

Love in the Present Tense

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Extract

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PEARL, *age 13*: **dying lessons**

One night when I was seven I watched a man die. He was on the street under my bedroom window. I was on my knees looking out. The sound, it had woke me. The window was open for air, which there was not much of, and what there was did not move. The curtain did not blow aside, and it was dark in my room, and I knew they could not see me.

The man who was going to die was on his knees. Like myself. Only with his arms out. Not up, like a stickup. Straight out, like Christ on his cross, only with his knees bent. I call him a man because I was only seven at the time. To me he looked big. Now I can remember his face, both before and after, and I know he was maybe sixteen. But I mistook him for a man.

The guys doing the killing, there were three, standing up. Laughing, which is what woke me I think. One of

them had a sawed-off shotgun right in the man's face. Sort of a man. I guess if you are about to die like that, you're more than a boy.

Now the sort-of-man, he started to cry. Big crocodile tears. Or what they call that, anyway. Why they call them crocodile tears I don't know. I have never seen a crocodile cry. I have never seen a crocodile. But I watched a man die. So I know some things. Only maybe they are not the best things to know.

Then the almost-dead man, he started up begging. Please, he said. Please, think of my mama. Think of the kids I ain't even get to have yet. Please don't do this, I'll do anything, what do you want me to do? His shoulders shook, like a little earthquake right under the street that nobody could feel but him. His own little personal seven point one, just under his knees.

Please, he said, and the one with the sawed-off shotgun shot him in the face. Then the three, they walked off laughing. Turned the corner, laughing. I had to keep watching, because I was afraid to not watch. I was afraid to go back to bed. Because the dead sort-of-man, he would still be there. He had to be where I could see. I remember real good what he looked like after, but it's something I do not plan to say a whole lot about. Because some things, they are plain ugly. This thing, I figure it's bad enough *I* know.

After a while the cops came, and I got tired, and they were there to look and know where he was, so I went back to bed.

There is no mercy. Give up on that. Don't ask.

I decided when my number came up someday, I would not beg. I would take my dignity with me. They say you can't take it with you, but mostly about money and cars and such. Dignity, I think you can. And I think you will miss it sorely if you leave it behind. Anyway, we all believe what we want and that's what I believe.

Speaking of dignity, it is dignity when you own what you did. Not pretend. So, I shot that man. Just like they think I did. I will say that now. I shot that man between the eyes, in Rosalita's kitchen, where he stood with no pants on. Killed him with his own gun. It was my birthday that day. I was thirteen.

I knew he was a cop, but what difference is that supposed to make? Even if I could have known somehow I would die for it later. It's always better to die later. A time like that, you have to make a fast choice, and it's never die/not die. It's always die now/die later. Rosalita taught me that. She said, "Girl, comes clear somebody's number 'bout to be up, try and see it ain't you. Let him die now, you die some other time. When your number finally come up, you'll be ready. You'll've had lotsa practice." That made sense to me. But I don't think that's why I shot him.

I did not laugh or have fun.

I guess I felt some bad for it later, but at the time I don't

know what I felt. Not the half of what I should've, that I can say for a fact. I was not a cold person. Just alive, like everybody else, and trying to stay that way awhile longer.

I guess I felt bad later because I could've let go of the gun. Not pulled on it. I think if I'd just let him take it back he might not've hurt me or anything. But then you don't know for a fact and you just do something and then it's the wrong something. I worry sometimes, did I shoot him because he didn't love me and never would? But I really think it wasn't on purpose. Only, sometimes I see people fool themselves, so I ask myself all the same. But I don't think I meant for it to happen. Besides, if I was to kill everybody who didn't love me and never would, wouldn't be nobody left on the planet but maybe Rosalita and Leonard, my little boy. Who, of course, was not even borned at the time.

This is how it was.

