The Death of Dreams

by Bamboozlepig

Summary

In the cold harsh grip of reality, all dreams die, all dreams must be buried, especially his. He feels as if his own heart should be in that coffin with her—it is only fitting, his living, beating, bleeding, breaking heart lying next to her cold, still one. [a glimpse into Ashley's thoughts at Melanie's graveside]

Notes

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"Gone With the Wind" has been my all-time favorite book, ever since I first read it as a young teen. I adored Rhett and had a love/hate relationship with Scarlett, but I never liked Ashley, I found him to be a weak-kneed cad who couldn't decide which woman he really wanted. So it's rather ironic that my muse chose Ashley for this story, but I've learned not to question the proclivities of a giant guinea pig and just be glad the damned critter is willing to work on any kind of story. For now this is just going to be a oneshot, but I may decide to add sections for Scarlett and Rhett later on, we'll have to see where the muse goes with it. Thank you for reading!

This is all just a dream, a nightmare I'm having, he tells himself. This is nothing more than a nightmare and I'm going to wake up from it and find myself in my own bed and none of this is going to be true, everything will be the way it just was.
After all, his dreams have always been the balm with which he has soothed himself, a golden
reminiscent haze of the life that existed before the War—a life full of gentlemanly pursuits and
noble gallantry and grand tours; of drowsy, lazy days spent in philosophical discussions about
civilizations that lay long dead in the ruins of the past, archeological relics that survive only in the
printed words that fill the gilt-edged, dusty tomes of his library.

It was a life of familial duty, of a long-ago promise made before he even knew what promises
were, knitted together with a pretty yarn of words and draped delicately upon the framework of
fragile little bird bones encased in billows of grey satin—such a timid little sparrow, all plain and
unassuming, her shy brown eyes shaded by the wide brim of a leghorn hat, her lace-mitted hand
gingerly taking his as her pale heart-shaped face bloomed into a dusty pink rose, ducking
demurely away every time he proclaimed his love for her.

It was a life intrigued, fascinated, driven mad by fiery green eyes that snapped and sparked like the
Devil's flints, a lily-white face blushing as crimson lips spilled out a startling confession of love
that the selfish cad in him reveled in, all the while he tried to gently reject her, her slender hand
rising up from the folds of green-sprigged muslin to slap him, leaving behind a palmprint as red as
blood, as red as hatred—

As red as the slash of his broken heart.

The minister's words drone in his ears and he stares at the rectangular hole that has been neatly
dug in the ground at his feet, the emerald grass giving up hardpacked clods of red Georgia clay
like the earth has vomited up clots of blood—he cannot seem to stop thinking in terms of that
crimson lifeforce that can spill violently from living veins. Inside that rectangular hole lies a white
pine coffin, a simple wooden shroud for the humble occupant within it, a protective carapace of
smooth bone to shield the frail body inside—his wife, the woman who has always been his
strength and reason for living, even when he felt lost in the darkness that sometimes overtook him,
the woman who has always been his heart—

The woman who has been his very life.

He feels as if his own heart should be buried in that coffin with her—it is only fitting, his living,
beating, bleeding, breaking heart lying next to her cold, still one.

Of course, he had been foolish enough to let his heart be divided, torn between dreams and reality,
split between duty and lust, rended between honor and hunger. One half of his heart belonged to
those placid brown eyes that promised peaceful serenity and acceptance and devotion, her kind
and gentle nature evident in that tender, loving heart of her own that she wore on her sleeve. Her
quiet presence was a comfort against the sharp sting of the world, a shield against the slings and
arrows of life, his refuge when reality intruded harsh and unwanted and needy—she kept them
together...kept him together...her frail body containing a nurturing life-force and slender-steeled
will that was ultimately too large for her fragile bones to carry. She always seemed happy, finding
quiet joy even in the worst of times, never grumbling discontentedly about her lot in life, and
while those brown eyes held their fair share of sorrow, they never held hatred, for it was not in her
gentle nature to hate, her blood incapable of carrying the venom of deceit, of rage, of revenge.

