In Starlight

by Peeta

Summary

There is an old tale that souls lost to us do not fully let go. They live in starlight, come to remind us that while their physical bodies may be gone, they never truly leave us.

Notes

For day Round 7, Day 1 and Day 6 of PiP: Cheeks & Ashes. Death and loss, some sexytimes, but also mentions of toast babies! Introspection galore. (Inspired by the concept of walk-ins.)

In my life, there have been many instances I can recall where I felt anger, regret, and sorrow all at once. The first notable moment was when my father was caught in a mining explosion when I was eleven years old. I still wake up nights, screaming for my father to run from the mines as it crumbles in his wake. Despite them being figments of my imagination, I feel like there was more I could have done in them to save him; and maybe, somehow, by saving him in my nightmares, I could have saved him in real life.

But I know that’s just a fantasy. Nothing more than the night-time delusions that trap me until Prim shakes me awake, sweat pouring down my face.

The second instance is the irrational state my mother was left in after the death of my father. At first, I was so angry at her for leaving me and Prim alone to fend for ourselves. I would scream and cry for her to wake up, to shake herself out of it, but no matter how many times I grabbed her
hands and tried to pull her back to me, she never heard me. It took several years until the
depression faded from her eyes, and still to this day, I sometimes hear or see that depression
creeping back in when something reminds her of him. In that way, I regret not being able to
understand her, though I also think it was a way for her to escape the reality of our situation, so I
still feel so angry with her for abandoning us.

The third was the day I almost died in the rain, clinging tightly to my sister’s baby clothes. I was
trying so hard to keep us alive, to find any means of helping us survive. When the rain started
falling and I fell into the mud, Prim’s baby clothes all but ruined, I almost gave in to the same
depression that had gripped my mother. I was so resigned to death that day, that I almost didn’t
notice the baker’s boy watching me from his family’s bakery. He did something I both appreciate
and hate: he saved my life and gave me a sense of hope. But at what cost? I know he took the
brunt of his mean mother’s wrath by the bruises dotting his face and arms for a week following. I
also hated, hated being indebted to anyone, and here I was, holding tightly to a loaf of burnt bread
that managed to save my family for one more day and left its invisible mark on my soul.

The fourth was the moment I heard my sister’s name slip from Effie’s brightly painted lips. I
thought, No, it isn’t possible; her name is only in once! But there it was, her name on that damned
slip of paper. Before the Peacekeepers could come and drag Prim away, I shouted out that I would
volunteer. I’m not angry or regretful at having done that; it’s the fact that her name was called at
all, that the Capitol, in its infinite cruelty, would allow children like my sister to be dragged into a
vicious, mindless slaughter like the Hunger Games. That’s what made me hate them forever. I’d
already thought the Capitol a beast with no heart, but this was something that I could never
overcome. I couldn’t live with knowing that Primrose would be a victim. And still, I felt the
sorrow that comes with knowing one’s impending death is coming. Until I promised her I would
win. It was only then that I knew I would come out alive, if only to keep her alive in the future.

From that point, there have been so many other instances. I could count them all and tell you each
story, but I feel like I’d be letting myself wallow in them if I try to do that. Instead, maybe you can
see the rest of the story unfold for yourself, and then you might understand how it feels.

District 13 didn’t look how I’d expected it to. After the horror of the Hunger Games and the
opulence of the Capitol, I’m really not sure what I expected — but people in plain uniforms, with
rationed food and an underground dwelling that was reminiscent of a hollowed out cave?

Maybe the stories about this place’s destruction struck me much deeper than I’d ever imagined. If I
took the time to really think about it, this was exactly what I was hoping it would be.

But I couldn’t think about that. With my arms wrapped firmly around my knees and my head
swimming with all sorts of worst case scenarios, all I could think about was how soon it would
come crashing down all around me. Here, locked away in a place that had unnatural lights and the
hustle and bustle of a military lifestyle, I felt that regret wash over me again.

I don’t remember much of those early days in District 13. Prim and Mom were there to help me
through it, though. Especially Prim. She was so grown up, forced to age beyond her years.

“Come on Katniss, you have to eat something. Remember back home, when we didn’t have
anything to fill our stomachs? How you had to hunt for us?”

She used guilt like a pro. So I ate, washing down the tasteless food with water that had a strong
chemical smell to it. They said it was to purify it, because no one went up often enough to get
fresh water from the creeks running through the barren land.

It got better, little by little.

And then Peeta’s face came on the screens, and I wasn’t sure which way was up or down.

