On the Beach

by non_canonical

Summary

Leo thinks that they're going to be reunited, the three of them back together again. He tends to forget that his friend is a mass murderer.

Notes

*Being Human* belongs to Toby Whithouse and the BBC. Title stolen from Nevil Shute.

Leo slips lower in his deckchair, and prods at a little pink shell with one bare toe. Nat King Cole croons softly from the portable radio; gulls shriek and wheel out over the water. The breeze wafts a few wisps of cloud across the blazing sky, and Leo tilts his face up into the sun's kiss. He closes his eyes. It's the sort of day that makes a man glad to be – well, glad to be here. There's only one thing missing, and here she is – he catches the shush of feet in the sand – Pearl, bringing the ice cream. The footsteps stop; a shadow steals Leo's sun. He opens his eyes and squints up at a familiar silhouette – familiar, but not who he was expecting.

"Hal!" Leo shoots to his feet, grabbing the man by the shoulders – and he feels real enough. "It is you."

But Leo peers into the man's face, not trusting his eyes, and the corner of Hal's mouth lifts into that lopsided smile. Then Hal chokes out his name, and Leo would know that voice anywhere. He's grinning like a madman, but it doesn't matter: Hal's there, right there in front of him, and he's grinning too.
"It's good to see you," Leo laughs. But his laughter curdles. "Oh Hal, I'm so sorry. If you're here, that means you're …" But Hal is still smiling, and Leo shakes his head at the sheer absurdity of it: nothing can hurt them any more. "What happened to you?" he asks.

"It's a long story," Hal tells him.

"We have time."

They have nothing but time, now, and Leo sinks back into his chair. Hal's smile falters. His fingers twitch – not quite tapping out a pattern, but not quite still – and Leo was hoping he'd have left all that behind. Hal takes a step towards the other chair, then twists to stare off down the beach, back the way he came.

"Sit down," Leo chides fondly, and only Hal could manage to look so stiff and uncomfortable sitting in a deckchair.

"You look" – Hal's eyes flick over him and settle on his face – "You look the same." He makes it sound as though he expected something different.

"So do you," Leo chuckles. "But you always did."

Hal shakes his head. "It's been a long time," he says.

"Has it?" Leo shrugs. "It's not important – you're here now."

"Yes, I am." Hal's smile is gone now, leaving no trace of where it had been. "I want to be sure that you're all right. The two of you – are you happy?"

"I feel like a young man again," Leo tells him. "And Pearl … well, you can see for yourself. She'll be back soon." There's no sign of her yet, and maybe she ought to hurry: dark clouds are gathering on the horizon.

It's such a lovely day, and Leo doesn't want to spoil it. But it's stayed with him, that last image of the other man blinking back tears as Leo walked away, abandoning his best friend to the mercy of strangers.

"How have you been?" he asks, but surely Hal wouldn't be here if he blamed him for that.

Hal ignores him and turns the radio up. "Remember this?" he asks. "Louis Armstrong. I never understood why you liked this song. Did you ever actually listen to the words? 'Give your heart and soul to me.'" Five hundred years old – and who knows how many more have passed since they last met – and who knows how many more have passed since they last met – and sometimes his friend still acts like a child.

Leo's patient. He's learnt to be, living with Hal and Pearl. But this is something that he needs to know, the one thing that's been troubling him. Unfinished business, even if it wasn't enough to anchor him to the world of the living, even if it proved weaker than the lure of leaving with Pearl.

"How are you?" Leo presses.

"I'm –" Hal closes his eyes and, for the first time since Leo has known him, he looks like a man at peace with himself. "I'm not hungry any more."

Leo breathes. He breathes out fifty-five years of fear, of doubt, of second-hand pain, and when he breathes in it feels like he's filling his lungs with pure sunshine. It doesn't matter that those clouds are looming closer: it's going to take more than a little rain to dampen the warm glow in his chest. But Hal is staring at the growing darkness, and Leo doesn't like the set of his mouth or the way his
nostrils flare. Hal scrambles to his feet.

"It will pass," Leo says, but Hal shakes his head.

"Tell Pearl I was here," he says.

"Where are you going?" Leo demands of Hal's retreating back.

Hal stops. He doesn't answer, just frowns into the distance where the horizon has been obliterated by a wall of blackness. The storm is boiling up fast now – it isn't natural, the speed, the violence, with which it rushes towards them – and the look on Hal's face sets the hairs prickling at the back of Leo's neck.

"I shouldn't have come here," Hal snaps, but Leo clutches at his arm.

"What is it?" Leo has to raise his voice against the howling of the wind, but not a grain of sand – not a hair on Hal's head – so much as stirs.

"It's what I deserve."

"Then we'll face it together," Leo tells him, "just like the old days."

"Not this time," Hal says. He eases Leo's fingers loose and squeezes them between his own. Then he lets Leo go.

Leo hurries behind him for the first few steps, but maybe this is how things have to be. Maybe this is the only way his friend can finally find peace. He stumbles to a halt.

"Will you come back?" Leo calls after him.

"I don't know." Hal's voice cracks; his head droops. His eyes are wet but his mouth quivers into a smile. "If I can," he promises.

Then Hal squares his shoulders and turns to face what's waiting for him. Leo's hand spasms; his whole body aches to run after the other man, to pull him back. But it won't do any good, so he stands and watches his friend walk away, a dwindling figure against the swelling fury of the storm. The wind shrieks with a thousand voices. The figure fades and blurs, and is swallowed by the darkness.

The sudden silence rings in Leo's ears.

"They'd only gone and run out of strawberry." It's Pearl – oblivious, radiant, irritated – an ice cream in each hand. "I got you rum and raisin instead."

Leo turns his head away. The clouds are gone, leaving behind nothing but an empty expanse of sand.

"Well, go on then. Eat it before it melts."

Leo's hands are locked into fists, and the joints creak as he unclenches his fingers and takes the ice cream cone. He lifts it to his mouth and licks, but the stuff seems to have lost its savour and the only thing he feels is the cold.

"What's the matter?" Pearl asks. "Why are you crying?" She brushes at the wetness on his cheeks, but the sun and the breeze are already drying his tears.

"We must have hope," Leo tells her, "that he can be saved."
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