Oblivion

by Fratniss

Summary

“That lady...” I begin, “Is her daddy missing?”

Katniss stops moving completely. I wonder if I’ve said something wrong. Enough time passes that I think maybe she won’t answer me, but then she says, really quiet, “Yes, Peeta, he’s missing. That’s a good way to describe it.”

“Do you think he’s coming back?” I keep my head down when I ask, afraid she might see the jealousy in my eyes if I show my face. “Will somebody find him?”

“I don’t really know if he needs found. It’s more like he needs to find us. He needs a beacon to call him back.”

Another side-effect of the hijacking. Peeta loses all memory of his wife, his children, even his own childhood. He's five years old again. Katniss thinks she can bring him back if she tells him a familiar story

Notes

This story has been bouncing around in my head for a while. It's going to be a slow burn piece and will become explicit in later chapters. Canon compliant with a little meta twist.

Disclaimer: I don't own The Hunger Games trilogy. It's the intellectual property of Suzanne Collins. Excerpts from her work will always be italicized.
It’s so beautiful here, close to the woods. I can see the sunset leaking over the treetops, painting the sky a muted orange, filtering through the fresh leaves of spring. Every evening that’s warm enough, my friend leads me outside to watch the sun set.

She says I used to paint all the time, but I never did get to paint a sunset. She brings out an easel and a tray of paint sometimes, but I don’t have time for that. I’ve got to keep enjoying the sky.

Plus, I have a secret- I don’t think I ever did any of that. I think she’s trying to trick me, my friend is. But not in a mean way. In a funny way. A nice way.

Katniss would never be mean to me on purpose. Katniss is my best friend. She’s sitting beside me now, looking kind of crumpled like she does sometimes when she’s sad. I try to cheer her up when I notice, but whenever I take her hand and tell her she’s gonna feel better soon, it just seems to make it worse. I don’t know why.

This evening, Katniss brings two more chairs into the back lawn of her house. We’re having visitors, she told me this morning when she woke me up for a bath. I like it when Katniss gives me a bath because she puts extra soap in my hair and it bubbles up real big. I remember mama used to do that all the time when I was a little kid. I miss her a lot sometimes.

I asked Katniss this morning where she thought my mama was, because I missed her, and Katniss just got all crumply looking again. So I didn’t ask again, but I did get really scared. I can’t imagine living in a world without my mama, even though maybe she isn’t so nice to me sometimes. My best friend Katniss reminds me of her a lot when I’m doing something I shouldn’t like taking out the scissors to cut things, and her voice gets all sharp and worried like mama’s does.

Anyway, my best friend Katniss says we are having visitors today, so I am excited and also scared. We don’t get visitors a lot. Sometimes there is an old old man that comes and my best friend Katniss gets out these special glass bottles I can’t have and they talk, and the old man looks at me all worried, but he doesn’t say much to me except “be nice to my sweetheart.” I don’t know why he always tells me this, since I am always nice to Katniss except for when I get really really mad and I don’t know why. When that happens se gives me a shot and I get sleepy. Then I wake up and everything’s better.

But today Katniss says the visitors aren’t the old man but somebody else who’s really special. I am excited to meet them, but they aren’t here yet, so I am a little bit impatient.

“The sky’s beautiful,” I tell her from my chair. She’s sitting beside me drinking lemonade, which she says she can’t get enough of now that lemons are easier to come by. “I really like orange,” I say.

My best friend Katniss has polished-looking skin that shines deep like wood, and long dark hair that’s silvery around the temples to match her eyes. Her eyes have soft little birds feet all around them, which makes me think she must be kind of old even though she’s strong enough to hold me down when I’m feeling angry. I asked her how old she was once and she said “Fifty-four,” which sounds pretty ancient to me. She laughed when I told her that, and said she used to think that way, too.

Today, she’s smiling through her lemonade straw, and she tells me that orange is my favorite color, which I think I sort of knew but now I’m glad it’s fresh in my mind. Behind me I hear the sound of feet crunching on gravel, and I see two people approaching. Our visitors!
One is a tall woman with dark wavy hair and a huge belly, and the other is a man who’s holding her hand and looking at me warily like maybe I will jump at him. I don’t know why he looks like that. My best friend Katniss stands up quickly to hug them both and then she leads them over to where I’m still sitting with my hands digging into the chair arms.

