

The Lone Sailor - FICTION

Professor Parks spreads the blanket over Ms. Lily's small frame, wrapping her with the affection of a mother. We've come to love each other, the three of us. That thought makes me unbelievably scared.

"Now, you keep this tight to you, Ms. Lily. Just because the calendar's turned a page doesn't mean winter's left us quite yet." Professor Parks sits.

The park is quiet, and light falls on the snow softly. It seems like the type of place to be nostalgic for. Ms. Lily's frail state is accentuated by her shivers, which rattle through her relentlessly, shaking her skeleton with ease. I sit on the side of her opposite Professor Parks as we both pretend not to notice.

"Those trees over there," Ms. Lily points, "the willows. When I was young, very young, I thought those were the trees that wanted to grow their hair out long while the rest stayed clean-cut." She says this seriously, as if it could still be true. "I remember asking my mother who braids it for them, who in the world could reach that high."

This sentiment echoes in my head; I reach for my notebook. This could work.

Professor Parks laughs, crossing one leg over the other and leaning back. "Ms. Lily, would you say I'm a respectable man?"

"You know, Charles, it isn't a compliment if one must solicit it," she teases. "But yes, I would say so."

"Well, back when I was in college, I had hair down to my ankles." He grinned.

Ms. Lily and I both turn to face him. "Bullshit," I say, shocked. The mental image of my professor, who wouldn't dare be seen with so much as a shadow of stubble, with unruly hair just doesn't compute.

“Sam, you should never speak like that in front of a lady!” Professor Parks scolds, appalled.

“No, I believe his diction in this case was perfectly appropriate. Bullshit,” Ms. Lily challenges.

Amused, Professor Parks sits up. “Alright, well then, I ‘bullshit’ you not. To my ankles. I had to learn how to braid just so that it wouldn’t get caught in my clothes.”

“Charles Parks!” Ms. Lily whacks him with her handbag. “You must have looked ridiculous! Can you imagine our sweet Sam with hair that long?”

“I don’t know, I think it might be a good look on him,” He reaches over to tussle my hair. Laughing, I push his arm away. “I can’t believe you were my age, walking around like that. Now, you’re so...”

“What, boring?” He jokes.

“No, no. You’re just--”

“A tree that would prefer to keep his hair clean-cut,” Ms. Lily volunteers.

The three of us laugh until a coughing fit seizes Ms. Lily, holding her hostage as it steals her oxygen. I glance at Professor Parks; he pretends not to notice her wheezes. She’s deteriorated rapidly within these last few weeks—it’s undeniable.

Slowly, she regains her voice as her inhalations settle. “Sam, from the pieces of yours I’ve read, you have an undeniable gift for imagery.” She starts. “But please, don’t waste a *second* writing anything to try to make this sound beautiful. It’s been ugly, and wretched, but the ugliness dies with me. Especially that God-awful cough.”

“Yes ma’am.” I re-open the notebook, and feel her gaze over my shoulder, supervising. How am I ever going to do this?

“I used to think it would come in handy, the braiding. I thought, someday I’d have a daughter, and I could braid her hair? Make her smile, maybe.” Professor Parks offers.

“It’s not too late. You’re still young.” I say.

He laughs. “Words of high praise from the twenty year old! Am I not an artifact to you yet?”

“He’ll answer you honestly next semester when you’re not the one grading his papers. And don’t look so appalled—you did the same when you studied under me post-grad.” Ms. Lily turns to me. “The most loquacious flatterer, your professor.”

Professor Parks is a charmer, I know this much. But I also know how much he respects Ms. Lily. He tells my class frequently that her lectures shaped his education, though sometimes I wonder if it’s just his way of singing her praises to those he knows will never get to meet her. Well, except for me.

I skim over my notes, mostly half-baked anecdotes and scribbled names and dates from Ms. Lily’s past. This is unlike any school assignment I’ve ever had, and though I’m honored, I’m terrified.

I lift my gaze, looking out across the water. There’s a statue that I’ve never noticed before. “The Lone Sailor,” I murmur, reading the engraving. “Funny name for a statue.”

“Why’s that?” Professor Parks turns.

“I don’t know. Whoever it was, you’ve gotta think he had something more special in his life to be remembered by then the fact that he was alone for part of it, right?”

“None of us have a damn say in the way we’re remembered.” Ms. Lily’s gaze has turned stoic. “You have to live in a way that you can answer to God for, and if you’re lucky, you’ll cross

someone's mind once or twice before it's their turn to meet Him. The rest is out of your hands, completely. To be remembered at all is a gift." She is silent.

I feel Professor Parks' posture turn rigid; he places his hand atop her intertwined fingers. "Ms. Lily, you *do* have a say. That's the whole purpose of this assignment."

"And if you don't like the way I'm doing it so far, I can—" I start.

"No, no, Sam. You're doing wonderfully." She bites back her words, chewing on them, contemplating.

"I'll continue to supervise, too," Professor Parks assures. "It's a unique assignment, so—"

"Would you stop calling it an assignment!" Ms. Lily exclaims, jumping from the bench and ripping her hand from Professor Parks' as quickly as she can manage. "For God's sake, Charles, call it what it is! It's a eulogy! I am going to die!"

Paralysis creeps over my face. The very subject matter that my Professor and I have been tiptoeing around for months, she has just forced us to confront.

"And it is *so* beyond kind of you to approach this in your curriculum, but you can't write the words for my funeral and not acknowledge the fact that I won't be here to listen to them," She finishes.

Professor Parks' face is contorted with confusion and pain. "I thought this was what you wanted," He breathes softly.

"It was—it is. I've known you are brilliant, and I knew your students would be brilliant," She turns her focus to me. "Sam, you are one of the brightest writers I've ever met, and I'm forever grateful to you for writing this for me. Someone gave my voice a chance when I was a young writer, and it has made all the difference. That's what I want to do for you with this. But I also need it to be done well—" she turns back to Professor Parks "—and I need *you* to make sure

it is done well, and neither of those things will happen if you continue to ignore the truth of the subject matter.” She appears exhausted, as if this outburst has stolen her last remaining morsels of strength. “I need you to say it. Call it what it is, Charles.”

He whispers, tears welling in his eyes. “*Eulogy.*”

“Charles—”

“It’s a eulogy,” He booms. “It’s your eulogy.”

A shiver shakes down my spine. How eerie, to hear it pronounced so boldly aloud. For months, I’ve been gathering pieces of Ms. Lily, plucking them out of stories she’s shared or research I’ve done, and all the while I’ve been convincing myself that it was for something else, some different purpose. Professor Parks is too close to her, and too emotionally driven; he would never bring himself to finish it. But why, I find myself selfishly asking, did he and Ms. Lily have to choose *me*? Looking at her now, shaking, barely able to support herself, I’m confronted with the grim reality that in a matter of days—weeks, if we’re lucky—I will have to say goodbye to one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. And, I will have to write the words of her farewell to the world.

Slowly, Professor Parks stands. “Ms. Lily, will you come sit with us, just a little longer?”

She nods, fatigue and frost having settled deeply into her bones. Professor Parks wraps her in a hug, guiding her back to her seat between us on the bench. I close my notebook; I have forever to write. I don’t have forever to be here, next to them.

No more than strangers a few months ago, the three of us have grown to love each other. I know it is love because of the fear I have of losing it. The snow is starting to melt.