

### Author's Note

As a writer, I have found that I tend to stay within my established comfort zone, rather than push myself to try different styles of writing. So, in the past year, I started to experiment with new characters, genres, and more. The short story below is one piece that resulted from these efforts. In *Promises*, I challenged myself to write from the perspective of a male character, which is something I had never done before. I drew inspiration from the changing of the seasons, which has thematic and structural importance to the story. The main character experiences many different kinds of love as he matures through life, four of which are based on the four seasons.

## Promises

The winter sun crept up the sky and illuminated the earth, throwing a slight sheen on the gray world. But the light did not translate to warmth.

“We’re almost there, hang on,” she sang, softly.

The snow was just a little too deep for me to tread confidently, but her warm and reassuring hand pulled me across the final slippery street and past the tall school gates.

I watched as boys ran and played in the snow by the playground, and listened to their hollers and laughs, trying to figure out if they were playing the same games I used to play with my old friends.

“Those boys look nice.” She remarked, brightly and hopefully.

No response from me.

“I’m sure they would let you join in.”

Nothing.

“Just let me know when you’re ready for me to leave.”

I didn’t say anything and I didn’t mean to suggest anything either, but I must have subconsciously tightened my grip on her hand. She laughed and ruffled my hair.

A bright yellow school bus pulled up outside, and I watched as a sea of kids poured out. The little dots of color immediately brightened up the silvery landscape, and soon swarmed into the school. All of a sudden, it seemed as if someone had turned up the volume of the world.

Voices bounced and echoed around me, filling the previous silence. Kids ran around, some brushing against me as they passed, one even bumping into me and falling. She let go of my hand to take his and help him up. I didn’t do anything as I watched him straighten and dust himself off. He gave her a small smile and me a long look, before dashing off again.

“Are you cold?” She asked, looking down at me. I shivered as an icy breeze blew past.

I nodded, and she pulled me against her body, locking her arms around me. As warmth started to spread through me again, I felt as if the two of us were detached from the people around us. The rest of the world was a mess of indistinct motion, cold winds, and gray haze, but we were safe. It was my first day at a new school in a new neighborhood, but in that moment, I felt as if I were back at home.

Her embrace was a fire that melted all the snowflakes as they fell, and I could feel the land around us start to thaw. To me, it almost seemed as if the kids stopping to look in our direction were jealous. Most of them turned back to their games after a while, but the boys I had first seen by the playground continued to stare. They made some vague pointing gestures, and I heard some laughter. Perhaps they would teach me how to play new games.

I looked up at my mother. Her lips were pale, and her cheeks were red. A mess of white snowflakes had settled on her dark hair, a few dusted over her

eyelashes. But her eyes were filled with joy, flitting back and forth, drawn to all the commotion. She was laughing. I could tell she wanted me to join them.

Warmed, reassured, and soothed, I shook myself free of her arms.

“I’m ready, mom.”

She smiled and leaned down to gently kiss my cheek. I gave her a little wave and walked to the boys I had originally seen in the distance. They stopped their game when I reached them and looked me up and down. I turned to look for one last nod or smile from my mom, but I could already see her bobbing figure getting smaller in the distance.

“Looking for your mom?” A rough voice pulled me out of my search. To me, the word “mom” always had connotations of happiness and safety. Coming out of his mouth, it sounded harsh and rude.

I turned and saw someone standing right in front of me. It was the boy who had bumped into me earlier.

“Aren’t you too old to still be holding hands with your *mommy*?”

“Does she still kiss you good night every day?”

The other boys started to surround me, and I didn’t know what to say. I started to back out of their menacing circle, but that only fueled the mocking and jeering.

“Are you scared without someone to hold your hand?”

I backed away and started to run towards the school building.

“Yeah, run home to your mommy!” One boy shouted.

I slid on a patch of ice and fell hard on the ground. No one stopped to try and help me up. They laughed. I stood up again and rushed towards the school, but I could feel my cheeks burning, my chest getting heavier, and my eyes watering. As I tried to blink the tears away, the world before me transformed into a kaleidoscope of arms, legs, and various shades of gray. I seemed to be seeing everything through a cracked piece of glass. I was surrounded by loud voices and fragmented motion. I was lost.

By the time my mom picked me up that afternoon, things had not improved.

