

Big Blue Malibu

I'm dying

And as I lay here dying, my frail body cushioned and caressed by my deathbed, I find it funny what thoughts run through my head. My life these days consists of nothing but thinking and pondering, but they are not the thoughts I would have expected in my situation: instead of begrudging death I find myself celebrating life; I find myself thinking of all that I have accomplished and everything I have seen.

Is this what they mean when they speak of your life flashing before your eyes?

If so then my history has been flashing before my eyes for a long while now and it is filled with the people I know, the people I knew and the people I almost knew. You'd think that my thoughts would be crammed full to bursting of my loved ones: my beloved husband, my daughter and my sister; but I found this is not so. They are there, to be sure, but you will be as surprised as I to hear that the person who enters my thoughts more often than any other is a stranger: a man whose name I never took the time to learn.

He entered my life several times, each time through complete coincidence (or perhaps fate, as some would call it) and each time something new happened. Each time my life was redefined in a way I could never have foreseen.

I was just six years old when I first met him. My father, a strong, imposing man, and I were on a stroll one evening. My hand was wrapped tightly around my father's rough callused finger, and I could feel his powerful reassurance flowing into me.

I'm not too sure what caused me to look up when I did (for, in the spirited tradition of six-year-olds, I was trying my hardest not to step on any cracks), but, when I looked up and met a stranger's bright, spirited eyes, something in my young soul shook and a lust for knowledge and adventure blossomed in my heart. I was only a young girl then, and looking back he must not yet have been twenty, still only a young soul himself, but the fire and opportunity I saw boiling behind his emerald eyes set me upon a path that would define my life.

One wouldn't normally think that a person as young as I was then could have a moment that re-defined their life. But I really, truly believe that that is what happened. Before then I would say it was as though I had been strung along by my parents, learning what they chose to teach me and being completely content with this way of life.

But the passion for life that I felt emanating from this young man blew those preconceptions away and set me on my life path. My parents would later tell me that they didn't know what had gotten into me. I became rambunctious... well, no, that isn't the right word. Adventurous and curious is a more apt way of putting it, I suppose. After that there wasn't anything I was afraid to stick my nose into and from that point on it seemed like my hands and knees were always dirty, for I could usually be found crawling into any new, unexplored corner I could find.

Eventually this curiosity led me to search for a way to express myself and my individuality (well, looking back this is how I would explain it... I don't think I consciously understood the concept of self-expression and individuality when I was seven). What I found to satisfy this urge was dance. Any type of dance would do back then. I would dance in my room for hours after school, just flailing around and making up my own dance moves to my mom's old Beach Boys and Aretha Franklin records. I couldn't get enough of moving my body and feeling the music. It was a youthful exploration of sound and the world of music.

My parents encouraged and supported my dancing: I would put on shows for them and their friends during dinner parties, relishing in the drunken applause that would come afterwards as I gave my short, precise bows.

My parents were of the nurturing sort so I quickly found myself enrolled in a ballet class and let me tell you... the first time I looked in one of the wall-spanning mirrors that lined the dance studio and I saw myself standing beside my mom, our hands clasped securely together, all my fears were wiped away.

I looked magical.

And so started the affair of my life.

I was a good ballerina. Very good, in fact. By the time I reached 13 years of age I was being scouted by many of the top schools, not only here in Canada, but from around the world. I loved the

attention. So many people coming to watch me dance, each one a blank slate onto which I could write an everlasting impression of myself by dancing for them.

My parents pushed me hard. They were both people who had had dreams early in life that they never pursued. I think that my achievements as a dancer were a medium through which they could live out their own lost successes.. That's not to say both of my parents wanted to be dancers (the only time I ever saw my father dance was at those aforementioned dinner parties – alcohol sure can bring out the best in some people...), but it showed them a glimpse of what life can be if one only follows and devotes oneself to their dreams and passions.

My father always wanted to be a writer. No, scratch that... he *was* a writer. He wrote a lot in his spare time, always with a pen and pad somewhere nearby. He wrote whatever came into his mind and later in life I would read many of his works: play scripts, radio-dramas (a genre for which he had a curious passion for), short stories and even some half-finished novels of various genres. He just never pursued it as a career.

