

Light of Life - FICTION

Few come close to holding true Joy in the palm of their hand. Happiness is all around; don't mistake me for a total pessimist. But Joy's entirely more elusive, more difficult to grasp. Have you ever tried to catch the wind?

You don't know me yet, though you will see me throughout your life. You may ask me, once we're acquainted, why I feel any entitlement to speak on the subject of Joy, as in your mind I'm associated with the contrary. Soon you'll understand.

I've followed Joy for many years. I observe. Joy dances across your faces, lights your world long enough for you to forget the dark. Then, Joy leaves.

I wait for the day someone captures it. Someone came close, years ago. I don't know his name, and I won't for a few years. He's got a whole lot of living left to do.

The man's father was a soldier in the war, fighting for the Allies. He had kept a camera to document pain, an important component of Joy. His camera saw eyes sunken into hollow cheeks and piles of abandoned shoes. I met most of his subjects in those years. That was also when I met the man's father.

When the camera was shipped back to Baton Rouge with the rest of his father's possessions and a folded flag, the man's mother passed it to her son. His fingers developed a magnetic pull towards the shutter button of the same gravitational force that kept his feet on the ground, though his head escaped its grip, residing permanently in the clouds.

When he grew, he biked a paper route three days a week over roads needing paving. His sack was made a few ounces heavier by the camera, though it never slowed him down. He'd only stop when the light refracted off of a window too perfectly to leave unphotographed, or when a neighborhood dog chased a bird in a way that begged to be frozen and framed. He wouldn't tell you this, but he stopped for an ice cream truck, too. But only once! And it was an exceptionally hot day, one even the most disciplined of boys wouldn't have been able to let pass by without the sugary salvation of a chocolate cone.

After a few summers of work, he'd been offered a job with the town paper to photograph the local goings-on. He was a man now. He worked in an office with wood-stained desks, black matte chairs, and air conditioning that blew air as frigid as a secret when the days crept higher into the Fahrenheit. He'd grown into his body and responsibilities. Stress pulled at the skin beneath his eyes with such strength it colored like a bruise. He worked hard, almost never stopping—except one time past midnight for a cup of coffee, all black. But only once! And the night felt exceptionally long, so much so not even the most motivated of men would not have been able to stay awake without the biting caffeine. Preserved in the lens of his camera was his childhood youth as he advanced into the world of a working adult.

Some nights, he'd think about his father. Instead of being angry for the hours they were robbed of, the man chose to be grateful for the connection he still had to his father; the camera. Lessons of hard work, dedication, and sacrifice—all crucial components of

Joy—were taught to both of the men within the 5 x 6 dimensions of the camera, and for that the man was appreciative.

He was approaching the latter years of his twenties when he was asked to photograph a local diner, Magnolia's. He'd been planning on highlighting the classic simplicity of the diner, yet when he opened the door, his eye was caught by something—someone—and he knew the photographs could wait. Nothing would ever be simple again.

She had locks of chocolate cake curls which melted down her shoulders. On a stool by the bar, she stared with concentration at the notepad in front of her. To her surprise, she heard a faint *click* as a stranger's camera focused on her.

He sat down, though his hands were shaking. He gripped the camera a little tighter. "Mind if I take this seat?" He smiled, his boyishness plastered onto his face.

"Haven't you already?" A smile crept onto the corners of her lips.

The cook stood polishing a sundae dish that shone like water. The man caught his gaze.

"One Coke, please?" The cook shot a smile, punctuated with a nod. As he turned away, the man called out again. "And put this lady on my tab. If that's alright with you."

Her cheeks were rosebuds rushing into bloom. She looked quickly down to her notebook. "I suppose so," The smile was audible in her inflection. "But I'll get you next time."

The man's drumming heart seemed to have lost all rhythm as it faltered, stealing his breath. "Next time?"

"Only if the photographer cares to show some of his work." She avoided his gaze as if the stare of a man grazed her skin as frequently as the sunlight.

"Well, that depends on whether the poet cares to tell me a story." He shifted his weight closer to her. He'd only felt this drawn to one other thing his whole life. I'll bet you could guess what it was.

"Alright," Her mind settled. "But you first."

So the man showed her his photos, many of which he kept small prints of within his wallet. She asked about the photos that'd been taken of her moments earlier. He smiled, told her they wouldn't be ready for some time. He reached for the pages of her notebook. Reflexively, she pulled it close to her chest.

He scooted closer to her. "Show me."

The lady flipped through the pages of her notebook, reading poems she'd worn on her heart and mind for years. "You realize now you have to write another one? I took photos, but now you have to write a poem. For me," He ventured.

"If I did," she started, "What would it be called?"

He looked into her eyes, searching for a sign that she felt the way he did. They mirrored his exactly. “I think it’s called Joy.”

What the man had wanted to say was love. But “love” and “Joy” are synonymous, as love is, once again, a component of Joy. He learned a lot about it that day.

A year of hand holding and quiet kisses passed like leaves carried by an autumn wind. He saw a diamond in a jewelry store window on his way to the office one day he’d never noticed before. Fogged circles of breath on the glass would remain long after he had left.

He worked overtime, saving pennies for weeks. He started giving photography lessons; during one, a gentleman took note of his camera. He told the man it looked nice, and what was it, a 40’s Kodak? The man replied yes, it was. The gentleman was looking for a camera for his son, who’d shown a liking towards photography. The man’s mind jumped into action. He told the gentleman it was a nice camera, and the gentleman’s only concern should be that he’d see the lens of the camera attached to his son’s body more than his face. The man spoke with the eloquence and fluidity of a life-long salesperson, and when he finished, the gentleman simply looked at him and said, “Name your price.”

With a new check in his pocket, the man watched the gentleman and the first Joy he’d known step into a Corvette. The man smiled as he thought of the next child that would get to learn from that camera as a single tear streaked down from the corner of his eye. Joy is melancholy, too.

When he slid the diamond onto the lady's finger at Magnolia's, he came closest to holding Joy in his hand. He took her hand donning the ring and held pain, loss, sacrifice, melancholy, and love. Joy flitted between their fingers for many moments, the longest I'd seen. Then it darted into their hearts, for Joy is not meant to be held, but worn.

I met the lady last week. A poor turn of health is unfortunate, but she was lucky enough to have had adequate time for last kisses for both her husband and her children.

Yes, it'll be a few years until I get to meet the man. Since the day he lost his lady, Joy has been harder to find, but he's never stopped trying. He's a good man. She made him better. When I'm so fortunate to finally meet him, I'll bring him to her. I'll thank him for teaching me about life, and I will ask to take their photograph--a polaroid, so I can hold it in the palm of my hand. On the white film beneath the image, I think I'll write "Joy".