Prim was there again, one of the few people who didn’t believe he’d turned on us. She could see how, each time his face was broadcast to send out Snow’s message, there were deeper lines and darker spots under his eyes.

At night I dreamt of him, whole and perfect again, his chest rising and falling steadily beneath my ear as we comforted each other.

When I woke up sobbing like a baby because the dream wasn’t real, it was Prim who came to keep me company. She sat beside me, stroking my hair like a mother would a child. She was so grown up. I still couldn’t wrap my head around how much she’d had to suffer, what she’d gone through while I was stuck in the Games with Peeta and the others.

“Hush, Katniss. It’s just a dream,” she would whisper in my ear. I would cling to her and murmur the images that flooded my sleeping mind. I told her about my nightmares in the dark, where I couldn’t look up and see the sadness that was probably reflecting in her eyes.

Coin had work for me to do. Plutarch and his camera crew, Cressida, Messalla, Castor, Pollux. Even Boggs and Mitchell, whom I’d gotten sort of close to when we trained as soon as I was well enough. They all became something of a comfort to me because of how they’d come to District 13. They all suffered in some way. Some came from the Capitol, others were 13-born. What mattered was that, with their help, with Prim’s help and guidance, I was able to come back to a semblance of myself.

One day, Gale and Finnick were gearing up to go on a mission. I pleaded with them to let me come, but Coin wouldn’t hear of it. She needed me in 13, ready to make more of those propos while the rescue team snuck into the Capitol’s strongholds.

It was nightfall when the mission happened. I’m not sure what I expected them to bring back, but when I saw Peeta sitting there on the hospital bed, I didn’t think, I just ran to him.

His hands wrapped around my throat made me think about that regret again. My life didn’t flash before my eyes, but all of my negative emotions did. That regret, sorrow, anger (not at Peeta, at Snow), hopelessness. I thought about never seeing Prim again right before I lost consciousness to the sounds of shouting.

And there was Prim when I woke up, tending to my lost and confused expression with a smile and reassurances that I was still alive, that he was okay, but heavily sedated. She told me about what the Capitol did, something about tracker jacker venom and mind control. Whatever else she said was washed away by the steady stream of white noise in my ears. I felt like I disappeared after that, only looking back in when I could stand to deal with what my life had become.

I remember snatches of things that happened: Finnick talking to me, his and Annie’s wedding, seeing Peeta through glass as he was restrained and struggling, flashes of Delly’s hair as she came and went, Mom trying to coax me from my stupor, and of course there was Prim like always.

“You’ll make it through this,” she whispered to me as she dropped her forehead to mine. Her fingers ran through my tangled hair in soothing strokes.
Another mission was happening, only this time, I was on the strike team and so was Peeta. It’d been so long since I’d talked to him. I think maybe I resented him for a while. He couldn’t know how much I wanted to take that back, to comfort him the way I know he’d do for me if he could. But what’s done is done.

I find myself questioning the things that happened during that mission sometimes. Did Peeta lash out at Mitchell and cause his death? Did Finnick’s throat get torn right out in front of me while I screamed helplessly? Gale… did he set those bombs on the Capitol?

Gale. The bombs…

That’s when things become absolutely clear.

Primrose was only trying to help. She wanted to get the children out of Snow’s mansion when it was safe from the bombs. Her face looked up at me, just like I remember Finnick’s the moment he was dying. There was a look there, something like terror when she realised, when we both realised, that the first bomb was only the beginning.

Back in District 12, it feels like a place that’s frozen in time. Much of the district was ruined by bombs, and yet, the feel of the place is still the same. Victor’s Village was left relatively unscathed, though most of the other parts of the district weren’t so lucky. The Seam is practically in ruins, as is much of the Merchant quarter. The ash from still-burning fires that coats almost every surface reminds me of the coal dust that once clung to each nook and cranny in 12.

I tried so hard to forget everything that had happened in prior months, even years since the death of my father. Since the moment I started to realise that real life was something only fools suffered.

Did that make me a fool, then? I’d allowed myself to be a pawn of some child’s game, where children were the sacrifices. When I thought that was over, my own sister had to be sacrificed so that the world would keep turning.

It was hard, living day in and day out knowing that Prim was gone. When Peeta returned, when his hands were patting the dark soil around those yellow flowers, I couldn’t stand being alone with my thoughts anymore. I ran to the meadow and stayed there overnight, shivering from the dewy cold that clung to me, but somewhat content for the first time in what felt like a very long time.