“Peeta,” Katniss says slowly, her eyes searching my face like she’s expecting something, “This is Willow and her husband Titus.”

Then suddenly they’re all looking at me with that same look Katniss is giving me. Like they’re waiting for something to happen. But nothing does. I just loosen my hands from their grip on the chair.

“Hi Willow,” I smile, my eyes flicking from the woman to the man. “Hi, Titus.”

They wait for a little longer, and when still nothing happens Katniss sighs and offers them a seat.

Titus passes by to his seat and shakes my hand and he does it, “Hello there, Peeta.”

I nod. “Nice to meet you.”

Willow doesn’t shake my hand- she bends down to hug me, pushing her pregnant belly into my chest. I’m startled by this complete stranger showing me such affection, but I hesitantly hug back.

“Hi, Peeta,” Willow whispers into my neck, and she seems to reluctantly pull away when Katniss touches her elbow.

Katniss sits beside me and takes my hand in her own, I guess because she can tell that I’m a little upset with the way people are looking at me like I might sprout a pair of wings and start flying at any moment.

Our visitors start talking but I don’t pay much attention, too busy watching the woods gray away into a dark mass of foliage as the sun drags down. Every now and then I catch Willow staring at me, but she quickly glances away. She’s rubbing her belly a lot. I wonder if she notices.

Once it is finally and completely dark, Katniss leads everyone inside so that we aren’t eaten up by mosquitos. On the way back into the house, I hear the woman, Willow, muttering to Katniss. Something along the lines of, “he’s never been this bad before. Doesn’t even recognize me. It’s not right- he wanted to meet her so bad.” And after she says this she rubs her stomach again before I dart my eyes away. They aren’t talking about me. Couldn’t be. I’ve never met that woman in my life- sure maybe she looks a bit familiar, but a lot of people have faces like that.

We go inside and I just really want my mama more than anything. Dinner is this yummy stew with plums in it that we have lots of the time. After we eat, for hours and hours we sit around the kitchen table, with them talking and me pushing my forehead on the table because I’m really tired and scared and I don’t want to talk to the strangers anymore. My belly is all full up and most of all I would like to go upstairs so my best friend Katniss can tuck me in before she goes to the room across the hall. I like that she sleeps so close by because when I get scared I can go to her and climb in beside her and she hugs me real close and puts her fingers in my hair.

They keep and keep talking and Katniss keeps saying things like, “I bet your dad would love that,” and “Your father is the exact same way.”

Finally they leave, and I’m not so scared anymore. I’ve been thinking. Katniss is washing up dishes, so I join her and help with the drying. We settle into a comfortable routine. We do this a lot. The whole time I am plucking up my courage to ask her something that crossed my mind when they kept
talking about that woman Willow’s daddy.

“That lady, Willow,” I begin, keeping my eyes locked on the bowl I’m drying. “Is her daddy missing?”

Katniss, elbow deep in murky sink water, stops moving completely. I wonder if I’ve said something wrong. Enough time passes that I think maybe she won’t answer me, but then she says, really quiet, “Yes, Peeta, he’s missing. That’s a good way to describe it.” Then she starts up her washing again without waiting for me to respond.

I take another bowl that’s she’s handing me, still curious and still a bit confused. “Well is he lost? Or did he run away?” The distinction is important to me. It’s the difference between hope and resignation.

“Lost,” she responds almost immediately. “He’s definitely lost. Her daddy, he would never run away. He loves her- and me- too much to ever hurt us by running away.”

So hope, then. Good, but now I’m curious about this man who loves her, and deep in me I feel this pang that might be something like jealousy. Katniss is my best friend and I don’t want some other dumb person to love her away from me and make her leave. She wouldn’t do that, would she? She wouldn’t leave me?

“Do you think he’s coming back?” I keep my head down when I ask, afraid she might see the jealousy in my eyes if I show my face. “Will somebody find him?”

