

Lost

Were I able to change one event of my life, it would have been that night. Out of all nights I remember, that one alone I would alter. The night I let the truest thing I've ever known pass me by.

The sky clouded early if I recall correctly, and the wind was sweeping the red leaves of autumn gently past. She stood just before me on the side-walk, the brown, knee-length coat that was her favorite clasped about her frame. I still remember thinking how perfectly enchanting she looked that evening as the sun sank slowly, sending the last of its rays only just far enough to bathe the sable hair that crowned her.

We both were silent, neither of us courageous enough to break the quiet that had followed her last words. I hear them in my mind even now, softly echoing like some haunting whisper that cannot be shut out: "I can't stay."

Never before had my heart been thrust with such a sudden and fierce shock as it was when I heard those words.

I loved her. I loved her in the purest way a man can give his love, with the truest yearning of his passions. It had been on a clear, early-year afternoon that I had first seen her, strolling the green near Holly Hill. Hidden, I had watched her for some time, afraid, I now realize, to meet her. But she was so free and bright, so merry and careless that at last I had mastered myself and ventured forward. Her greeting had been a smile. Her smile! I was hopelessly charmed the instant it revealed itself, and it was as though everything around her roused. For many days afterward we had met, sharing one another's company with a delight that grew. 'Twas with this delight that my love blossomed.

And yet I had never told her. How could I have? The dreadful fear of her not bearing for me the same affection was more than I could risk, for if such a thing had turned out to be true it would have slain me. Now here she was manifesting to me a road unforeseen, yet nigh just as painful.

I recall how I had butted against her leaving with every possible idea I could conjure, seeking desperately for a way through which she could escape. She couldn't just leave, not when I had never revealed to her my heart. It had all been useless. There was no way it could be averted. Complication was piled upon extreme circumstance, and they upon drastic severities. She could not stay.

But it had been during her explanation of this, through tears and short sobs, that I had realized that which I had not dared to approach in hope: She loved me. She did not say those words, but in the midst of her explanations her affection for me was laid bare. At this revelation, I thought my heart would burst. But she did not lie.

And that was when the silence had drifted between us once more, stretching as it clung to my mouth, even as it held her while she waited for the reply she hoped for. Never in all the days of my life did I wish to speak so much as I did in that moment. But words—such elusive things!—had failed me, and it was with growing agony that I could do nothing but stand and stare. *Perhaps, I seem to remember thinking, perhaps by looking into my eyes she shall read my answer there, and so words will not be required.* It was all I could do.

I stared into her eyes, those deep pools of profound beauty, as the wind rose to a roar. The first drops of rain began to fall. I looked at her dim form—lithe and gentle with a

radiance I knew no other would ever possess—long and tightly as the automobile rounded the curve, and came to a stop beside her.

Its door opened, and still I could not tell her. She gazed at me with a pain in her look that nearly felled me. For a moment she hesitated. Still my speech—my cursed tied tongue!—would not return. Over she strode to the waiting vehicle, and still I could not speak. For the last time she hesitated.

I began to tremble.

With a smile that was devoid of cheer absolutely, she ducked inside and the car eased away. I watched it until it reached the end of the lane and made a sharp left, passing out of my sight.

And then the rain fell in earnest.

My clothes it soaked, but to my face it made no difference, for my cheeks already glistened with the rain of my eyes.