“Hi, honey. How was your day? Did you make a lot of new friends?” She asked, animatedly.

I didn’t say anything, but my eyes pointed in the direction of the boys from that morning. I looked down, quickly, after seeing them standing together, watching me, laughing at me.

She understood. My mom grabbed my hand, and led me home. She asked if I wanted to talk about the boys, and after I shook my head, she never brought them up again.

In the weeks after, I often found my mom crying in her room, and I thought it was because she knew I was getting bullied and didn’t know how to stop the mean boys at school. I told her it was okay, but she told me it wasn’t.

I never knew what she meant. She never told me about the disease.

I remember the last promise she ever made to me. She had been crying that afternoon but stopped when she saw me. Her eyes were framed by prominent, dark circles, and her hair was a tangled mess. Her familiar smile wasn't the same, either. It didn't reach her eyes.

"Mom, will we always be together? No matter how old I get, or how old you get? No matter what?"

I can still feel the comfort that I did when her arms wrapped around me.

"Yes, of course, my love."

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A bumblebee buzzed past, and I watched as it landed on a bright, pink flower. It was the first day of the last semester of high school, and it coincided with the first day of spring. I smiled, listening to the birds chirp and looking at the vibrant life around me. My smile only got wider when I thought of her.

Anna.

My first love.

A whirlwind of bashfulness, clumsiness, and awkwardness.

She always wore a little too much perfume, but it was my favorite scent. She always tripped over herself, but I was always there to catch her before she fell. Her smile was always a little crooked, and her eyes were a little too far apart. But I loved her.

Anna was never afraid to speak her mind. She was brilliant, insightful, and funny. Everyone went to her for advice and trusted her judgment, wholeheartedly.

Anna was also kind. In fact, she was the sweetest girl I had ever met. No one ever had a bad thing to say about her, and if they did, I'm sure no one else would believe it.

Anna reminded me of the smell of the earth after a storm. Or the colors of a sunset at the end of a hot day. Or the sound of the waves at low tide.

On the day of graduation, we sat next to each other and held hands the whole time.

"How do you feel?" She turned to me near the end of the ceremony, with a huge smile on her face.

"Excited," I said, mirroring her smile. But I wasn't, really. I wasn't looking forward to university, or adulthood, or responsibilities. I was only excited because she was so excited. Her smile was always infectious, and her laugh was my favorite sound in the entire world.

I thought we would go down in history as legendary high school sweethearts – the couple you would see at a reunion fifty years later and be amazed by when you realized that they were still together. We were only eighteen when we graduated, but I could not imagine the rest of my life without her.

So I got down on one knee. We made the ultimate promise of marriage, pledging to be together through sorrows and joys, through hardships and triumphs. Pledging to be together for eternity.

I didn't know that once we left school and entered society as adults, we would be tested and faced with challenges we had never before encountered. I didn't remember how harsh and unfair the world could be, because Anna had changed my outlook on people, life, everything.

It was a slap in the face when we found out that relationships were not as simple and straightforward as we always thought they would be.

The rings on our fingers were the symbols of our bond, and just like our love, they rusted with time.

I remember the day we promised ourselves to each other. It was a sunny spring morning, and flowers were in full bloom. The air was sweet and filled with excitement.

"Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to have and to hold, in sickness and health, in good times and woe, for richer or poorer, keeping yourself solely unto him for as long as you both shall live?"

She smiled her crooked smile before she answered.

"I do."

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I met Chloe on the longest day of the year. I had finished my junior year of university and could enjoy the freedom and thrill of summer.

The sky was a pure, cloudless blue, and the earth was a painting of lush greenery dotted with colorful flowers. The world was alive.

I sat in a coffee shop, observing all the people. It was interesting to think that each individual around me had his or her own unique, complex story, and that all the people were at different points in their own lives. As the main character of my own narrative, it is always incredibly hard to remember that people are fighting their own battles, and that they may play supporting roles in my life, but they are the protagonists of their own. On that day, I tried to put a story to each face.

The young girl sitting to my right was immersed in a book, occasionally gasping when, I suppose, there was some shocking development in the plot. She smiled as she turned the pages, constantly brushing her curly hair out of her eyes and shifting her posture. I created a story for her, in which she was using fictional problems to escape from her real ones. Maybe she was going through a bad fight with a friend, or maybe she was under a lot of pressure from school. Maybe that book was what was helping her hold on, transporting her to a different world as the words on the page came alive before her.