Haymitch was back too. The honking of his geese helped to remind me that life goes on. Even Peeta, whose mind was turned inside out and back again, was always there on the outskirts, waiting for a moment when I could look him in the eye and welcome him into my house. We always ate in silence when he brought the smells of fresh bread over. His knuckles turned white each time he had to grip onto the back of a chair, but they, too, reminded me that he was fighting what the Capitol did to him and over time, the episodes became less and less.

Before I knew it, five years had flown by. The bakery and many other Merchant buildings were rebuilt, with Peeta and Haymitch, oddly enough, spearheading much of the renovations. It was good for them both to bond over something again, to take control of their broken lives and help build something new. Thom and some of the other ex-miners helped to build 12 back up again, even took jobs in some of the shops. Delly was back and running the cobbler shop almost as well as her parents. Gale, though… he stayed on in 2, where the resistance had set up their militia and
where he could travel to the Capitol and back. Last I’d heard, he attended a small memorial for the Undersees and helped erect a small monument dedicated to District 12’s lost souls where he lives now. It was sort of comforting to know that he was moving on, even though any prolonged thoughts about him still made my stomach twist in knots.

One night, Peeta came up to my room and sat on the edge of my bed. We’d long ago settled into a sort of routine: he would sleep at my house and bake fresh bread in my kitchen in the mornings. To “keep practising his baking skills”, he’d told me with a smile. Most of his baking supplies mingled with mine by the time year two rolled around.

“Katniss?” he asked softly, his hand sitting between us on the bed. I had my back to the headboard, a hand idly running through my hair before I braided it up for the night.

“Hmm?” I hummed, my eyes closed.

“Have you thought about…?” He didn’t have to say the rest.

We’d discussed having a Toasting before. Although we were as good as married now, we still hadn’t… well, I couldn’t be intimate. I knew he wanted to cross that last barrier between us, but he never pushed. Only occasionally alluded to how nice it would be to see more families settling into District 12.

“I don’t know, Peeta,” I murmured under my breath. My eyes slowly opened and settled on his hand, which was drawing nonsensical patterns in the bedspread.

“Maybe for now, we can just…” But I didn’t have to finish my sentence, either. He looked up and smiled as my hand reached across the bed to grasp his. The candle lights were blown out before our lips met in a long, slow kiss. Our clothes gradually fell to the floor, one by one, but we didn’t breach that final barrier just yet. I still hadn’t gotten rid of my final demons, and neither did he.

Nighttime was when the demons plagued us the worst. I’d long ago learned how to tell when Peeta was having a nightmare. His body would go stiff as a board, and barely a whimper would pass through his lips. I’d told him before to let me know when he had one, but he responded with: “It doesn’t really matter after the fact. Just waking up and feeling you next to me is enough.”

My body’s response to nightmares was the complete opposite. I would thrash and scream, caught up in such physical pain that Peeta could barely shake me awake before I lashed out at him in my horror-addled sleep.

Most of the time, it was Prim’s innocent, yet too matured face that would be staring up at me amidst the flames engulfing her. She tried to scream, only to have her mouth sealed by the heat and smoke that permeated her lungs. I would give anything to let go of these images.

Those nights, I would sit up sharply after Peeta managed to wake me up, panting as though I’d run a marathon. Eyes wide and wild, I would dart around looking for signs of Prim, only to feel crushing sorrow when I realised I was very much awake and she was no longer with me. In those moments, I wanted to die to be with her. He’d never let me, just like he did when he took the Nightlock pill away. Sometimes I would yell at him, cursing him out for forcing me to stay in a world where Prim no longer existed. Where nothing waited for me but more pain, more despair at the losses I’ve suffered.
On one such night, ten years after the rebellion, Peeta held my face between his hands and forced me to look him in the eye.

“I’m here, Katniss. So is your mother, and Haymitch. We’re here with you and we aren’t going to leave, do you understand me?”

Only then could I focus on the gold band gleaming in the low starlight, sitting comfortably on his left ring finger. My breathing evened out and I leaned forward, his arms instinctively wrapping around me as he let me cry out my sorrows into his chest.

We still hadn’t been fully intimate, despite having our Toasting the year before. I still couldn’t let go.

Morning came like so many others before it. We would have breakfast at our kitchen table, hands connected in some way, whether our fingers were entwined or his were running along the backs of my knuckles.

