

SHORT STORY: TAKE THIS PHOTOGRAPH FOR ME BY BILLY BOWDEN

Summary: This story is actually the story of my recent engagement. The proposal took place in Ogunquit, Maine. My fiancée's parents had chosen this place as their destination for Memorial Day Weekend getaway for several years. The first time that I went to Ogunquit with my now fiancée our relationship was taking a sharp turn because of the requirements of Graduate School that she was struggling with. She was having a tough time balancing a relationship and finding herself and our vacation to Maine together at this point of our relationship was really what brought us together for life. This story comes days after the proposal when things are starting to finally quiet down a bit and I have had the time to write.

Take this photograph for me, Ogunquit by the sea the place where my heart melts and the sun sings. Every time I hear its name I think, and every time I think something moves inward towards me.

I got down on one knee, sweating, this moment of life. Nothing but pure love, love spent over weeks and adoring love, love that never wanted to go away. Our family drank in the sunsets, for some of them it was the first time. How long did we talk about it? We thought, then we just smiled—pushing those negative tensions away. Projecting our visions in the future I remembered our past, a lifetime was already created here, the first time you asked me. You had me at hello of course, but then I wasn't sure. Wasn't sure if love was dispersed. We grappled with something like tension for a while, and of course that tension was shared. It wasn't the cool darkness of apathy, it wasn't the dark shade of neglect, it was the misunderstood depression. The empty chasm, but of course, we shared it—but how could we share the same?

We didn't and so we grew apart. Through aimless nights I spent back tossing endless drinks, thinking that chasm would simply remove itself. It didn't. I sought atonement, for what I

SHORT STORY: TAKE THIS PHOTOGRAPH FOR ME BY BILLY BOWDEN

wasn't sure. That first night harkened on me. With your parents, and I a foreigner. The language was different, the feel was different, and it was a difference I needed that I admired. When those nights alone in the shower, empties water dumped on top of my contemplated head in shame, those trickles made me think.

Who was I that I was alone? Was independence better than nothing, was something more creative? Coime and meet my parents, you said. And I said, that I would love to before I could control those words, they just escaped. Even though I reached out for them, they could never come back. How could they ever?

The thoughts passed through me like ink in my veins, or fluidly, like ink on the page. Then I remembered your voice. Passing, a passing sound. Back then it was only passing, because truly our time together was brief. I only had a vignette to remember, but that word "yet" seems terrible to describe something so terrific. Three years I spent already walking up and down that monstrous terrain. Jumping in friends cars to attend parties down the line, thinking that we were invisible. That invisible cloak was ephemeral, such was the problem. Couches called me to dance on. That backward and forward motion wasn't enough, either dancing or moving the bottle. Pouring poison into my receiving mouth waiting on the world to change.

How to decipher this? That the peaking hours of that night after spending hours in contemplation about composition, we spoke to each other as though we knew each other since our lives began. Could we have? I knew your Mother before you told me of her physically fit appearance past fifty years old. I knew that she had to be a teacher and that our dreams were interlocked. I heard the voices of her students, with little money but dreams alike anyone else. I saw them too, when I worked in tandem with people I barely knew. When these groups had the

SHORT STORY: TAKE THIS PHOTOGRAPH FOR ME BY BILLY BOWDEN

capability of rearranging my whole life. There it was, the movie, scene one act one. Twenty-one years in, and yet a beginning.

You pulled us over. “Would you like a ride to your car?” Just one passage? You took me over then. Well I was with my roommate over course. I felt my skin creeping up on my forearms. Before then I had been the quiet boy. I was in the class to pass and to move on, could I do anything else? To my own, I was average. I would most likely get an A if I tried hard, so I heard. But would I meet the love of my life? Staring at the room across from me. Just as puzzled as I was. She didn’t even speak. Her friends spoke for her and my anxiety woke me up.

The dream turned inward, there was something there had to be something. My hope was quickly spiraling down the empty stream where I had been before. I misplaced it over and over, and I saw it go. Why do you keep leaving the room? I can no longer reach for you, grope for you, or control you.

Then there came the pilfering, the suggestions. Why do you read? Where will those lines of poetry take you? My privileged body sat in contemplation watching oceanic nights. There it was, the world—and beyond that?

My feet run without my walking. I couldn’t feel my face as we sat in the back of your tight car. There were water bottles everywhere while my heart was in my throat. The water bottles said drink me; the car said hold on. Everything I knew, structure, disappeared down the least painful gap where everything just floated, where everything just made sense.

You wanted to be a teacher? You cared about what you learned here, the knowledge that you gained? You paid for a reason. Tell me more! I could have held your sweet delicate hand

SHORT STORY: TAKE THIS PHOTOGRAPH FOR ME BY BILLY BOWDEN

where our sweat mixed together but I didn't know that then. I could have told you I loved you but I didn't feel that then.

From the purview of the mirror I only saw light, my opportunity. Our opportunity. But did I see getting old, a porch somewhere where coffee rises and novels were set. We could read in piece over the fire at night, look at the stars above our colonial home. Pointed tops; beautiful interior. We can finally drink this in.

Just wait. Your eyes told me everything, that mix of blue and green: who are you? Who is perfect like this? I knew you but really I didn't. I knew you in my dreams where I prayed to a God that I half believed in that one day he would send me the person who would be my equal. Not in every way, just a balance, the fulcrum in the middle the medium that provides. I couldn't provide and my relationships only looked like fire meeting ice until that moment. In the car, we could have turned the whole world around but we simply drove on.

Three years time in the brunt of all New England offered us. Cold weather and warm, tired nights and lively nights. Binaries we couldn't resist, they seem to be part of us. Sweet friends that brought us here—and time. Of course, time. That sweet boy you knew who sat in the front of the class with his hat tilted looking at the apprehending world as if they would never accept his real self became a real self when you said those words.

Consuming a lifetime in three years. Not impossible and in fact, it became possible every time I picked up the phone. Including the first time. With a whole history of trauma a whole history of rejections: I'll text you and you text me. That ended quick. I only said few words. The only thing I could think of was not, "Hey" but an anecdote about our elderly neighbor. There she is. She walks and we walk. Yet she walks the road up and down, up and down, up and down. The

SHORT STORY: TAKE THIS PHOTOGRAPH FOR ME BY BILLY BOWDEN

movement her feet, crumbling as she walked, I thought would be a nice topic. Later we would rave about her, she was a movie. Our superstar.

But then I had only few words. I wouldn't tell you much. Then I couldn't write because how could I breathe enough for one sentence when on the other end of that digital equipment was a beautiful soul waiting to be discovered. But discovery... That doesn't hit the right note. It hits it hard but you would have to take the world's largest sledge hammer and have it collide with a material solid to just begin to understand.

Language doesn't do justice. We spend a lifetime because of lack. I pour words into lack and lack doesn't reciprocate. Instead, lack torments. Lack wakes me up at 1 am and it doesn't relent. How could I sleep? The world awaits words and letters. They told me they gave up on letters so long ago so why would they want those letters now?

My letters, her letters, our letters.