

Sarah Johnson

### Past and Future Wednesdays at the Café

I was 22 when I almost killed myself. I chose a cold and early Wednesday morning – 6:45 AM to be exact, atop the bridge in my local park. I held my grandmother’s old pocket watch necklace. It had a clock face on one side, and an insert for a photo on the other. I didn’t know anyone worth putting on that side though. Never have. I thought I never would. But its time was always right, even as I looked at it from around my neck for the last time.

I knew this desire to end it all was all just a disease of the mind, but my mind didn’t know that, and so it was time to let it all go.

But that was when I first met him.

“Why are you doing that?” he asked, behind me, my foot already propped up on the bridge’s railing, ready to propel over it.

A man, who appeared to be in his mid-thirties, was staring blankly at me, his hands in his pockets. His blonde hair was blowing in the wind, and his face had a ghost of a smile. He waited for me to answer.

“Am I that obvious?” I slumped my shoulders, a tear escaping my eye.

He then gave a soft smile and kept looking into the river.

“I can answer with a ‘yes,’ but the problem is, I have no idea *why*.” He said, now frowning.

He looked back up at me.

“Well, to be honest, I don’t really think it’s much of your business, Sir.” I said sternly, almost rudely.

“For someone who is so ready to leave this world, you don’t seem to be afraid to face it, with that attitude.”

“Everyone sees this world so black and white, no one takes the time to see that people cannot be defined by one color. Every single person in my life has no clue as to what I’m actually like. What I’m actually going through.”

“Fair enough. So. I’m Aaron.” He casually brought up.

“Hi Aaron, I’m Leona. Nice to meet you, but I think it’s time to carry on with our day though, so if you don’t mind?”

I stared off into the open air.

“Maybe, but I do know a nice café nearby, where you can tell me all about why you’re standing on this bridge – just for a quick chat.”

He asked so innocently. He was clearly about 10 years older than me, but I went to coffee with him. And we just...talked.

We met at the same café every Wednesday from there on out for the next few months. We talked about me – just me, and what I was feeling, what I was going through.

He helped me get ready for job interviews and gave me pep talks before them, he let me drone on and on about my days, he bought me my coffee when I was short some weeks, and he let us sit in silence when some days were just worse than others.

He was simply a man who found me and decided he should intervene. I had the initial suspicion he had wanted more from me than this platonic friendship – more than this mentoring and this therapy session he offered weekly – for nothing in return.

But I was shocked to find it was *I* instead who slowly wanted more from him – more than just a nice smile and a good pick me up every Wednesday. I wanted to know if he could permanently cure me with, perhaps, a steady *real* relationship. He always told me life was worth it; that I had no idea what the future held. That someday I could fill that other side of my grandmother’s pocket watch with a family. I’d always close it in front of him, shaking my head in denial.

I finally got the courage after half a year to ask him if he felt the same way about me, to finally be honest with him about my harboring feelings – to bring up what was clearly actually happening between us.

“No, I’m too old for you, Leona.” He answered quickly, with a smile, shaking his head.

“What does that even mean? You clearly have been seen with me while you’re a, what – a 34-year-old?”

“35.”

“And I’m 22. You’ve known that this whole time, and you’re still seeing me...”

“Yes. As a friendly friend. As a helping hand.” He said so matter-of-factly, almost condescendingly.

I frowned.

“I don’t see how you couldn’t have ever thought something more...or...” I started to tear up for some stupid reason.

What was I thinking? This man was older, he tricked me – I wasn’t the type to fall for this, to get swept up in this sort of thing.

“I can’t...see, back home, I’ve got someone...”

“What?” I asked abruptly, “A girlfriend?”

The more we spoke, the more I realized I knew nothing about him – that this all shouldn’t have been coming as a shock.

“No. A wife.”

I placed my face in my hands.

“A wife. And you never told me this because...” I could feel tears start to brim my eyelids, embarrassment flooding my cheeks.

“Because I’m here to help you. Not to tell you about my life, or to tell you how I feel.”

I spent the rest of the evening avoiding his eye contact, nearly crying. He told me not to let this lead me back to where I was when I had met him. I told him to go back to his wife. This made him look confused and sad. He replied with a simple “Okay.”

He didn’t show up for our next Wednesday meeting, something he had never missed for the entire time we had had them.

And he didn’t come to the next one either. I finally called his number he had given me for emergencies, and he answered right away.

“I’ll be in the café in 10 minutes, meet me there,” He agreed.

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I stared at him across from our normal table in the café.

"I keep wanting to tell you that you're going to meet someone one day, that I can't interfere with you, that I can't leave my wife, because it would ruin your future with your husband," His hands were shaking as he held his coffee mug.

He spoke quickly, as if this was all a secret. Like he was telling me a prophecy.

"You're speaking like a lunatic – I know because I am one. You're acting like you know things, like what could happen one day, is important right now...we need to talk about right now, and how you lied to me..." I began.

"I'm speaking as if I know things, because I *do* know things," He said quickly, again.

"What does that even mean?"

"It means I know who you're husband is, because I am your husband."