Fifteen long years of pain had been enough to mellow both of us out. He still smiled at me like I was the sunshine in his world, whereas I finally managed to let him into my world as fully as I could. At night, we would hold each other and caress one another lovingly, our clothes dotting the bed like years before. We gave more of each other than we had before, because despite our demons constantly plaguing us, I came to realise that he wouldn’t be leaving any time soon. Peeta had been beside me for so long, just waiting for me, giving me time and space whenever I needed it. At 32, I was able to cherish that like I’d never been able to before.

That night, we went to bed utterly exhausted. He had been at the bakery all day, while I resumed my hunting and working at the rebuilt Hob during the days. Greasy Sae was still in business, though it was newly renamed Sae & Mellark as she grew older and less able to work. Besides, the Hob was no longer a black market, running entirely legally under the provisions of the new local government. What meat I brought into the Hob, I bartered for various knick-knacks and supplies with the locals. Sometimes money would pass our hands, but more often than not, I kept to the old tradition of trading to keep the District 12 most of us remembered fresh and alive.

Prim came to me again in my dreams. When they were on the verge of turning nightmarish, the flames suddenly dissipated and she looked happy instead of terrified. I’m not sure what caused this turn of events, but in my dream, I ran to her and hugged her tight, our tears mingling like a stream rejoining the lake after years apart.

“I’m still here with you, Katniss,” she whispered into my ear.

I tried to speak back to her, to tell her how much I missed her, but as soon as she spoke, she was nothing but smoke in my hands. I called for her in the vast, borderless space, only to hear my echo come back to me. Maybe this was a new nightmare I had to endure.

Like always, Peeta woke me up, but I hadn’t been thrashing around this time.

“You were whimpering and crying so softly, I thought maybe I’d imagined it,” he told me. His hands soothed my fevered skin as I shut my eyes to banish the empty space still lingering in my mind.
“She came to me, and then disappeared too quickly,” I returned.

Sighing as his hands worked the stiff knots out of my shoulders, Peeta pressed a kiss to my neck and let his chin rest there.

“At least she still comes to you. Take comfort in that?”

I was shaking my head before I could stop myself. “Why doesn’t she just stay?” I asked, desperation tingeing my words.

His fingers lessened their ministrations as his breath slowly fanned out across my ear. The familiar warmth and smell of him managed to soothe me even more than his massages.

“Perhaps you aren’t ready for her to, or she’s waiting for something.”

I let that thought sink in for a moment. The quiet of the room felt different tonight, as though it, too, was waiting for something.

“I stopped taking my monthly shot.”

The hitch of his breath and sudden absence of motion behind me told me that he was shocked, to say the least. I didn’t think I would confess that to him, nor that I would ever stop the birth control the Capitol still offered me. Something about stopping felt right, though, cemented by this strange new dream of my sister. I thought that maybe I knew what she was waiting for.

“Did you?” Peeta asked casually, perhaps hoping that I wouldn’t notice how subdued his voice had become.

Turning in my spot, I locked eyes with him and felt a smile grace my lips.

“I did. Maybe that’s what she’s waiting for. You’ve been asking for so long… maybe that’s what she wants. For me to stop denying ourselves the chance to move on. I’m not sure I can ever stop feeling this regret, but I’m willing to try.”

His eyes flitted between mine, his tongue wetting his lips as though he was thinking of something to say to that. Instead, he shook his head and leaned forward, his wet mouth meeting mine for a kiss that would drag on all night.

Like other nights we’d done this, our hands shed our clothes around the bed, until Peeta stopped to look me up and down with the same awe I always noticed in his gaze. My smile felt real this time, as I beckoned him closer with hands clutched at his bare thighs and lips poised above his collarbones. He pulled me into his lap between kisses, his breath dancing along the skin of my neck as it trailed the open kisses he left behind like little prayers.

Although I’d never been entirely comfortable with my body, tonight I let my breasts push against his chest, revelling in the heat of his body and the faint scratchiness of the sensation. He rubbed himself along my front and found all of my ticklish spots, rending the air around us with muffled giggles and snorts I couldn’t withhold. It’d been far too long since I’d felt this carefree. Leave it to Peeta to make me feel like I could let go.

Our kisses morphed into something much deeper and more meaningful the closer we pressed together. His hands caressed my lower back and over my behind, pushing my hips flush against
his so that I could feel every ridge and valley surrounding his erection. We’d been together like this plenty of times, but what felt different this time was the knowledge that I willingly plunged headfirst into the unknown. He wanted this for so long, that he couldn’t contain his excitement as he rolled into my thigh over and over again.

