everything in such a calm manner that they didn't seem to care that a man's—

my husband's life—had been lost a few moments ago! What nerve—but I had to be strong, for my son. I felt my arm rise with the deep heaves of his chest and shoulders as he mourned his father.

Who would teach him to hunt? Who would teach him how to love—he knew how to love. He learned by watching his father.

The room shrank as the doctors left. The floor now seemed to reflect all the light of the world and made it difficult to keep your eyes open.

“Our Father, thou art in heaven ...” I began the prayer, while my son clasped my William's left hand—I his right. No priest could have made it as meaningful as we had.

II

“Clear!” Jolt! “Clear!” Jolt!
“Clear!” Jolt! “Clear!” Jolt!
“Clear!” Jolt! “Clear!” Jolt!

That's what I remember first. My father had been lying there without moving for such a long time—and I was scared. He looked so peaceful: his glasses nestled on his nose, eyes softly closed, it looked as if he were sleeping. The violent spasms of his body that the shocks caused brought me to reality—my father was dead.

My mother held me close as I tried to pray inside my head. *Our father...*

I hoped God would listen to me and forgive me for not knowing the prayer fully by heart. I remember seeing my mother's eyes, swollen with tears; stay connected to my father's. She was looking for any movement—any sign of life.

When the doctor said "I'm sorry" I felt the air leave my body; no matter how hard I sucked, no air would come into my lungs. I felt numbness over my body and my weight seemed to have tripled—I couldn't support my own body anymore.

I have to be strong for her, I thought to myself. My mother's pleas for her husband could be seen in her eyes. They pleaded with death to allow her one more day with my father. Or to take her instead, but she wouldn't want to me alone in this world. I can't get that picture out of my head. She was in so much pain.

The doctors and nurses helped clean up around the body. Some smiled at me but I don't remember if I smiled back—I don't care if I did or not. They all avoided looking at us in the eyes, to avoid the awkwardness, and out of respect. They were kind, very kind, but we were not concerned with kindness at that time. *Why did my father die? Who took him from me? The God I just prayed to?* I was thankful

that I at least got to know my father. Some boys never know their father—I did.

III

I lost another patient today; an older gentleman with a wife and young son. Why the hell couldn't I help him? As long as I have been doing this ... It doesn't get any easier with time, let me tell you. We tried everything, the defibrillator was the last resort and it didn't change a thing. I remember everything so clearly.

“Dr. Thomas! You have a patient that just came in—seems like a heart attack—he is in unit 8,” one of my nurses informed me.

I couldn't move fast enough; I ignored all other insignificant requests that doctors get when hospital staff see them: phone calls—family calls, etc.

In the small, simple unit where the patient, a Mr. William Kind, was being held, I darted toward him to

check the vitals—no heartbeat. Mrs. Kind and the boy kept their eyes and breathing still—fixed on me.

My team, consisting of 3 nurses and myself, tried our best to help the man. Cardio resuscitation—nothing; Defibrillator—nothing.

“Clear!” Jolt! “Clear!” Jolt!

“Clear!” Jolt! “Clear!” Jolt!

“Clear!” Jolt! “Clear!” Jolt!

I could tell the family was realizing what was going on, I felt so helpless. The wife, now a widow, was clutching onto the boys shoulders so tightly, the powerful heaves of his sobs were weakened by her grasp.

With a twisted face of failure I looked at the family and squeezed out a painful “I’m sorry”. My arms stretched out almost robotically to hug the family but medical training protocol stopped me halfway, making it look like an uncoordinated reach for the defibrillator.

Sobbing sounds were all that came from the mourners. My heart sank a little deeper; it never gets easier.

IV

It was a day like any other. It didn't feel quite the same, though, I could tell. Nothing had changed, but something was different.

Keff! Keff! Keff! The familiar sound of my axe tearing into a cedar was a soothing sound. The forest provided so much for my family and I—food, shelter—I built our home with its trees—and energy. *I won't take more than what I need*, I always told myself.

Cheep! Cheep! The birds were serenading my labor from their nests. I hope none of them lived in this tree! If they did I'm truly sorry, little fellas.

I gathered the large pieces of wood to take for burning under my arm. The rest of the tree would be collected with Michael's help, after all a boy should learn everything he can from his father. I don't remember making it home.

