

A Reason For Living

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When she finally wrote it out, she'd gone over it so many times in her head it was perfect, and it flowed out though her fingertips so smoothly she didn't make a single mistake. She used the little chisel-pointed "calligraphy style" pen she'd bought just for this, and the paper like creamy parchment she'd gotten with it, and when she was done, she shuffled the sheets together and read it, stroking the silky surface.

The fine texture of the paper, the smooth inky black lettering, the sound of a bird outside her bedroom window; everything seems heightened this morning. There's a smell of spring so sharp she can taste it, a breeze through the window so soft it's a lover's sigh on her neck.

She spends some time getting the sheets of the letter laid out so casually perfect that she can turn away, not needing any more from them. She can take all the time she needs. Her parents won't be back until late tomorrow.

Rising from her desk, stretching deliciously in the lover's breeze through her window, smiling a gentle lover's smile, she floats to her closet.

All these things, too, were specially purchased for this event. Somehow, none of what she had seemed fitting, and when she first started these plans, so many months ago now, she couldn't see herself wearing any of it. Nothing at all, something whispered in her mind's ear, wear nothing at all, and that seemed fitting, but not socially appropriate, so she began to save and plan and window-shop.

Taylor's wardrobe was no different, and no better suited to this, than any other sixteen-year-old girl's would be. For this, you want to be at your feminine utmost, something she's never tried to be.

All white, she decided. Everything she wore on this magic day would be brand new, and everything would be white. The most feminine underwear she could find, not sexy, not racy, just soft sleek white satin perfection. A white slip, for the white dress that's the first dress she's ever owned. The dress is a soft filmy spring dress, knee-length, flaring out fuller and fuller till it drapes in milky perfection around her knees, little puffy sleeves, a round neckline. White patent leather pumps, and a matching purse. The purse is empty. It's just a prop.

Taylor almost always showers, but this morning calls for a bath, and she runs the tub full, adding things to the water that she got from the edge of her mother's tub, soft chalky tablets that you crumble up, and some oily-looking drops in a tiny glass bottle.

She shaves her legs more slowly and perfectly than she's ever bothered. White nylons would have made her look like a nurse, so she's going bare-legged this morning.

Dressed and ready to go, she checks her reflection one last time, wishing she had softer, longer hair so she could pile it up in some feminine fashion, but she's never been really good at that kind of thing anyway. Better the wrong style done well, than the right one muffed, she thinks to herself, sitting down on the edge of her bed, taking the bottle from its hiding place behind her nightstand.

These, too, she's taken from her mother's bathroom, from the medicine cabinet, one at a time and only from fullish bottles. It's taken her over a year to collect enough.

Today's the day.

Pouring most of the pills out into the palm of her hand, she feels a slight nagging doubt. Nothing serious, just her old companion, the perfectionist control freak who lives in her skull with her. Has she done everything right? Has she done everything she needs to? Setting the pills down, she takes one more turn around her room, scans the letter one last time.

Mom and Daddy;

Please remember, above all, that I love you. I have always loved you. My actions now do not reflect a change in the way I feel about you. Please don't hold yourselves responsible for this. I simply cannot find a reason to live.

I have decided that today is the day I leave this world. My world is filled with bombs on airplanes, drugs in the streets, people dying every day. My world isn't the world you live in, not any more. Your world is filled with stocks and bonds and concerts and recitals.

If I could live in your world, maybe I'd go on, but I can't. My world offers no reason to live. I am leaving this morning, after you have left on your weekend away.

Please don't worry about me. The method I have chosen will be swift and painless. I'll just drift off to sleep, my favorite music on the iPod you gave me.

Please give my iPod to Lucy, next door, as she has always liked it. The clothes I am wearing are what I am to be buried in. Please let Lucy take what she wants from the rest, and then Jennie. What's left, please give to the women's shelter. Please, it is very important to me that you **DO NOT SELL ANY OF IT!!** And don't give it to any store that will sell it. I can't explain why, but even that mink stole Grandma gave me must be passed on to someone with nothing in return. Please, this is very important to me.

