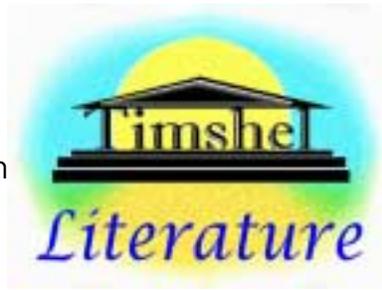


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The Heart Grows Stronger

by Justin Katz

Jude

The sunlight should have made the day more cheery. The autumnal litter of leaves crackling under my feet should have added a sprightly rhythm to the childlike melody of the carousel. But in my state of mind, with the activity in which I was now engaged, I could not relate to the laughter of the children running like leaves blown in the wind around me, nor, more to the point, the private smiles of lovers sticking to opposite ends of a ball of cotton candy.

It was between the starry eyes of two such lovers that Sorrow appeared, her brown hair cut, as I knew it would be, in the trendy television fashion of the day. She wandered nervously from the left of the carousel and continued toward the house of mirrors to the spot at which I had told her I would meet her.

Let her sweat, I thought, as Sorrow leaned against the outer wall of the make-shift building to the right of a huge grotesquely distorted face where, very appropriately, two kids our age, or rather, two teenagers the age we were when we first met, were kissing tentatively, as if for the first time, next to her.

Arriving early, I had stationed myself behind the ring toss booth through which, like a shadow passing amongst the crowd, I could watch Sorrow, comparing her to my own mental acceleration of her features, and still remain unseen. She had managed to keep off most of the weight I would have expected her to gain, but the loose jeans and sweater were an obvious attempt to hide what she considered too much girth. From my distance I could not see her eyes, but I suspected they carried the slightly hazy appearance of her daily hang over. I could nearly hear the song she that she must have passed out muttering in her drunken soprano the night before. “You know me so well,” she had once said.

While I was watching, Sorrow nervously pushed her hair behind her ears and looked apprehensively at the faces of people who were not me. Strangers in a mockery of glee. I decided that the time had come to make my entrance and so crossed the short space between us, passing a father who was trying to keep up with the excitement of youth and glancing briefly, almost regretfully, into his gaping wallet.

“Hello,” I said, and Sorrow, who had been puffing out her sweater around her waist, looked up at me through glassy eyes; and I was struck wordless by the surge of conflicting emotions that rushed forth from long idle parts of my mind and beat upon my sense of time and place.

“Hello.”

I struggled through the swirling collage of my thoughts for the words I had so carefully planned and rehearsed, but it was she who broke the silence, “you look good.”

Looking at her, I decided that while to the unbiased eye she had probably looked better the last time I had seen her, with the unexpected feelings of passion (which I had thought dead

and rotting long ago) and the veil which fell with them across my perception, she looked radiant. “So do you,” I told her and wondered how obvious the looming tears were in my voice.

An awkward moment passed and I suggested we sit on a bench beyond the writhing crowd near a lake which wound its way under an arched bridge and out of sight into the woods. Once seated, we both looked away reflectively, me at the bridge and her at the sky, until once again the silence was broken by the barely audible voice of Sorrow, “Jude, why did you ask me here?”

I paused to gather my thoughts and released a heavy sigh, “Sorrow, this all has to stop.”

Sounding like an adolescent girl who had been caught orchestrating a diabolical scheme and insisting on denying her role, she responded, unbelievably: “What?”

“The letters, the calls. You say you’re over me and that you’ve never been happier, but then why can’t you go on with your life and leave me alone? I just want to let it all go away.”

Tears lined the bottom rim of her eye, getting caught in her lashes and then plummeting down her face, “but you, you have no idea how you hurt me, I...”

“*I hurt you?* Sorrow, you have no idea what hurt can be,” I readily accepted the fever that rose through my head, as it abolished the waves of affection, “can’t you remember how it really was?”

“How it was? I remember that you said you loved me. I remember playing the part of the innocent little girl, while all the time being scared of you. That you used me. You never loved me!”

Seeing her flinch, I followed her eyes and discovered that my left hand had risen, serpent-like, now poised to strike. I forced my hand down and held it securely in my lap with the other. Sorrow showed no surprise at my arm’s move towards violence, but I couldn’t believe it. I

wasn't like that, I had never been like that. But could I blame my hand for moving to defend me from such a blindly cutting assault? "I never hit you, I said, more to myself than to her, and continued tentatively, "that's all in the past, long ago, let's talk about now."

She shuffled in her seat and the impression of her as a guilty teenager returned, "what about it?"

"Listen, I know it shouldn't matter to me, but you're delusional. I don't know what dime-store novel you've put us in, but by the letters you send me, the things you say, it seems that you've forgotten that we had it wonderful for a while."