The other half of his heart belonged to those dancing green eyes, their Devil's flints striking and
sparking a fire deep within him, for she promised bold vitality and lushly vivid life, her very being
humming with sharp vibrancy that shouted out to be noticed, her own heart carefully hidden
behind feminine wiles and guiles and charming flirtations that could take his breath away. She was
fascinating, she was aggravating, she was everything he wished he could be, for she possessed the
guts of a million brave men, courageously flouting conventionality and societal mores, throwing
her rebellion in the face of the world as she moved restlessly through life, pursuing it relentlessly
like a cat stalking its prey, forever in search of that happiness she knew existed just beyond the horizon. Those green eyes held depths of sorrow as well, but they also held infernos of hard hatred, of razor-sharp revenge held cupped on the thin blade of her tongue—frightening to behold when he realized how far she would go to cut down anyone who stood in her way and told her she could not have what she wanted.

And his wife knew, for she was not blind, nor was she stupid. She knew he was torn between her, the woman who could satisfy his mind and his soul, and her, the woman who could satisfy his body. She noticed how his drowsy grey eyes suddenly sparked to life and his mouth swelled into a pleased smile at the sight of that female who was the tantalizing forbidden fruit dangling temptingly just out of reach of his hands and his moral code, but not out of his dreams, for she'd heard him call out the other's name as he slept—"Scarlett! Oh, Scarlett!"—the two syllables drenched with desire and hoarse lust as they rasped from between his dry lips, the two syllables the saving grace oasis hidden in the cracked deserts of his soul. She also knew that the other woman was in love with him as well, for it was not something those dancing green eyes and giggling lips and flirtatious heart could hide very well, despite all the wiles and guiles and delicate little lies stitched out in those gossamer spider-silk threads, holding the teardrops of untruths like a black widow's web holding the glint of early-morning dew—so pretty and sparkling if you'd only believe, but so deadly dangerous the moment you did not.

She never accused them, never berated them, never blamed them for the adulterous dreams their hearts committed against her, and she never stopped loving either him or the other woman…

For her love was the soft cloak that hid that silent unconsummated sin, allowing her to forgive them for the unspoken trespasses against her.

She had said that on the last rasps of breath as it fled her body—*I forgive you, Ashley*—and that is the biggest burden the shell of his heart can carry, will carry for all the years he has left on this earth, knowing that he could not love her enough until it was too late, that his desire for another woman hurt her, yet she forgave him for it, for all of it.

He's not sure he can ever forgive himself.

He wishes now he could take it all back, never inflicting the unintended hurts or sorrows upon his loving wife, never been stupidly weak-willed in his longing for another woman when the woman he had was too good for him. He wishes he had one more day, one more hour, one more minute to wrap his arms around his wife's slender, frail body and hug her to him, whispering into her hair that he loved her and only her.

But time is at its most cruellest when it steals those moments away, and he hates himself for letting that all slip between his fingers like sands in an hourglass, not realizing until it was too late that she was always the only one for him—regret is time's biggest thief, reminding us of what we should have and should not have done when it was important, when it mattered.

He dreads it, the meaningless minutes, the vacant hours, the desolate days and hopeless nights that lie ahead of him, reminding him time and time again and with every single beat of his heart and with every breath upon his lips—

*She is not here.*

And that red-clayed earth she is about to be buried in is the ruins of his world—his life—that now lies as dead as the civilizations tucked within those dusty tomes, for while the relics of the past can be pieced together through the shattered bits of ancient pottery, it cannot be fully resurrected because the bones are too brittle, too fragile, too dried up to ever be able to retain the flesh, the meat of those memories he might build upon them. The shards of that shattered golden-dream
world pierce his skin with the glass splinters of truth—no longer will there be any discussions about the enchanting beauty of art or the fancifully woven worlds of literature; no longer will they talk about the rise and fall of empires, of kings, of civilizations dead in the dust; no longer will they share laughing reminisces of those halcyon days that existed before the War ripped it apart; no longer will he hear her quiet, sobbing prayers that begged God to give her another child like she so desperately wanted…

No longer is a steep fall into that black pit of eternal emptiness.

He first slipped against the crumbling edges of that pit the day he heard her cry out from their bedroom and rushed in to find her crumpled in a heap on the floor, blood swiftly staining her white cotton nightgown like water rushing through a sieve—she'd had a miscarriage, God finally granting her what she so desperately wanted, only to cruelly snatch it back again.