There's a file on my computer called funeral.doc. It's in My Documents. The password for my computer is orlandobloom. These are the instructions for my funeral. There's a lot that I don't care about, and you can do what you want, but please do the things that are listed there. I won't go into details here, but one thing is **VERY VITAL!! NO TEARS!!** There is to be no crying at my funeral! I forbid it! Mom, stop that! And something I just thought of: my headstone must read "She went boldly into that good night."

Always remember, I love you both very much. That is what I'll be thinking as I go to sleep:

I love you, I love you, I love you!

Love forever,

Taylor

But the letter's perfect, that's not what she's worried about. The worry is: has she looked hard enough? Has she searched everywhere?

Beauty. Freedom. Truth. Love.

Those were the ideals she listed, that day almost three years ago now, the things she said would constitute sufficient reason to live. She'd look for Beauty, Freedom, Truth, or Love, and if she found any one of the the four, she'd go on. She'd turn her back on all of this with the finality of resolution that only a perfectionist control freak can muster, and she'd live out her days on Earth in the memory of what she'd found that one time.

She never found any of her Four Ideals. But suppose, she thinks now, turning the bottle of tiny pills to face the exact front of her nightstand, centering it between the two edges, suppose she didn't look hard enough? Suppose she never looked in the right place. Suppose the Four are waiting for her right now, right around some corner somewhere?

One more walk, then, she tells the perfectionist. One more time. One more quest. She has all day.

A beautiful day to die, she thinks, locking the door. In a sudden rush of pure joy, she twirls on her front porch, kitten heels thumping hollowly on the old peeling boards, skirt flaring out like a drooping white lily.

Today's the day!

It feels really odd, walking familiar sidewalks in heels and a dress. Well, they're really not very high heels, but they're not her old Converse, either, and all the other times she's worn a skirt, she wore nylons, too. The fresh spring breeze reaches a surprising way up the dress.

Canyon Park first. Slip through the old woods on the white gravel path, squirrels and woodpeckers drowning out the faint traffic sounds from the rim. There's a place she likes to stand, partway down the side of the big gully the park's named for, on the first of the bridges. There's a tree across the canyon, rooted in the rocks halfway down, still below her so she's just level with the tip of it.

There's something she can almost name in the line that old tree makes, standing up so straight and firm, something in the way it drapes its roots like vines down the stony face, seeking out the bits of earth and water among the boulders, clinging to its precarious toehold. Every spring, she swears this winter killed it, finally, and there will be no green this year. It couldn't find enough of what it needs in the tiny pockets among the boulders, couldn't find a reason to live, and next fall, the winds will topple it from its stony throne.

Every spring, long after all the other trees have sprouted a green haze you can only see if you look sideways, the old cliff tree finally manages a few straggly sprays of growth, drawn in chalk on heavy, toothy paper. Looking down into the tree, she sees it has that chalky headdress now. Goodbye, old tree, she waves to it, smiling, goodbye and good luck, moving on.

The focal point of this trail is a ninety-year-old concrete bridge, slung across the face of the falls, halfway down. There's a plaque on the mossy concrete railing that tells how long the geologists think this river has taken this plunge, but she can never remember how long it says, and she doesn't go out that far across the bridge now. If you stand right here, looking up, if you're early enough, you can see the sun tip up over the cliff top, peeking down along the steep stairway of the falls, and you can see a full-circle rainbow. When the sun's lifted high enough that she can no longer make out that awesome ring, she waves goodbye to the fading halo, smiling. Goodbye, rainbow, she waves, moving on.

Beauty, Freedom, Truth, Love. There's prettiness here, there's an ease of movement among the trees and slanting beams of sunlight, there's a feeling of age and wholeness, but that's all there is.