On account of it was my birthday, I had been almost all day looking for Mama. What one of these things has to do with the other I can't say that I know. What I thought she would do about it being my birthday, well, she wouldn't do nothing. That much is real clear now. But it made me look for her all the same.

To make things worse, Rosalita had got arrested, only this time she did not come back. And I had to wonder why. Usually it wouldn't take her no more than two, three hours to make it home. Cop would pick her up, take her on a ride supposed to be to the station. Only they'd go

someplace else, she doing for him for free what he was supposed to be taking her in for. Then he'd drop her back on the corner.

This time she did not come home all day. Maybe some cop really put her in jail. Maybe he didn't want nothing from her, or had kids and a wife he wanted to stay true to for real. Or a bag of other maybes I could not understand. What had happened to things? I didn't know.

I went by to where Little Julius was sitting out on his stoop and I asked him did he see my mama.

"Maybe I seen her," he said. "Maybe I ain't. Why'nt you come over a little closer here and we talk about it?"

I didn't get no closer to Little Julius. He was a big fat man with his hair shaved all off and little designs shaved in, and, when he smiled, his front teeth were all gold. You would think it would look nice—all that gold. But no. It was ugly in a way I could never explain. He liked the color of my skin because of me being part black and part Korean. He said I am fine. Not that day, but he had said it. In the past. And even that day, even with him not saying it, you could feel that hanging around.

I said, "Maybe did you sell her something?"

Little Julius said, "Ain't got nothin' to sell. Ain't got no product. If you would listen to reason maybe I would have. You and me, we could do okay. Little girl like you, just don't have no idea what you got. You and your mama, live in a real house. You'd be doin' okay."

I knew we were talking two very different kinds of

things and so did he. I cared and Little Julius, he did not.

“Who she buy from when she don’t buy from you?”

Little Julius frowned. Frown like that means maybe time to back up. Maybe time to get the hell somewhere else.

I say no to guys all the time. Every day. Most don’t like it any too much. Sometime I say yes. The good ones, they’re not sure what they feel. Feel too many things at once. They are the only kind I say yes to. The too-sure kind, I say no. They got no conscience to make them feel some other things. Watch out for that.

I waited under the freeway overpass for some guy they called Slacker. Listening to the cars go over my head—thump-thump, thump-thump—I was wondering what makes that thump sound. If there are bumps in the road or something. But I never been on that road, or most others. Me and Mama didn’t have a car. I was wondering should I go back in and ask for this Slacker guy again. But I was in that bar once already, and the bartender man, he threw me out. Said I would lose him his license. Said he would send this Slacker out to see me.

Thump-thump. How long it would take him to come out and see me I didn’t know.

I was thinking maybe I would just go on back to Rosalita’s. Give this up for the day. But it’s a long walk

back there. If I had bus fare maybe I would've already been gone. The day was already almost over.

Then this man came walking by. Looked too good to be down there. You know, with a suit and all. A white man with a shiny gold wedding ring. I was sitting on the sidewalk and he looked down at me and I looked up at him, and I knew he had the taste. I could see it in his eyes. And I knew he would give me some money if I asked, because he did not know it. At least, he did not know it out loud. So he would think he was looking at me for some much nicer reasons. Like I am this nice young person he wants to help out, and like there is no shame in a thing like that. I looked up into his eyes like I had fallen into something I couldn't quite find my way out of. Which in some ways was the truth.

"You okay?" he said.

"Can't get home," I said. "No bus fare."

He took out his wallet and pulled out three one-dollar bills. I could tell he did not ever ride the bus and was trying to think what that might cost. I didn't tell him, because then he would give me the most he thought it might be. He reached it down to me and I wondered what he would do if my hand touched his when I took it. I knew he was a man who would feel lots of things at once. I could say yes to a man like that. Maybe get a steak dinner for my birthday. But then he let go real quick and walked on. I watched his back walking away. That is a man who knows trouble when he scrapes by it.

That's what I told myself while I watched him walk away.