Like teenagers experiencing this for the first time, he ducked his head into my neck and smiled in embarrassment over his eagerness.

“Sorry, I can’t help it,” he muttered, to which I smiled and wrapped my fingers around his length. The movements of his hips stuttered, so I squeezed, causing him to push into my hand.

“It’s okay, I know you want to. Just go,” I said as I lifted myself above him. He pulled his head back until it was resting flush against the pillow.

“I love you,” passed his lips in a soft whisper.

As I held his erection steady, I stroked the hair from his eyes with my free hand, resting the palm along his cheek. My ring caught the starlight and I felt a pleasant little twist in my stomach. “Me too,” I told him just as softly before lowering myself to engulf him with my whole body.

Entering into motherhood was not something I imagined myself doing, let alone actually enjoying. After the birth of my daughter, I felt the breath I’d held for a long time slowly start to release. There was still terror in my veins, but it was slowly leaking out to be washed away like poison from my body.

Nights were a little easier to bear once I was pregnant with my son. His conception took far less convincing on Peeta’s part. Our children would be four years apart, just like my sister and I had been, as though it was divinely planned that way to remind me that she’s still with us.

During one of those nights close to my due date, she came back to my dreams and smiled as though we hadn’t seen each other in years. Which, truthfully, was something I was not looking forward to because I was so scared of the nightmares. She kept smiling as she approached me, her hand up in a sign of peace.

“I missed you, big sister,” she told me as she reached me, arms pulling me into a hug that I fell into much too easily.

Unlike the last time she appeared in my dream, she didn’t disappear as soon as I returned the hug. Her voice spoke whispered nothings into my ear, calming and soothing me.

“This time, I’m staying with you forever.”

Her hands continued to run soothingly across my back, much like she’d done in District 13 when the pain was too great.

My dream melted into a blissful state of sleep I’d missed for as long as I could remember. Peeta woke up with me at dawn so we could watch the sunrise from the meadow. He didn’t need to ask me anything, he simply felt my calm through my skin as he laced his fingers through mine.

When my second labour took hold of my body, I found it much easier to bear down with the contractions. My mother had returned from 4 to help me with the birth, just as she had for my
daughter. All of my family was with me in that room, even little Willow who clung to her father’s arm with wide eyes and babbling a mile a minute about what was happening to mommy.

Rye entered the world not long into a morning in April, the first day of spring. I felt the tears streaming down my cheeks as I leaned back into the warm tub of water, exhausted from pushing so hard for twelve hours. His wrinkled little face smoothed out when he was set into my arms, not a single scream passing through his little mouth but a smile as wide as could be gracing his face, instead. I could already see the little tufts of gold sprinkling his head.

The moment we locked eyes, his bright blue like his father’s and round with curiosity, I felt my heart stop for a moment. The image of Prim from my last dream of her came back to me full-force, her smile and the feeling she instilled in me reflected back in my son’s face. That’s when I knew that while she was physically gone, her soul had found its way back to me.

It was at that moment that I felt all of my anger, the regret I’ve felt for so long, and my sorrow over my losses slipping away. She gave me the closure that I desperately needed.

Without the sacrifice of Prim’s soul, I’m not sure I ever would have come back to myself and moved on.

Years later, although I still mourn her young and innocent soul, I remember how wise she became, how gentle and loving she was. I think about how happy she would be to welcome her niece and nephew into her arms.

“Mama, tell me about Auntie Prim,” Willow says with wide, inquisitive eyes.

I smile at her and push some stray wisps of raven hair behind her ear.

“There’s so much to tell you, baby. She was kind, beautiful, and so loving. She had hair of spun gold, eyes of sky blue, and a smile that could light up a room.”

As my daughter snuggles up in bed, as Rye comes toddling over to climb atop my knees and settle into my arms, they both look up at me while I tell them about my sister. Peeta stands at the doorway behind me, and unbeknownst to me, he has the most understanding, warmest smile on his lips, because he remembers her exactly as I’m describing. It was his hand that immortalised Primrose on paper. Because of her, we were able to overcome our demons and move forward. I was still afraid to live my life to the fullest when the memory of my dead sister lingered at the back of my mind, so she came and told me it was okay to move on.

Ever since then, I’ve lived entirely in the moment. My children will always know what a kind, giving person Prim was, and Peeta and I will be forever grateful that such a beautiful soul had entered into our lives.

The meadow around our house is her soul’s eternal resting place, surrounded by flowers as bright as she was.

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