Climbing the trail out the other side of the park, she pauses, thinking, checking her watch. Perhaps the mall? There are always a lot of people in there, and people-watching is one of her favorite things. She takes a table in the food court.

When she first made this decision, when she was thirteen, she came to the mall and she spent one entire day just watching people go by. She'd thought she'd find the Four Ideals blazoned on the faces of these people, but all she saw was hurry and rush and pain, choices to be made, stuff to be gotten, places to be gotten to and then away from as fast as possible, and she stopped looking in the faces for the things she needed to find.

Now she watches as an old man crosses from the coffee stand with a cup in one hand. He's wearing a carefully tailored brown suit, his shirt as white as clouds, his tie so red, so perfect, she finds no words for it. His eyes are ob-

scured by the darkest glasses she has ever seen, and the stiff handle of his dog's harness is in his other hand. The dog is a sleek, smooth, short-haired German Shepherd, and if you could ask that dog a question, he would tell you there is only one person on Earth. Everyone and everything else is an obstacle to the progress of that one person, something for him to be guided around. The dog's eyes flick unceasingly from chair to table to the knees of a passing stranger, to the grasping hand of a toddler, pulling against his mother, back to the table, to the knees and feet of his man, watching, checking, calculating and recalculating, nudging and pulling so imperceptibly she can barely see it, guiding that one single person to the table he's chosen for him, guiding him there so surely and so perfectly, that when the man gets there, he reaches out and sets the coffee down squarely, takes the back of the chair with a single gentle, seeing sweep of his hand, settles to his place.

The dog sits beside him, watching his face, and the man fondles his muzzle with hands that see as surely as her eyes do, kisses the soft fuzzy spot between his ears, whispers something to the eyes that see for him. As he turns to his coffee, reaching surely and deftly to exactly where it sits, the dog lies down, watching him, and only a long moment later, sure his job is done for now as well as it can be, as perfectly as he can do it, does he lay his head on his feet and sigh a sigh of perfect contentment, his faithful eyes closed.

Now the old man's just a man drinking coffee, and she looks away, looks beyond him, to the passing flow of people. There's a man in his twenties, a big Goth-punk-biker-looking guy she'd not want to meet in a dark alley somewhere. Every single thing he wears is black denim or black leather, studded and chained like winter tires, and at least half of the skin she can see is tattooed. He has silver studs and rings and bolts through every piece of himself that you can pull tight enough to poke a hole in, and he's walking along slowly, leaning down over a Target cart, pushing with his elbows. In the cart is a baby girl less than a year old, her dress a pile of pink and white, her smiling eyes fixed unswervingly on his ugly face, and the man murmurs to her non-stop as they cruise slowly by, his eyes never leaving hers, smiling a smile down at her so tiny Taylor can just barely see it.

There's something there... There's something there that's... There's something there, too, that she can't quite name. She named the Four Ideals. Well, she didn't, but someone did, in that movie she saw so long ago. She wrote them down and pinned them to the frame of the mirror on her dresser, is all she did. But they have names, that's the point. They have names, and something she can't name doesn't.

Riverside Park. She'll go to Riverside Park. There was something very very close to an Ideal in the stately passage of the tugs and sailboats, something very much like something with a name in the swift dartings of the ski boats, and she'll go look there again. This has to be right, it has to be the one and only thing left to her, if today's to be the day.

Walking to Riverside Park, passing the shop windows full of things you have to have, watching all these helter-skelter people, breathing the fresh spring air they're ignoring, she feels the doubts fading. She looked a long time, and never found any of the Four. She'll look today, she'll look till mid-afternoon, but she won't find any of them now, either, and then she'll go home and go. This is right, this is all that she can do. Her world offers no reason for living.