I awoke, at least half-consciously, inside a room where I could hear such commotion, along with beeps and clicks of all sorts.

“Nurse, defibrillator!” I thought I heard someone say.

I could see my body lying on the bed with my dear wife and son staring a few feet away. They were in each other’s embraces, a picture of a loving family—missing me.

Sweetheart! I can see you! I love you! I thought I said, but there was no reaction from anyone in the room. The nurses huddled close to the doctor to follow his every direction precisely, with a solemn yet kind demeanor.

Darling! Can you hear me? What happened to me? I will be alright because I love you. Thank you both for being here. I want you to know, if this is it for me, I love you both and I will see you again.

“Clear!” Jolt! “Clear!” Jolt!

“Clear!” Jolt! “Clear!” Jolt!

“Clear!” Jolt! “Clear!” Jolt!

When the Rain Came

The little boy and the little girl stopped playing. The rain had come. While other little boys and girls ran and hid under their blankets or in bed with their parents, these two ran to the door and opened it just

enough to watch the rain hit the walkway outside their home. They could feel the mist sprinkle their faces and hear every crack of thunder. Play time was fun, but it was time to watch the rain.

A Case of Delusion

I remember walking into the hospital as any other day for treatment of a patient that suffered from delusions. My daughter had come with me, since she was working on her doctorate for psychiatry. I thought it would be appropriate for her to visit along with me.

I had been telling her about the unfortunate case of Mr. Fels, who thought himself to be a psychiatrist. He was in an incredible state of delusion and thought he had patients come see him when *he was* the patient.

The receptionist shook her head at me as I walked in with my daughter by my side. She must've been new and not known who I was. Or it may have been my accent that took her by surprise.

I didn't have any time to waste; my patients needed my attention urgently. I excused myself from my daughter and met with my first patient who was waiting for me outside my office.

“Good morning, doctor.”

A sigh was let out. "Good morning, shall we get started?"

II

I'm not sure if my father was getting better. All my studies in psychiatry could not have prepared me for handling the delusions that he was suffering from. In fact, that is what I was doing my dissertation on: delusions.

My father was a curious one. He thought himself a psychiatrist. He walked around as if he were a doctor at the hospital where he received treatment. He always spoke with an English accent when he treated his "patients" but not in ordinary conversations with "non-patients".

A Pile of Dirt

"You said you would help me move this heap of dirt!"

"I said I would help you move a *pile* of dirt; not a heap."

"Same thing!"

"No, clearly it is not."

"Well, fine then!" the man walked over and created another mound of dirt from the first one. "Now will you help me?"

“Only with one of those piles.”

The Neighbor's Lawn

On a sunny, Sunday morning, the man looked at his neighbor's fertile, dark, green lawn and then at his own dead grass and arid soil. As he watered it he muttered to himself, "I wish mine were as lush as his; I would gladly cut it every Sunday."

The neighbor, while cutting his grass, glanced over to his neighbor's dead lawn and thought to himself, "I wish I had a drier lawn so I wouldn't have to cut it every Sunday."

The Merchant and His Son

The merchant set up his clay bowls and plates neatly on his wooden stand as the sun was rising over the hills surrounding the small village. His son helped him quietly and diligently.

The market place was soon filled with many people buying many things. People passed by and looked upon the clay bowls and plates; some picked them up and studied their fine craftsmanship. One bearded man picked up a bowl and felt the smooth, rounded edges with his fingers and set it back down.

He asked the price and frowned when he heard it. No one bought anything, though. It was midday and the merchant had still not sold anything.

The son hesitated to ask his father anything that might be disrespectful, but he was curious as to why his father did not seem to mind not selling anything.

"Why are people not buying anything?" he finally asked.

"It seems not many need a plate or bowl."

"But why not lower the..."

"If people need it, they will buy."

After eating, they returned to work. The merchant had seen the bearded man look at other merchants' bowls and plates and then make his way around back to his bowls and plates. The merchant could only assume it was because of the quality of his product.

The bearded man asked for the price one more time, picked up a pair of bowls and a pair of plates, paid and walked home.

A Conversation with a Bird

I saw a bird perched up high on a branch glancing in every direction. I asked where it had been.