Looking back I think he was scared to do it; scared of the rejection that he would face; perhaps, ironically, even afraid of the success he might find. He knew there was a lot of pressure in the publishing field and I'm just not sure if he felt up to it. I guess he just wasn't a go-getter kind of guy.

I, on the other hand, dealt with the pressure of the dance world well. A lot of girls (and boys, for that matter) can't put up with the pressure of being scouted and knowing that their futures are in the hands of a small group of strangers sitting in the back row of a theatre. For me, though, there was something about it that made me feel invincible. In a lot of ways it felt as though I was expected to fail... as though the scouts had already decided I would fall or forget the dance. It was this perception that drove me: I wanted to prove them wrong. I needed them to leave disappointed because I *was* amazing, disappointed because they knew that they were going to have to give in to the fact that I deserved to be at their school.

I was good... and I knew it.

In fact, I loved it.

And then, one day, *he* appeared again, a small blip on the radar of my life, and everything changed.

There I was, with a smile plastered to my face. The sun was shining and only a few wisps of cloud marred the dusty blue sky. Why would I not be smiling? My junior prom was just around the corner and I was going with *Will Winchester* of all people. I mean, you should have seen the faces of some of the girls nearby when he came brashly to my locker and asked me to the dance. It was priceless.

Of course I'd said yes. He was only the most popular boy in the school and for whatever reason (it wasn't my boobs, that's for sure) he wanted to go with me.

I met the world with a grin for the next few days. My mother and I (along with Sara, my little sister) cruised through every dress shop in town trying to find the perfect dress for the big night (for under \$100 of course...) and, after many fruitless hours of searching, we had finally managed to find it. It was a beauty: coral-pink and ruffles as far as the eye could see. Today, of course, I wouldn't be caught dead in it, but at the time it was just right.

A few days later, on a hot, flawless afternoon, I went to the dress shop alone. My parents did not get paid until Friday, at which time they would buy me the dress, but I just couldn't wait that long. I caught the bus downtown and rushed over to the dress shop for a fitting and loved the dress even more than I did the first time. It really was a wonderful time to be me. Looking back on it, it was a funny time, I was so happy and ignorant of what was to come, and had I any idea of what it would be like when real-life came knocking, I wouldn't have had such a smirk on my young, pretty face.

That being said, I left the dress shop with a big goofy grin stretching ear to ear. Prom was only three days away and my heart was fluttering with joy in such a naïve way that it can only exist in the hearts of young girls. I was enjoying life so much, in fact, that I let it slip right out from under me.

I was in my own little world, making my way lackadaisically to the bus stop when it all happened. I stepped into the crosswalk; everyone was stopped nicely at their red lights and so I presumed everything was safe. I dipped back into my daydreaming as I walked through the intersection. As I was passing in front of a dusty, blue Malibu I was shaken from my wanderings by a loud, jarring crunch and squeal of colliding metal.

This sound erupted around me for only an instant before the right side of my body exploded in pain.

Then I blacked out.

As my gummy eyes fluttered open I could see a man staring down at me, panic etched into his face. His fiery, green eyes were frantic as they met mine.

These were the eyes that I remembered from so long ago, when I was walking down the street with my hand firmly gripped in my Father's. It was the young man who had opened so many doors for me when I was still young. It was the man who, in an indirect manner, had led me to dance and thus helped define the early part of my life.

His lips were moving wildly. I knew he was trying to tell me something, but I couldn't hear the words that came from his mouth. *Why is he so frantic?* I thought to myself, unaware of what had happened to me. I could think only of how *he* needed to calm down. I tried to tell him this, but the effort caused me to slip back into unconsciousness.

The car that hit me had been slammed into violently from behind by an out of control pickup truck. This caused the Malibu to jar forward and send me flying. I didn't die, as is obvious by my sitting here telling this story, but I might as well have as far as I was concerned.

The whole right side of my body, from the waist down, was shattered. What followed next was hour upon hour of surgery and weeks in the hospital working on rehabilitation and recovery (during which time I missed my junior prom and Will Winchester ending up necking with my best friend). The good news was that I would walk again (and mostly normally, too. No limp.)

But, as always with good news, the bad news was soon to follow.