Then next thing I knew this white dude with his hair slicked back came out of the bar and said maybe he is Slacker and maybe not. All depends on who is asking. I said I am asking and then he figured maybe yeah, that's who he is.

I asked him did he see my mama. And I told him about the scar she wore on her face, so that way he would know which mama she is.

He said yeah, maybe he might've made a sale to a person such as that, and maybe by now she would've gone on home to use up what she got. Like that answered everything, he said that to me, and stared me down. And I said shoot, Mr. Slacker, we don't live noplacé. Like what was he thinking? Used to we had a real apartment, but that's been a long time now.

He just shook his head and went back inside the bar.

I stood a minute more under that overpass. Thump-thump. Thump-thump.

Then I walked to the bus stop, thinking it was good I had three dollars.

Before I could even get there this boy slapped me up against the brick of a place. No one around to see. Boy no older than me. Younger maybe. But bigger. Held me there with his dirty self that smelled bad.

"What you got for me?" he said. "Got any money?"

I thought for a minute about that three dollars, and would I fight for it. I can take an ass whipping. I done so

many times. But it was my birthday and also I could not see getting my ass beat for three dollars. That white man with the shiny gold ring, where was he now when I needed him?

“I got three dollars,” I said.

“Shit, that ain’t no money,” he said.

So I said, “Fine. Don’t take it then.”

But he did take it. Stuck his hand deep down in the pocket of my shorts and took it away and then pressed his dirty self up even closer and said he can take what he wants. I was just about to spit on his face.

But then he said, “Don’t want nothing from you, though.”

And he let me go. I spit on him just the same, and he kicked me in the leg and ran away.

I sat on the bus bench anyway, because sometimes there is this one driver on this route who will let me ride even if I don’t pay. He puts a finger to his lips and real quiet says, I got to go there anyway, don’t I now? With you or without you. He is nice. But a bus came by and it was not him driving. It was this lady. She stopped and put the door open with that noise sounds like an old man complaining while he sits down. She looked at me and I looked back.

“Getting on?” she said. “Don’t have all day.”

“No money,” I said. And she closed that door and rolled away.

It was starting to get dark. I’d been sitting on that bench a real long time.

I knew there was one more place to look for Mama, but it was a long walk and not someplace I really so much wanted to go. I was thinking maybe I did not need to find her quite that bad.

Then the cop car stopped for me.

So much of how it was started when that cop got out and came up to me. But I didn't know all this when it first happened. I guess you never do. I didn't know there would ever be a Leonard, or that this man would be his father, or that anybody would have to die. I didn't know where all this would take me at the time.

This cop, he got down on one knee by the bus bench. "You been sitting here an awful long time," he said. "You been letting some buses go by. You got a way to get back home?"

I looked at his badge, and his little name thing. It said Officer Leonard DiMitre. I looked past him to his partner waiting in the car. His partner had a mustache and his lip was funny underneath. Like one of those lips start out in two pieces, and later the guy grows a mustache to cover it but you can still see where the split was. He had this look like he didn't like what was starting up here. Maybe it was just the lip but I don't think so. Then I looked back at Officer Leonard, right up into his face, and I smiled back at him, and I saw he had the taste. And I thought, good. Now I can get back to Rosalita's place, and finally this day can be over.

I got in that car with them and he asked me my name,

and I told him. First and last both. Right in front of that lip man. I don't know why. I had got happy and forgot to be careful. It was stupid, I knew right away. How stupid, well. I had to wait to know that.

First thing he said—this Officer Leonard, when he saw Rosalita's place—he said, “My oh my. Your mother certainly keeps this place awfully clean.”

I did not tell him Rosalita was not my mother. I did not tell him that I was the one who kept that place so clean. Clean, that is a big thing with me. When I live someplace you can eat off the floor in that place. Off the seat of your chair. Right out the stainless steel sink. There will not be one germ. Not if I have my way. Every place I go, I make that place clean. Turns out that is a good thing, because when you make places clean wherever you go, seems you always have someplace you are welcome. I was trying to decide what to tell Officer Leonard and what to not tell.