"All over this place," it replied.

"That must be wonderful."

"It is! Why don't you do the same? I see you have those giant, metal birds that take you to faraway places."

"I would love to, but it's not possible."

"I would assume some thought it impossible for humans to fly in the first place."

With this, the bird dove into the air and soared away.

The Pirate

Beautiful islands sprawled throughout the Caribbean and other faraway seas. The pirate had now amassed so much wealth that there was no need for the pirate's life anymore. The pirate knew this day would come; he couldn't pillage and plunder vast, beloved seas forever but he never thought that his last day would come so soon.

He had already had his eye on his replacement as captain of the ship; a strapping young lad named William.

As he walked the ship and introduced the new captain to the crew and made sure he knew the ship well.

William took the ship around the world on many adventures. He fought many pirates and upon his return visited the old captain.

"There is still much to discover," he told the old captain, whose heart still belonged to the sea.

“Aye!” shouted the captain as he stepped aboard and the adventure began anew.

The Dinner Party

Antoinette and Carlo had fallen in love since they met. They had a special, pure kind of love that could not be measured nor destroyed. Then war came and Carlo was shipped off into a faraway country and Antoinette would never see him again. He was presumed dead in combat.

Antoinette mourned Carlo for many years and kept all of their pictures and mementos stored away in a box deep in the attic. She could never truly forget him, or even stop loving him, but she eventually remarried and had a small family. A baby girl, Emily, and a 3-year-old boy named Tom. Her husband, Franklin, was a successful businessman and provided a very comfortable life for her and their children. With the many business contacts that Franklin had come many party and dinner invitations.

There was one particular party that stood out above all the others. It was just another cold December day and Antoinette and her husband would be joining his business associate, Mr. Jacob Styles, for dinner in his home. The children would be staying with her mother for the evening.

“Good evening, Mr. Styles,” Antoinette greeted him with a warm embrace and her husband followed with a firm handshake.

“I’m very glad you could join us, please, come inside and I will introduce you to the other guests.

Among the guests were doctors, lawyers, a sheriff, and other public officials, as well as some friends of theirs from upstate. There was, however, a man that struck Antoinette. His presence captured her attention and she could not stray away from his vicinity. He looked strangely familiar and she stuck close by his conversation with other guests to listen in for a clue as to why she felt this way.

“After the attack, no one thought we would make it...but we did, only three of us survived out of 20 men...but I was nearly head and the doc told me that I was suffering from amnesia and that I would not remember many things, including the attack, I only know what I am telling you because of the other soldiers that survived. They told me what had happened after I recovered. They said that the head trauma had changed my facial expressions and even my voice, ha-ha. They said that I sounded like a different man. And after that, well here I am, Uncle Sam brought me back and I found a job, and got back to civilian life.”

Antoinette’s breath was stolen from her. *It was Carlo!* She thought to herself. He had changed, she hadn’t noticed him at the dinner table, he may have entered late, but he had her full attention now. *Was he still the same man that I fell in love with so many years ago?*

“Honey, it’s getting late,” she whispered in Franklin’s ear, eager to get home. *Why risk it?*

The First Date

She waited anxiously to be picked up. She looked down at her old dress, neatly pressed for him. She smelled of sweet perfume and looked very excited yet nervous; she really liked him and it would be their first date.

He showed up right on time and came around to open the car door for her.

“You look beautiful,” he told her as she entered his car.

Arriving at the restaurant, he took her hand in his and felt like the most important person in the entire restaurant. They exchanged flirtatious glances throughout their meal, spoke of happy memories, and laughed well into the night.

“And what shall we do to celebrate your birthday next week?”

“Oh, anything would be fine,” she smiled and squeezed his hand. He returned the gesture.

She would be sixty-eight; he had just turned seventy-one earlier that month.

The Golden Toys

There was once a little princess whose toys were made of solid gold. Some were little figurines and some were too heavy to play with. Being a princess was a terribly lonely thing. When she asked to have

other kids to play with, the king arranged for a small group of the kingdom's children to come play with her and her toys.