I stared at him silently, playing over in my head what he actually said. It takes a crazy person to even listen to another a crazy person, and even more so one to believe them, so I only squinted my eyes.

"Are you suggesting you're my husband from the future?"

He nodded, looking relieved.

"And...I'm supposed to believe you, because?" I nearly laughed.

"Because I can tell you already do. I came to stop you – to save you from jumping over the bridge. To make sure I'd have a wife to marry – to make sure you would live."

I only stared. Suddenly he pulled out something from his pocket. It was my grandmother's pocket watch, older and rustier looking. I gasped, as he cracked it open.

The watch was still ticking, almost in sync with the one around my neck. However, on the other side of this one, was an inserted photo. It was of a younger looking Aaron. Next to him was an older-looking me, embracing him lovingly.

"For extra proof – that I was right that someday you'd meet the one. He just happens to be me."

My heart lifted in elation; my happy ending staring me in the face, my future within reach for the first time ever. I grinned from ear to ear.

"So the wife at home...is me? I sent you here?" I slowly realized, grinning even wider.

"Quite the opposite. You told me I had traveled back to save you – but it was my decision to come back. You didn't want me to."

"Why not?"

He got shifty, "Because I'm not returning to you in the future."

"And why not?" I felt my heart rate quicken, my shoulders tensing.

"Because 'future you', told me that you had witnessed...well, you knew that I would die here."

It took a while for him to calm me down, and for myself to even figure out how to deal with this. Aaron told me I had to still send him back once I married him – that I couldn't change the plan. The plan to save me.

"How can I? You...you can never...you shouldn't have come back!"

"I had to. You'd be dead right now if I didn't."

“So you came back...to sacrifice yourself for me? Why?!”

He only smiled.

“You’re my wife. What did you expect? Your future self asked me the same question every day I prepared to come back here.”

“Because she and I are both right – you shouldn’t...my life isn’t worth more than yours.”

“We could argue about that all day, but it’s even more than that, if possible. I’m saving you, and I’m saving the chance to even meet you – to spend 10 years of marriage together. I’m giving my life up, for all that. It’s worth it.”

I kicked and screamed and told him he was wrong. But he never faltered.

“Leona, you must promise me. You must promise me that after we’ve met, after we’ve married – that you’ll tell me the truth – that you won’t keep me from going back – that you’ll tell me what I must do. To save you – to save us.”

I could only shake my head. I wept for weeks. He would call me every day, to make sure I was still stable and eating – but I was spiraling back to where I was that day on the bridge. Only this time, I knew someone wasn’t going to save me. That person already had, and I had lost him before I even had had him.

Aaron kept saying over and over, that we still had so much time together. But I had fallen for this future Aaron – I didn’t want to lose him now. He said I would meet him again someday. I’d just have to go through twenty-something-year-old Aaron first.

I told him yes, *I* still had time with him, but his was running short. He told me not to think of it like that – but how could I not?

None of this pleased me, but I continued to meet him at our café, to talk over the future, to talk over what I must one day tell him. That I’d have to bring him the future pocket watch with our photo in it, to prove to him I was telling him the truth. It was all so complicated and all so much for me to handle.

One day we were walking down the street after our café meeting – it was dark and quiet. He held my hand, ensuring me that one day we’d be able to start a relationship, I’d just have to wait to meet him. That it was all worth it.

He grew sad and quiet, like the night. Suddenly a man appeared out of an alleyway, ready to mug us, it seemed. He lunged towards us, but Aaron threw himself in front of me, the gun going off at the same time. The man grabbed my purse and ran. Aaron lay down in front of me, bleeding all over the floor, all over my clothes.

I was screeching, partly traumatized, and partly ready for this moment. He had been too.

“Promise me, Leona” were his last words – with a smile.

I promised him.

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Now we are sitting across from each other, in the café. 23-year-old Aaron is intently reading the menu, scrunching his nose, stealing flirty glances at me.

“I’ve never heard of this place before – you said it was your favorite?” he asks, unaware.

I nod with a small smile. His blonde hair is fuller, his body less aged.

I dread each day, as he grows older, even if only by 24 hours. Each one ticks by, reminding me that with the dawn of each new morning, he is one step closer to becoming the Aaron I first met. The Aaron I promised to send back to his death. The Aaron I made a *promise* to.

"I think I like this place," He later tells me after our second date, as we walk out of the café, hand in hand, like we did right before he died.

"Me too," I smile, ready to keep it all from him.

I can so easily keep my grandmother's watches, both my past and future one, hidden in my dresser. I can easily never send him back – he'd never have to know.

I'm caught between being selfish and being very selfish. Either way, we both win and we both lose. The time isn't here yet. We have only just met. But soon, I'll show him the watch. I promised I would. And sometimes, it's my selfishness that has me holding on to the promise. In my mind, sometimes the only thing keeping me sane is my past self.

I keep promising her to hold on. That one day I'm sending someone back to her. Her smile once she sees him is sometimes all that keeps me going. She deserves Aaron. Aaron deserves her.