Katniss hands me the last bowl to dry, and, wiping her hands on her pants, turns to me. “I don’t really know if he needs found. It’s more like he needs to find us. He needs a beacon to call him back.”

There. The dishes are finished. I stack them in the cabinet, aware that Katniss is watching me. I want to ask why. Instead, I shuffle up the stairs to my room, Katniss close behind to make sure that I don’t fall and hurt myself. She turns her back while I change into my sleeping clothes, because I told her before that I was shy of her looking at me.

That’s not true. I don’t care if people see me, cause us people we’re sort of beautiful underneath if you think about it. Also there’s this secret part of me that would like it if she looked. But what I don’t want her to see is the strange man in the mirror. He’s not me. He’s old- with laugh lines and stubble and hints of silver in his blonde hair. And he’s big, kinda looks like my daddy if he were older. Except he only has one real leg, and the other is a fancy silvery thing that’s good at pretending to be a leg but really isn’t. That man in the mirror isn’t me, but he’s always there and I can never find myself. It’s like a curse, and it scares me, and lots of the time I stay away from reflections because I’m afraid someone will see that man and then I’ll turn into him.

I’ve stumbled out of my trousers and pulled on pajama bottoms, and Katniss is still talking. “I’ve been thinking a lot about how I could call him back, and I think I have an idea.”

I pull off my shirt, eyes averted from the man in the mirror who likes to copy what I do. There’s a tugging in my gut. I want to know her plan. “What is your idea?”

Then Katniss has turned around and I’m still not wearing my new shirt because it’s still in my hands and she is walking over to me and looking at me. A deep thrill shudders my skin. She notices.

Katniss is standing really friendly in front of me. Then she sits down on the floor, criss cross applesauce. “Come join me,” she says. “I’m going to tell you a story about a boy I used to know.”
I know she’s trying to distract me from my question, since she does that sort of thing all the time, but still I follow her orders. She knows how much I love stories. My one leg works kind of funny so it takes me a while to sit down. We’re sitting close, knees touching.

“This is a true story,” she begins, “about a bad time in my life, when I was very young. My father had just died in the mining accident.” She pauses to confirm that I know about this accident, which I do. She only talks about her father’s death rarely, but of course I remember it. She’s my best friend. I remember everything about her.

“After my father died, my mother shut down. She couldn’t take care of me and my little sister…”

“Prim,” I say, to show off all I know.

“Yes, Prim. Prim and I were starving without my mother working to get food, and I was so terrified that the District would take us away from her. But there was nothing I could do about it. At one point in the winter, all we had to eat was some leaves in the back of a cabinet, and I was down to selling Prim’s old baby clothes for food. Of course, nobody wanted them.” At this point her voice broke, but she pressed on.

“Finally, I gave up on selling her clothes, but I was still so hungry. I started searching through the trash cans of a wealthier family’s bakery.”

Something about that phrase scratched on the inside of my ear, dug into a spot in my brain, so I kept picking at it, wondering what it meant to me. Bakery. Trash cans. She told me once that I liked to bake. She never said if I had ever been any good.

“-and a few minutes later I heard a commotion, and the woman was shouting at her son, telling him how stupid he was. When he came back out, he had two loaves of burnt-looking bread and a big welt on his face from where she hit him with a rolling pin. He was supposed to give the bread to the pigs…”

Bakery. Trash can. Pigs. Rolling pin. A series of disconnected, but surely real images flickered in my mind’s eye. I’d seen these things before, all close together. The scratching in my brain continued, grew deeper.

“But instead,” Katniss’ voice wobbles, “he gave the bread to me. He saved my life, and my sister’s life, and my mother’s life.” She’s looking at me again, in my eyes this time, and she looks almost teary. “Peeta, I owe him everything, even though he thinks I don’t.”

A long pause with nothing in it but the scratching.

“Well…” she gulps down a laugh. “He thought I didn’t owe him. I’m not sure what he thinks now.”

“You don’t owe him anything,” I say with a conviction that bubbles up from deep inside me. I don’t know where it comes from, but I feel very certain about it, so I don’t look away from my friend Katniss when I say it.