The children could not believe their eyes! They played with everything; the figurines and even the ones that were too heavy to play with. The little princess' choice however was a little rag doll brought by one of the little girls who was invited to play. To the little princess it was perfectly exquisite; her hair was made of coarse straw, her purple dress was made of an old cotton rag, and her eyes were two small stones sewn tightly down.

Hats

The man walked around and did good deeds all day. When he got home, he hung his white hat on the coat rack.

The next day, a man walked around and did evil deeds all day. When he got home, he hung his black hat on his coat rack...next to his white hat.

The Letter

As I waited to board the subway, the crowd of people looked infinitely restless. It was Friday

evening and it seemed everyone was anxious to get home or anxious to go out.

When I found a seat toward the back, I couldn't help but notice a small, white envelope with the words "Open Me" written on it nestled between two seats. As I curiously opened it, I discovered that it had two five-dollar bills in it along with a letter that forever changed my life:

Dear Stranger,

Please use one of these bills to buy something for yourself and I only ask that you use the other to help a stranger. If you have been helped by this gesture, please consider doing something helpful for another stranger.

*Your friend,
A. Stranger*

The Student and the Master on Wisdom

And the student asked, "How did you get so wise?"

The master replied, "I didn't get any wiser; I've just become more fully awake."

The Student and the Master on Wisdom

When speaking of love, and suffering a broken heart, the student said, "You can't drown if you vow to never swim again."

To which the master replied, "You will also never choke if you never eat."

The Student and the Master on Giving

"I feel that I'm missing something in my life," said the student.

"Then give," said the master.

The Student and the Master on Expectations

"This isn't what I expected," said the student.
"Therein lies the problem," replied the
master.

A Thousand Poems

Pierre did not know how he was going to win her heart but he would win it. She would love him.

To see her was to fall in love with her. To hear her was to hear music. To feel her was to feel silk. Her beauty inspired a thousand poems within me. Some of which I tried to pen, but compared to her, it was gibberish.

Her name was Elena, and although she was rich, she had a humble heart- not allowing her parents' servants to do much for her- she washed her own clothes, cleaned her own room, and many more things. She enjoyed the simple things, I saw- just being with friends and laughing. She loved nature. She would write poems about the river close to her home-she was my river. She wrote a thousand poems about that river, and I wrote a thousand poems about her.

Elena would celebrate her 17th birthday in a few days. What a celebration her parents planned for

her; music, plenty of food, and all of her friends, myself included. And her gift? A car. Not to mention all the gifts from all her admirers. That's what a beautiful face got her- a following of young men that would do and buy anything to have her heart. She won me over with her heart. She was such a simple and kind person. She shared everything she had- a drink, a cookie, a laugh. I loved her with all my heart.

Pierre thought and thought what he could give her for her birthday; he scribbled ideas on paper to get a clearer vision of what would make her the happiest. He didn't have much money and knew that he could not compete with the gifts from the other young men.

I had one more day to get her gift. It had to be perfect- no less would do. I didn't even bother counting my money as I knew I could not buy something suitable for her. What good would a cheap gift do her?

As I walked through town looking at all the beautiful dresses that I wished I could buy for her, I saw a man selling ice cream. "That's the kind of thing she would appreciate," I said to myself. I sat on a bench and watched the people; some were enjoying their ice cream, others walking, and still others sitting and talking with friends. The whole world was oblivious to my current predicament.

After what seemed like an eternity in thought, I finally stood up and walked more. Time was my

enemy now! I walked alongside some more stores and boutiques -such beautiful jewelry! Any diamond or band of gold would be dimmed next her smile, her eyes! I considered myself very lucky to have such a bittersweet predicament. Finally I found her the perfect gift.

The day finally came. It was her birthday and we all arrived at her house. As expected, the young men gave her the most beautiful necklaces with the most exquisite of pearls, the finest gold, and the most precious of stones. I have to admit that I was a little discouraged after seeing all of the elegance of the gifts.

Before I left, I handed her mom a small box wrapped in simple but happy wrapping paper.