The haggard man sitting at a table in the corner of the store was typing furiously on his phone, frowning. I watched as he took sips of his coffee in between each message, looking restless and agitated. Perhaps an argument with his significant other? His boss, or maybe a coworker? I imagined that he may have been facing a tight deadline and that he was at risk of losing his job because it was his last chance. Maybe he desperately needed the job to support his family.

Then, I saw someone sitting by the window of the coffee shop, and I was at a loss. She was both the most beautiful and the most intimidating woman I had ever seen, and I could not fathom what the story behind her existence was. She was a blur of black leather and red lipstick, and I would later find out that she always smelled of both daisies and cigarettes. The sunlight coming in through the window framed her beautifully.

It took me twenty minutes to work up the courage to walk across the coffee shop and talk to her, and even when I did, she spoke first. When she noticed me approaching her, she held my gaze and smiled.

“Hey, can I get your opinion on something?”

And before I even had a chance to respond, she had launched into a conversation that would end up being the most fascinating one of my life. In that one afternoon in a small and crowded room, she spoke to me, a stranger, about art, literature, love, sex, and death. Before that day, I had never talked to someone so passionate about life.

Regardless of what the topic of discussion was, her eyes would sparkle. I witnessed the instant the light inside of her turned on, and in that moment, I knew that any life with her would not be an ordinary one.

Her eyes were the stars of the galaxy, the lines of her palms were the contours of the earth, and her laugh was the answer to all the questions of the universe. She was a myriad of different souls collected in one vessel. She was a mystery I wanted to spend my whole life solving.

Chloe was always daring me to go faster, further, harder. Our love seemed to be the antidote to the poison of life, but like any drug, it did not come without side effects.

I remember the time I asked her a foolish question, seeking the confirmation I so desperately wanted her to give to me. It was a warm, summer evening. The air was humid, and the quiet rumbling of the sky told me a storm was coming. But we remained outside, sitting in the park. She lay down with her eyes closed, and I sat beside her. I ran my hands over dewy blades of grass, feeling tickles across my palms. The prickly feeling of the grass mirrored the anxiety I felt inside, as I took a deep breath to speak.

“Chloe, do you love me?” I asked, and I felt my face blaze as I realized how childish and insecure I must have sounded.

“Yes.” She said.

And that was it. She didn’t elaborate, didn’t smile, didn’t even open her eyes to look at me. I hesitated, and a deafening silence settled over the two of us. Eventually, I asked her the question that had been on my mind since the second I saw her that afternoon in the coffee shop.

“Do you promise to always love me?”

I regretted the question as soon as I uttered it. It sounded so stupid, naïve, *childish*. And I desperately tried to stop the words as they tumbled out of my mouth in a rush.

She laughed.  
“I don’t make promises.”

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Red, orange, yellow, golden-brown.

As the trees undress, their leaves scatter on the earth around me. They dance whenever a chilly fall wind blows past, and transform the landscape into a beautiful whirlwind of color.

She lets go of my hand, sprints forward, and jumps on a pile of leaves. They crunch, and she smiles. Satisfied, she skips back to me and loops her fingers through mine. It has been five months since I adopted Hazel, but her small hand already feels like an extension of mine.

“What are we having for dinner tonight?” She asks, staring up at me expectantly. Her eyes are the size of the moon, and as I look into them, I feel a smile stretch across my face.

“Whatever you want.”

“Okay,” she says, thoughtfully.

We walk in silence for a while, with Hazel often disengaging her hand from mine to run around. As I watch her laugh and play, I realize that she is the most precious thing to ever come into my life.

The minute Hazel entered my story, she stole the show and became the main character. Now, my whole life revolves around her.

She is the sun, and I am just a planet in her orbit. She is a fire, and I want to dedicate my whole life to protecting her flames. She is a flower, and I want to spend eternity watching her bloom.

Hazel runs back and stands before me, cheeks flushed, panting, and smiling. I start walking again, slowly. She stands silently in thought for a moment, then reaches out and gently tugs on my hand.

“Promise me this is forever,” she says. I freeze.

*Yes, of course, my love.*

*I do.*

*I don’t make promises.*

“I promise this is forever,” I whisper, knowing it wouldn’t be.