He had dropped his partner with the lip back at the station, end of shift, and then turned in his patrol car, and then he had drove me back to Rosalita's in his own car, which was this Corvette with the T-roof and all. Man did I like riding in that car. It was like a whole birthday all by itself. Just before we drove off, his partner, the guy with that weird lip, he gave Officer Leonard a funny look and said something I could not hear. But my friend Leonard,

my birthday man, he waved it off like he knew just what he was doing.

“Come upstairs,” I said when he got me back to what I sort of called home.

He didn’t ask any questions or anything. In fact we was both real quiet until we got upstairs and he said that thing about the clean.

I took his hand and pulled him at Rosalita’s bedroom. He said one more thing. He said, “Are you sure? Are you sure this is what you want?” This is something a man will say when he’s feeling a lot of things at once. When he’s not the kind of man who would do this if he thought you might not be sure. But I was surprised because we both knew right on that bus bench and it seemed kind of funny to stop to talk about it now. But I was glad that he did. All the same.

He was a big tall man and I think he was Italian. Anyway, he was handsome, with wavy dark hair. He did not have a gold wedding ring but sometimes a guy will be married without one. I wondered if he was married. If he had a kid my age. Even so, I was thinking he might love me. Then things would all change, right from that day on. Even if he was married. Rosalita had a man once who loved her. He was married but he paid her rent and came over three times a week and brought flowers and wine. I thought maybe this was my birthday present. Someone who would love me and pay the rent. I never answered that question he asked. We didn’t say nothing more for a long time.



Way later he said another thing to me and it made me laugh. He said, "I never did something like this before." He said it in this mushy voice from deep inside his chest. He had a hairy chest. Talking so deep inside it, that made me think even more that maybe he would love me.

"What?" I said. "You never did sex before? I can't believe that." I said. "Now don't start lying to me, just when everything was going so good."

"No, not that," he said. "That's not what I meant. Sex, yeah. Just not with somebody, you know. Your age."

Maybe he was lying about that. I've wondered lots of times. I think about that a lot, was that a lie or was it the truth? Did he really want a younger girl all those years and not do that? Or was that just something you say? A lot of what I have heard in my life was lies. So I really wondered about that. Looking back, it seems a shame that I killed him when I did, and now there's no way I ever get to find out.

After that he got kind of funny and young, like he wanted to play. He even tickled me some, like I was a kid, only we were naked in Rosalita's bed. No place for a kid there. Then he got real serious and brushed the hair off my face and looked me right in my eyes. "I'm so glad I met you." That's what he said. Right into my eyes, he said that.

And I thought, this is how love feels. I know that now. Happy birthday to me.

Then he looked over my shoulder and there was a clock back there. "Shit," he said. "I gotta go. I gotta get home. Shit."

That feeling, that thing I thought was love, I just watched it blow away. I thought, you spend so much time looking for it but then it blows away so fast. I wished I had known.

I got up and walked into the kitchen. Rosalita's very clean kitchen. I was feeling bad because I knew I was wrong about the love. He was getting dressed to go away and he wasn't never going to come back with any flowers or wine. He was just looking for something to do for that night only. If that's love, you can keep it.

I was starting to get mad.

His uniform jacket was hanging over the kitchen chair. Under it was the big belt with his gun. I was holding his pants on account of I'd picked them up off the bedroom floor. I was folding them neat to hang up. All I was going to do was hang them up with his jacket. My thought was never to steal nor to kill nobody. It was not supposed to come down like that. Maybe I just took the pants because I hate things to be lying around the floor. Or maybe I wanted him not to be so fast to go. But then there was his wallet. I could feel the lump in his pocket.

Usually I would never take something. I'm not a killer nor a thief. But I was mad at him and I thought I should

take enough to buy a birthday present, since he was not it, like I thought.

