

Beyond The Hills

“Time of death: 0753.”

I walk out of the hospital, cross the street, and step into yesterday.

Your yesterday, specifically, your 70 years before.

I see you in the shade of an apple tree, enjoying a crisp Granny Smith miraculously left untouched by the rabbits and the squirrels.

“Hello, little girl,” I say, taking off my hat and squatting down beside you.

“Hello, big man,” you say, taking a bite and studying me. “You look funny. Smell kind of funny, too.” You breathe deeply through your nose. “Like Mama’s cleaning soaps.”

“Do I? I honestly can’t tell after all these years.” I clear my throat. “I have something to tell you. Would you believe me if I said that I’m from the future? Your future?”

“Sure,” you reply nonchalantly. I can tell that you’ve made the mental calculation that this big, soap-smelling stranger means you no harm. “My classmate, Tommy, says that he’s from outer space. And I once heard Pa say that the new tailor in town is from ‘It-Uh-Lee,’” you pronounce the word carefully. “People come from all sorts of places. Might as well be the future, or the moon, or a country across the sea. What’s the future like?”

“We know each other in the future, too,” I let my eyes roll over the acres of farmland, watching the golden fields of wheat dance in the wind. “Lots of things are different. But more than you’d expect has stayed the same.” I pick up a warm apple beside me and take a bite. “Fruits taste better here.” I move closer and look into your gentle blue eyes. In them, I see my reflection, the hills behind me, and somehow, I see the world beyond the hills. I see innocence, and beauty, and laughter, untouched and unharmed, eager to accept, to believe, to learn, to grow. I see a hundred, a thousand, a seemingly endless cycle of sunrises and sunsets, of jump rope passing over your head, then under your feet, and your trust that while it swings behind you, it will always come back to your sight. I see your first love, your first kiss, your first heartbreak. I can see it all, yet I still offer, as I do for all my patients, another choice.

“When I’m from, you are old. You have a loving daughter and a little granddaughter that looks just like you today. You’re in a wheelchair when we first meet, and you have cancer. You died this morning.”

“Hm,” you reply, studying your apple for the next spot to bite. “I have a grandbaby?”

I shake my head and continue in a choked voice, “But you don’t have to die. I can’t explain how, but there’s another option. You can stay here. You can stay eight years young and never grow old and weak and cough so hard that blood spills and you can’t hold your water and you lose your smell and your sight and your hearing. You can stay here and never have to watch your friends and family and lovers grow old and sick and die, one by one. Stay here, my dear, in the sun, where you can skip and sing and jump till Mama calls home for dinner and Papa kisses you goodnight. It’s all I have left to offer. I’ll do everything that I can in 70 years, but it won’t be enough. Accept this final treatment, my last chance to save your life.” I offer you a small blue tablet, stamped with the word, *endymion*. You’re holding what’s left of the apple by its stem,

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spinning the fruit's core in your fingers, first clockwise then counter. "I get it, mister," and this time, you look me in the eyes. "But what about my grandbaby? What about the treehouse that Papa and I are building this Summer, or the trip to New York that Mama promises we'll take when I'm old enough? What about prom and college and meeting my Prince Charming? What about dancing like Mama when Papa takes her to the square, and spinning around so much that I have to twirl the other way just to stay standing? What about learning to bake like Grandma and plant tomatoes like Grandpa?" You stop to shake a seed out of the core. "Papa says my Great-Granddaddy planted this tree. I never got to meet him. I wonder if he knew that I'd be sitting here one day? I wonder if he guessed that I'd climb to the top to see the birds in the breeze beyond the hill. Probably not." You put the seed in your pocket and gently close my hand over the pill. "Sorry, mister, I have plans for tomorrow. And the tomorrow after that, too. I think I'll plant this seed beyond those hills, and it takes a lot of time to raise a tree." A bell rings from the house down the dirt road. "Thanks for the offer, though. See you later!" Before running off, you plant a playful kiss on my cheek and slip a fresh Granny Smith in my free hand.

0750, I step into your room. A little girl is pressed to your bosom, and you hold her in thin, frail arms. You're whispering softly in her ear and stop to cough every few seconds. Your daughter stands by the window with tears in her eyes. I come to your bedside and hand you the apple. Your eyes meet mine, then the apple, then the girl. You smile gently and offer your granddaughter the fruit. In the moment before she accepts it, the apple seems to float in the space between us, to waver between yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Between the wheres and whens and whos of a long life. And in its reflection, I see the bright, big, beautiful world beyond the hills.

You take your final breath and fly away.

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But is it?