Her eyes flash something for just a second, her mouth parts in this funny way and she leans just barely closer. But then her eyes dart real quick side to side like they’re trying to catch one of mine at a lie, and she relaxes back into a small sad-ish smile.

“No, maybe I don’t.” She fiddles with the hem of my nightshirt, which is still just pulled over my forearms. I’ve forgotten that I’m half bare to her and my skin thrills again, and even my nipples are startled about it. I look down at them curiously. I don’t remember my chest being so big and wide before.
“But maybe I can help him in return,” Katniss finishes quietly. She’s watching me examine myself and she does that for a while before she seems to remember herself. “Right, arms up!” She cheerfully instructs, and I obediently lift my arms so that she can pull my shirt over my head more easily. I’m briefly blinded by the fabric, and for a second she pauses, with me all exposed with my arms up and my face covered so I can’t see what she’s thinking. Something soft and warm brushes my skin just over my heart and my belly gets warm.

“Katniss?”

“Sorry, you had something…Let me just…There,” she smiles when I emerge blushing from the shirt collar. “Snug as a bug!”

I tuck my chin shyly. I want to hear her sing before I go to bed, but sometimes she doesn’t like that very much when I ask. I look up at her through my eyelashes to see if she looks happy enough to ask. She catches me at it and lifts her eyebrows curiously.

“Something you want to ask?”

It comes out in a barely-there breath. “Sing?”

She chuckles and it’s a warm and gravelly sound, and I wish that my mama had a laugh like that. Her slim fingers slip into my hair, tenderly pushing it away from my forehead and tucking a few curls behind my ear. I lean into her touch with closed eyes.

“I don’t know…”

“Please?” I mouth.

Her hand lingers, her fingertips grazing over the side of my neck where my heartbeat is. “Alright, let’s get you tucked in, and I’ll sing you one song. So start thinking about what you want to hear.”

That part’s easy. She knows my favorite. I climb under the comforter when she lifts the corner and allow her to bunch the fabric under my sides and feet so that I’m secure on all sides. Then she opens the window a bit, just how I like it.

“Valley Song!” I say when she turns to me.

“Of course.” Her eyes close and her fingers twist around each other in her lap. Then she opens her mouth. And the whole world goes quiet to listen.

Her voice is like a memory I could slip into if I closed my eyes and let go just enough. But I never look away from her face as she sings about the valley so low. There’s happiness in the lines around her eyes, but sadness too. The scratching in my head kicks up again as she finishes, and a brief flash of color registers in my mind. Red. With white checkers.

“Katniss?”

But she keeps her eyes closed and breathes slow and I’m not sure what I would ask her anyway. A lot of time passes and I just want her to kiss my forehead and tell me goodnight. It takes a while for her to move. When she finally does it’s like she’s waking up from some place far away.

“I’d like to tell you another story, Peeta. Would that be alright?” That’s when I notice she has a thick, old-looking book resting on her lap. “It’s a long one, so I would just tell you a part tonight, and then we could make this into a little tradition of ours, if you wanted?”
I don’t know. The last story she told me made me feel kind of strange and scratchy. “What’s it about?”

“It’s about me. And the boy with the bread.”

“Is it true?”

“Yes, I wrote it all down from memory. It happened when I was young.”

“Is it happy?”

“Not in the beginning. Not for a long time.” She runs her fingers over the rough-edged pages and I think she must be nervous about it. I don’t like it when she gets shivery and nervous like that, because then she leaves me alone sometimes.

“Okay,” I say. “I’d like that. As long as it ends happy. Promise?”

“Yes,” and her eyes flash hard then. “This is going to have a happy ending. I promise.”

Then she opens the old book to the first page and I snuggle down into my comforter.

“When I wake up,” she begins in a strong, soft voice, “the other side of the bed is cold. My fingers stretch out, seeking Prim’s warmth but finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress. She must have had bad dreams and climbed in with our mother. Of course, she did. This is the day of the Reaping...”

End Notes

Chill with me between updates at fratniss(.)tumblr(.)com.

Also. Anyone interested in some beta work? I’m new here and looking for a buddy. Drop me a line!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!