And he finally lost his footing and fell headlong into that pit of blackness the night he looked into those loving brown eyes and held that frail, shaking hand in his own, her tender lips whispering, "I love you", as death slowly bled away her life on every breath she took until all that was left in those eyes was nothing but blank shadows that absorbed and reflected back his own black grief.

For a brief moment, as he stares at the pale wood of the casket, he hates her.

Yes, hates her.

Her death feels like a vicious abandonment—she has left him behind for a world he cannot yet enter—her death a betrayal…

And if anyone knows about betrayal, it's him.

But how dare she leave him, how dare she leave their son, how dare she leave her beloved friends and family! How are they...how is HE...supposed to go on without her?

His blond head bows and his usually-proud shoulders slump in the droop of his black mourning clothes—he is frightened to feel so all alone.

Oh yes, he is surrounded by friends and family who share his grief, and he has a little son to comfort him in his loss, but the one person he wishes were there, the one who could soothe his hurting soul with a soft smile and erase his sorrow with a gentle hand against his cheek—

She is in that coffin.

Alone.

Such an empty word.

Such an empty man.

The mantle that weighs heavily upon his shoulders is made up of equal parts sadness and blame, a yoke that he will never be able to escape from, forever tethered to that fragile body that lies in the coffin by the golden chain of guilt, shackled by the silver cuffs of sorrow. It's his fault she is dead, for he should've been man enough to tell her no, remember what Doctor Meade said; he should've been man enough to suppress his carnal desires—but like all the other times he should've been a man, he found he could not be, for she was always the strong one and he…

He was always weak.

So when she came to him that summer night, her thick brown hair lying in a shimmering dark
wave across her bare back, her placid doe eyes gleaming with the hint of unshed tears, her lips trembling as she pleaded with him, her slender hands caressing his face as she begged him to make love to her…

And he gave in.

He gave in because he was tired of sleeping chastely at her side in their marital bed and pretending he didn't mind it; he gave in because he was tired of shutting off his desires and denying their existence; he gave in because he was tired of giving up. And he reveled in the unbridled passion they shared that night, he reveled in the life and love and joy that was reflected back to him from her eyes, and for awhile he was able to shove the memory, the promise of those green eyes from his mind. Then when she announced a month later that she was with child, he tried to be happy, even though he was scared to death, for he knew what a danger it was to her life to carry a baby—a danger that came all too true when she miscarried.

His heart thuds hollowly in his chest, a thrumming ghostly footstep in the cavernous echos of his vacant soul as he looks at the clod of maroon earth held tightly in his hand, opening his fingers a bit and letting some of the dirt drift from his palm, then he raises his eyes to the clear blue sky overhead, the hot Georgia sun beating down on the clustered clump of mourners in all its red-gold fury. He thinks it's obscene that the sun should shine on such a sorrowful day, for it would be more fitting if the heavens wept bitter tears from black raging clouds and the wind howled her name in grey-throated mourning, but it is not to be, and so he vows to hate sunny days forever.

His eyes lock on the other woman from across the open grave and for a moment his heart races with the old beat of anticipation as he stares at her, her pale face hidden behind the veil of black lace that dangles from her fetching little hat (trust her to have the latest in fashionable mourning-wear), her wild black hair caught and tamed demurely into a neat chignon at the base of her slender neck, her dark brows slanted downward in a frown as she chews on her lower lip, her gaze fixed on the gravesite before her. Then her eyes raise and even behind the shadow of mourning he can see their green vividness as they meet his, and with black despair he knows that he could never really love her, that he'd loved only the idea of her, the promise in her that allowed him to relive the past in those eyes and that smile and that wicked little heart, and the one that he truly loved has died...

Along with his heart.

In the cold harsh grip of reality, all dreams die, all dreams must be buried.

Especially his.

He feels a nudge at his side and his sister whispers in his ear, "Ashley, throw the dirt in," and with a twitch he realizes that the minister is finished speaking and all eyes are upon him, awaiting the start of the process that will slowly bury his beloved in that cold, hard earth, hiding her and erasing her existence until she is nothing more than a name etched on a granite headstone and a sweet ghost haunting his heart.

So he throws the dirt onto the coffin with a clumsy toss, the clod hitting the wood in a sound he will remember to his own dying day, echoing in his ears and in his heart and across his broken, lonely soul, her name a whisper of agony from his lips…

Melanie.
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