He came out in the kitchen with no pants on and looked at me funny. "You need money?" he said. "Just ask. I'll give you a few bucks."

I guess he meant it nice. Looking back I think maybe he meant it nice. But at the time I thought he was catching me as a thief and calling me a whore in the bargain. I am not a whore. What I do I do either for love or what I think might be love. If I am wrong, I am wrong, but I am no whore.

He was walking at me so I took up his gun.

I guess I thought, he has caught me stealing. I'm in trouble now. I pointed the gun at him. It was heavy and big. This all happened really fast. He still had this sweet look on his face, only now he looked sweet but also worried. Scared. Like I might really shoot him. But I never thought I would. But I flipped the lever that lets the gun really shoot, to make him think I would. I was just saying keep away.

But then he reached out fast like lightning and grabbed my hand. The one that had the gun. And it hurt, because it made the metal of the gun press too hard on the bones in my hand. So I pulled really hard, to get my hand and the gun back again. Just to make sure if he got it he wouldn't be mad and use it on me. I was afraid to let him take it. And then there was a big sound. It scared the life out of me, but at first I didn't even know it was the gun

going off. I don't know why it went off. I guess when I pulled my hand back I squeezed too hard, but I don't know. It happened fast. Like I said.

Then I was all surprised, because I shot him. I didn't know that was about to happen. Also I was surprised when that little spot came up between his eyes. I thought the gun was aimed straight, at his belly. I guess when I pulled my hand back I pointed it up. Or maybe he was trying to point my hand up so I wouldn't shoot him. Which I never thought I would do. But I don't really know what happened. Just that it all happened fast.

I thought all these different things at once. I thought, that did not make a mess at all. I thought it would make a mess. Then he crumpled down with that same look on his face and I saw the curtains behind, and what was on them. I thought, oh, shit. This place will never get clean, never again. I thought, this is bad, what happened. I thought, Rosalita won't let me live here anymore. I looked down at his face and he still had that sweet look on his face. I thought, what if he really did love me?

I took his credit cards and his money and his gun.

And I went to look for Mama in that last, awful place.

I found her there, too. It was this house, this boarded-up house. But I knew how to get in the back. The people there are terrible but they will not do you no harm. They

are too loaded to care. Mama was in the kitchen, leaned up on this stove that something had dripped all down. Like spaghetti sauce that nobody bothered to clean. How can people live like that?

“Hi, Baby,” she said, but the words kind of ran together and her chin nodded around.

There was no place clean I could go. Rosalita’s would never be clean and this place neither. But I wanted to stay with Mama now that I had found her. I was feeling strange.

I went down to the corner store and bought a roll of paper towels and that kind of cleaner you spray from a plastic bottle. With the money out of Officer Leonard’s wallet. Some of it anyway. I took it back to that awful house and made a clean spot on the kitchen floor near her.

Then I felt better, on account of I was cleaning. I did not want to think too much but I thought real simple things. I thought in the morning I would go see Little Julius and sell him the credit cards and the gun. By thinking things like that I did not think too much else.

Mama passed out before it was clean. So I took her by her coat and I pulled her over into my clean place and I lay beside her. Lay down in the clean and tried to get some sleep. I can’t sleep if it isn’t clean. I tried not to think about what was right outside that little circle of clean.

I had a baby in me. Just as of that night. Just that night it had happened, and I knew it.

Now, in the time that passed between then and now I have told that to a few people. They said I am crazy and I am wrong. They said you can't know that so soon. They said if a woman could know that so soon they wouldn't sell the little tests you pee on. She would just know. I don't care what they say. I knew there was a baby in me, and I knew a baby is somebody who would always love me. Forever love, that's what you get from a baby. He does not look at the clock and say oh shit. I better go home.

I made up my mind I would love him forever right back. That would be my whole job in the world.

So, that was my present. After all.

I went to sleep with my head on Mama's coat.