"It was never..."

"It was! It was. But that doesn't matter now. What matters is that you won't leave me alone. I was that close," I said, holding up the thumb and pointer finger of my right hand, and noticed that she again flinched and glanced toward the fair grounds, "to separating the good memories from the bad. I need to be able to think of it as a pleasant part of my life that just isn't there anymore, and I think you should do that, too."

"Jude," she began, and looked over my shoulder. Was that fear or regret in her eyes? I began to turn and felt the hot/cold sting of something hard against my right cheek and tumbled to the ground, the world turning gray around me.

"You should have left her alone," an unfamiliar voice floated, as bubbles float, through a wall of disorientation. Suddenly, as if I had fallen into the inner workings of some huge and horrible machine, I was battered. My head, my gut, my arms. A scream, Me? No, Sorrow. I swam through the pain in an attempt to find unconsciousness and instead felt the cool washing of October lake water. Allowing myself to float out from the shore, I hung suspended between

reality and imagination, the present and past, and heard, as I finally sank into the depths of my mind, a voice from some long ago but often repeated memory, “will you love me forever?”

“Yes, I always will,” I said, as bubbles.

“And I you, Jude. Time makes the heart grow stronger.”

Sorrow

Sorrow crossed the parking lot toward the carousel. *This is going to be fun*, she thought sarcastically and brushed aside the hair that hung down the sides of her face and framed it. She wasn't used to this hair cut yet, but she thought she looked good in it, and so did her boyfriend.

Coming up to the edge of the carousel, she hesitated. This was her last chance to turn back. Her life had been just fine without Jude for the past three years and she didn't need to open wounds that had been carefully stitched by the hands of time and doctors who dealt not with physical pains but those of the heart, soul, and mind. But still, she had to admit that her shaking was partly due to honest excitement and not just what her psychiatrist called “residual fear.” On the other side of these frozen horses and animated children was her first love, her first lay, and the first person she thought of when she lay awake at night.

Walking around to the right of the carousel, Sorrow saw a cute young couple sharing cotton candy and holding hands. She wished her Tom was here: her emotional savior and physical protector. Looking around, she spotted the house of mirrors, to which she walked, and stationed herself to the left of a huge funny face near two teenagers kissing as if they had been meant for each other and been each other's soul mates since the era of chivalry.

Brushing her hair behind her ears, Sorrow looked from face to face, hoping and fearing that each one would be Jude, but they were only regular people enjoying the festivities. Not

seeing him, she turned her thoughts toward her slightly aching head. Last night it had been punch, strong punch. She vaguely remembered Tom pushing her to the floor and storming out of the room when she called out Jude's name at the wrong time. She had run after him, wanting to explain that she had been thinking about Jude only because he, Tom, was so much better than him, Jude. More punch had followed, and so did the blessed black out. Wandering through the fraternity. Staggering to the sorority. Softly singing the lines to an old song that Jude had taped for her.

Standing here in the cold, Sorrow cursed Jude for getting his fingers into every aspect of her life and hoped that Tom would forgive her. She looked down at her sweater and untucked it a bit, feeling constrained.

"Hello," said a voice and she shivered.

She looked up at a face she saw so often in her waking nightmares and saw that it now looked slightly worn, drooping with the weight of countless wrongfully persecuted women. "Hello," she replied, thanking God that the word had made it through the lump in her throat. She did not want to upset him, she just wanted to get through this and get on with her life, "you look good."

Jude looked through her and she saw the damp curtain of tears in his eyes and heard them in his voice when he said, "so do you."

Sorrow knew this was a lie. The bastard was full of compliments and persuasions when he was trying to get something. What was it he wanted? One last go-'round? Perhaps the woman abusing business had been slow and he had been running down his list of names and come across hers.

He suggested that they move to a bench a little too far from the crowd for her liking, but she supposed it was close enough that her scream would bring protection should he get violent. Besides, she wouldn't put it past him to hit her right here if she refused. They sat on the bench and she decided that it was in exactly the kind of spot she would have expected him to pick for the purpose of charming an impressionable young girl. *But that is no longer what I am*, she thought and prepared herself for what might be a dangerous refusal. "Jude, why did you ask me here?"

"Sorrow, this all has to stop," he said too quickly.

Surprised by the contrast to what she had expected, and confused as to what exactly "this" was, she couldn't think of anything to say but, "*what?*"

"The letters, the calls. You say you're over me and that you've never been happier, but I want you back in my life, I'm so alone. I just want us to get away."