There's a hill in Riverside Park, a soft swell of ground that rises like a lookout above the picnic tables along the boardwalk, and at the top, beyond a sandy area, where the grounds crew leaves it alone, there's a patch of coarse tall grass. Since Taylor was very young, she's always liked to lie there in that grass, her elbows on the ridge, her legs stretched down the slope behind her, pretending. She pretends she's a princess, and this is her realm, all the little people down there along the walk. She's a giantess, lying there watching the villagers, choosing her dinner. She's an ant farmer, watching her livestock scuttle along at their myriad doings. Sometimes a long train grinds along the tracks on the far side of the river, and she's a model railroader, switching cars in and out of her train.

A tug steams by southbound, racing down the river ahead of its string of barges, the mammoth tow line dipping down into the water and rising up again at the lead barge. Another goes by upstream, blowing hard, its tow line lifting and surging in the surface of the river like a sea serpent, tossing long lines of spray as the tug fights the current. A fast white ketch running downstream passes a slow brown schooner moving up, and for some

reason she thinks of the keyboarding lessons in seventh grade, the old keyboards clacking noisily in the droning quiet. There was something in these movements, when she looked here last summer, something that might have a name, if only she could name it, but there's nothing here now, and she feels an ache somewhere, looking for that thing again.

She crosses her arms in the grass, lowers her head to rest her cheek on her hands. There's a stem of tough grass right in front of her, so close she can see the sandy texture of the underside of the leaves, feel them rasping on her unmoving hands. If you split a leaf of this grass and cuddle it between your thumbs, pulling it tight as a drum with your fingertips, you can lie here hidden in the grass and whistle such a piercing blast the rivermen on their tugs will lift their heads, looking for you along the shoreline. Wait until they look down, and you can do it over and over and they'll never spot you, hiding in the grass on the ridge line. She doesn't whistle now, she doesn't move, lying there with her head down in the grass. She sees a red bug so tiny his legs are invisible, moving like a floating dot of red up and down the stem of grass. She wonders if he's hunting or running, hiding or seeking, prey or predator. He's so tiny she can't see his legs, and yet his legs are good enough to move him briskly up and down his grass world.

But the bug has a name already, whatever it is, *buggus tinius reddus* or something, and she can't name him, and the names wouldn't fit him anyway, and she turns over, her hands smoothing her skirt down along her legs and then coming to rest on her stomach. She watches the clouds, looking there, seeking there. The dress has no waistline, and her hands begin to drift along the smooth expanse of fabric from the rise of her breasts, down along her stomach as far as she can reach and back again, slowly slowly slowly dragging along the fine grain of the linen. She can feel the waistband of her underwear slipping past under her fingertips and back again like slow clockwork, but there's nothing else in the soft hypnotic slide, and she can feel each thread in the cloth catch and release each swirl in her fingerprints, over and over and over.

Somewhere to her right, a bird calls, the same lilting twitter over and over, like it's practicing a speech. Is there something in that short snippet of song that she can name? Is there something there that needs a name and hasn't got one?

Clouds. There was something in the clouds that almost earned one of those names, one day, but she wasn't sure which name to give it, or what it was she was seeing, and in the end, she gathered up her names and went home. Now she tries again, wanting to go down that path knowing she did everything she could. If there's someone in that good night that asks her questions, someone that wants to know whether she did her best, she wants to hold her head high and boldly speak her answer: "I did my utmost. There was no reason."

Beauty? Freedom? Truth? Love? Not from the clouds, and she rises to her feet, satisfied and quiet. She'll go home. She's ready to go now. She walks swiftly and smoothly home to her waiting bed, smiling a small peaceful smile all the way, happy in the perfect fit of her choice.

But when the kitten heels of her white patent leather pumps drum again on the weathered boards of the front porch, the tattoo they beat there is so hypnotic she stops, and turns to the street. There's something. . . There's something in the sky, something in the tree in the front yard, something in the squirrel's voice, something in the swoop of a bird. . . There's something in each and every thing she can see or hear or taste or feel or smell, and each and every one of them is named beauty and freedom and truth and love, and in a sudden rush of pure joy, she twirls on her front porch, kitten heels thumping hollowly on the old peeling boards, skirt flaring out like a drooping white lily.