Later that evening, her mother gave Elena the gift from Pierre. Inside the small, carefully wrapped box was a small bag of flower seeds. It was a simple gift, but something more natural and beautiful to look at than all the jewelry she received that evening. From one flower, many more can grow. Elena's heart would be warmed when the flowers finally blossomed in the small flower bed outside her window. They would be small, white bells. The final wave of warmth in her heart was the poem that accompanied her gift:

With You

My life is a garden,

And you are its most beautiful flower,
Your love is my rain,
And your eyes, a stars' shower;
The sun shines brighter
When I'm with you,
I hope you feel it when
You're with me too;
It's something very special when
We're together in harmony,
Together for another day,
Making another happy memory;
My life is a garden,
And you are its most beautiful flower,
Your love is my rain,
And your eyes, a stars' shower.

Happy birthday,

Pierre

II

It was 3 days until he saw Elena again. She saw him sitting by the river at dusk. He was writing.

I can't imagine ever running out of inspiration with her on my mind. The words just flow. Whether

they were any good was up to the reader. My heart spoke and my hands listened.

“Thank you for my gift, it certainly stood out,” Elena broke the silence, approaching me.

I smiled and looked at her and then at the river. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Elena glanced at the river then back at me with a smile and a slight nod.

“Can I see you tomorrow night?” I asked.

“How about tonight?”

“Tonight too,” I smiled as I took her hand and she sat next to me on the soft grass. We lay by the river listening to the soft hum of the river water flowing by incessantly. With her in my arms, I felt totally powerless yet so happy at once; I wanted to protect her from everything and everyone. I cursed the time for passing by so quickly, as I knew I would have to take her home soon. I could have spent eternity by the river; the beauty in my arms envied the moon and the moon envied the beauty in my arms. And just as the moon would disappear, she would too. Night could not stay, nor could she. I loved her and I wondered if I would ever get the chance to show her.

We walked to her house in a quiet serenity of understanding. I told her I would come see her tomorrow night, but she said she was not allowed to go out tomorrow night.

“Then I will come to you, look for a light,” I replied.

She smiled a smile that could’ve warmed the coldest December day. Then she hugged me tightly and went inside.

III

The next night I sat eagerly by the window in a futile attempt to read, looking out my window every few seconds. I was awaiting the light and the visit that was promised.

In a repeated attempt to begin the page, I saw a glimmer out of the corner of my eye. The light flickered; too large to be a flashlight but not as bright as one. It swung from side to side in a bouncing motion; it must have hung from his neck. As he approached the house I could see what it was: a jar of fireflies!

My heart leapt from my chest and into my throat. As the light drew closer to my window, I began to hear a sweet sound in the air. A guitar! My heart then found a new, faster, sweeter rhythm to beat to. It was the sweetest song I had ever heard, and what a voice! His fingers strummed the strings and his words pierced my heart. After the song finished, he threw a small rock through my window. There was a letter tied to it, it read:

I feel very special being next to you. Yesterday at the river we made a memory that I will keep in the deepest depths of my heart. My heart raced as you lay in my arms and fell asleep. I wish I could've stayed in that moment forever.

*Good night,
Pierre*



About the Author: Carlos Salinas

From his website (CarlosSalinasWriting.com):

If you are a new reader or have been following me since I started publishing my writing waaaaay back in the fall of 2012, I am happy and grateful that you are here.

I always wanted to write. I remember reading great stories in all sorts of books and my imagination went off on tangents for my own creations. I also remember very interesting stories that I would hear people tell. We are all natural story-lovers, especially when there is a personal connection with the story teller, a character, or element in the story. I wanted to write stories.

My purpose for writing is to spread a positive, hopeful, inspirational, motivational, and insightful message through words; in stories, quotes, and rhymes. At times when looking for new books, I couldn't find the books with the message that seemed so clear to me: about love, knowledge, truth, perspective, and clear thinking. I remembered reading somewhere that if you can't find the book you're looking for, you should write it. So I did. The feedback I have received for my writing has ranged from: "I have always felt that...but was afraid to say it or couldn't put it into words," to "It made me think, and I don't agree with it but it really made me think." That was my goal all along. To help people discover themselves, their beliefs, and their voices.

As I always say, "A writer is nothing without his readers." And you guys are the absolute best. Feel free to reach out to me on here, Facebook, or any other social media. I always love talking to you.

See you on page one,

Carlos :)

**This is an excerpt from Short Stories of Love, Hope, and Laughter by Carlos Salinas due out in 2017. Thanks for reading!*

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