What letters? What calls? she wondered, and found that tears were coursing down her cheeks. Tears of confusion, tears of pity. There must be something really wrong with him to be talking like this, and in fear she became defensive. "But you, you have no idea how you hurt me, I..."

"I *hurt* you?!?! Sorrow, you have no idea what hurt can be," she saw the blood rise up in his face like in a cartoon, but he must have gotten it under control, because when he continued he said, "I promise it won't be how it was."

"How it was? I remember that you said you loved me. I remember playing the part of the innocent little girl, while all the time being scared of you. That you used me. You never loved me!"

He raised his arm to hit her and she flinched from his familiar hand. *Just like old times*, she thought cynically.

He lowered his arm and composed himself, “I will never hit you. That’s all in the past, long ago, let’s talk about now.”

He just proved that he hasn’t changed, and he wants to talk about now; she was amazed. “What about it?”

“Listen, I know it shouldn’t matter to me, but you’re gullible. I don’t know what dime-store novel your boyfriend’s convinced you that you’re in, but by the letters you send me, the things you say, I know you haven’t forgotten that we had it wonderful for a while.”

“It was never...”

He interrupted her with that flash of anger again, “It was!” then it was gone, “it was. But that doesn’t matter now. What matters is that you can’t leave me alone. I was that close,” he raised his hand only to illustrate “that close”ness but she thought he was going to hit her, and so flinched and looked off for available help, noticing Tom and two of his friends striding out of the crowd toward them. Jude continued, “to separating my good memories and the bad. I need you and miss that pleasant part of my life that just isn’t there anymore, and I think you miss it, too.”

Tom and his friends were now behind Jude, and Tom brought an iron pipe from behind his back. “Jude!” Sorrow screamed, trying to warn him.

It was too late. Before she could react, Tom and one of his friends were kicking and punching Jude, who was now on the ground. Tom’s second friend had grasped her around the waist and was pulling her away toward the noise of the fair, she screamed as Tom threw Jude into the lake. Her head was ambushed by a million conflicting emotions, pictures, and sounds popping like neon lights in an old, colorized movie before her eyes, and she settled on one. She

wasn't sure if it was a memory, a dream, or something she had seen on television, but it was of her asking Jude, "will you love me forever?"

"Yes, I always will," he had said.

"And I you, Jude. Time makes the heart grow stronger."

Ray

Tom asked me to come. I guess Sorrow, his girlfriend, had gotten a call from her ex-boyfriend, some lunatic from the city. I didn't want to get involved but after that little spat between Tom and Sorrow the night before, and watching her wander around my fraternity singing some sappy song that my mother used to love, I thought it might be best if somebody rational was there for the meeting.

"I'm going to fuckin' kill that guy," Tom said in the car on our way to the last of the season's fairs, "when I'm through with him, he's going to stop calling girls who have boyfriends."

"Naw, you're just pissed that Sorrow still wants him," said Frank, the wise-ass, from the passenger seat.

"Shut the fuck up," Tom retorted, and whacked Frank in the head, "bitch don't need no one but me. I'm more of a lay than she can handle."

"So that's why she was screaming so loud the other night," Frank said, rubbing his forehead.

"What can I say, man, bitch likes it rough: bam, bam, bam," Tom illustrated by forcefully lifting his hips off the car seat three times. They both laughed, but I thought it was kind of stupid, and wondered why I was friends with these people.

We pulled into the parking lot in time to see Sorrow walking around the carousel. “There she is,” I said.

“Yup. I wanna lay low for a while. From what she says, he’ll try to get her alone, and that’s when we’ll get ‘im.”

We parked the car and walked sneakily around the carousel. Sure enough, the guy was leading Sorrow away from the crowd to a secluded bench by the lake. Frank pumped his shoulders up once and started walking over to where they were sitting, but Tom grabbed his shoulder.

“Let’s see what he does first,” said Tom, but it seemed to me that he was more interested in what Sorrow might do. He asked me for a cigarette, and we stood there, the three of us smoking and watching, looking like gangsters from an old Mafia movie.

We could see that the guy was getting upset, and even raised his hand to smack her once, but Tom said, “let him hit her first.”

The guy got himself under control, and for a minute I got the impression that he was going to kiss her and that she wanted him to. That’s when Tom started moving. He bent over and grabbed a metal pipe that I hadn’t even seen on the ground not five feet away from us, and charged toward them.

I could see that Tom intended to do more than rough the guy up, so I tried to stop him, but he was too quick and had the guy on the ground before I could get close enough. Sorrow looked like she was going to jump in and try to stop it, but knowing Tom, I thought he might turn on her. Grasping her around the waist, I led Sorrow toward the safety of the fair grounds. She screamed and mumbled some nonsense about time, love, and strength.