I wasn't long into rehabilitation when bad news decided to reveal its presence. I guess a part of me always knew it would come. I think I could even see it in the eyes of those around me whenever I watched any sort of dance on the television. It was a sad sort of look and at the time and, if I even noticed it, I thought they were just sorry for the pain I was going through and the loneliness I was feeling (what with being caught up in the hospital while all of my friends were enjoying their summer).

So, the bad news: My dance career was over.

As soon as that big, dirty pickup made contact with the Malibu my name went from being a chapter in the book of dance to an obscure, dusty footnote hidden deep within the chapter titled "Failures". Better dancers than me had had their careers ended by more insignificant injuries than mine. I knew this, but it didn't help me cope at all.

There were times in the hospital when I thought it was all over, I didn't think that there was anything left in life worth pursuing. Dance was my life, and now it was gone. So, in a young, twisted sense, I convinced myself that my life itself was gone, that it had been viciously slammed out of me on a cheerful summer day.

Gone was the lust I had for life. Gone was the excitement I felt at all the different possibilities that had laid themselves before me. Instead of taking control and grasping what was mine to take, I was simply lying back and taking the scraps that fell from those more privileged than I.

This attitude continued for a long while (a couple of weeks, if I recall correctly), until one night I was woken from a startling dream. Consistent with the nature of dreams, it quickly fluttered out of my mind's grasp within seconds of my eyes opening; but though the dream itself was forever out of my reach, it had opened within me a memory that had been locked away since the accident.

It was the memory of the young, green-eyed man as he cradled my broken body in his arms. I remembered the fire in his eyes. I remembered the insistence and the compassion that had flowed into me through his clammy clothing and enveloped my body, keeping me safe from pain and fear during those few shocking moments of clarity.

And I remembered the promise I had made to him.

He had no idea this promise existed. In fact, on a conscious level before that moment, neither had I.

But that didn't make it any less powerful. A promise existed between us that I would not let life slip through my fingers and I would not let life pass me by. When I was very young he showed me the power of life through nothing more than a simple, innocent glance and at that moment my life was shaped.

I had to keep that promise to him.

I had to keep it to myself.

After that my rehab was a breeze (well, as breezy as rehab on a shattered hip can be). When I made my way out of the hospital, back into the world that thrived outside the confines of the hospital, I found my old life still there, waiting patiently for me. Nothing had changed during my stay in the hospital and after a few weeks it felt as if I had never left the real world.

I was even able to get back into dancing. I knew, and accepted, that I would never be a professional dancer, but casual dance was still a possibility. When I was seventeen the dance studio at which I danced offered me the opportunity to teach a children's ballet class. I gladly accepted the opportunity.

So, slowly but surely, I began to forget and move past the pain and uncertainty I had experienced in the hospital. I knew now that dance wasn't forever lost to me and that it could still be a part of my life. I found a joy in teaching the little ones how to discover the power of dance and found that watching them on stage could be every bit as exhilarating as actually being up there myself.

Then time passed.
A lot of time.

And life went on. Not always exactly as planned... but, then again, that's the whole point, isn't it? I grew up; I fell in love; I had a daughter and the years crawled steadily by.

And now I lie here in a white room telling my story. About eight months ago that I again glimpsed those evocative green eyes peering at me from under heavy lids.

Before that day I would always have counted the time I was struck by the car as the worst in my life. All it took to trivialize that day was for a doctor to utter three profound words: "You have cancer."

I can still picture the look on his face. He wore a mask of empathy and sorrow, but it was what hid underneath that that mask that resonated most deeply with me.

Ironically, I think Freddie Mercury summed up what I saw behind that mask very eloquently when he uttered the words, "Another one bites the dust." It's painful to remember that look but I force myself to and it helps me put things into perspective. He had a human side that cared, that felt honest sadness at my condition, but he was also a doctor who saw a patient who he wouldn't have under his care by this time next year.

And you know what? I didn't blame him. I wasn't even angry with him; he had a job to do and he would do it. At least he had the foresight to put on that mask of compassion before breaking the news to me.

After those words everything else the doctor had to say to me was a blur. I nodded when I needed to and even asked a few questions, but none of my actions were dictated by my conscious mind. I stumbled out of the office into the clinical, white halls of the hospital. I walked slowly through them, carving a meandering path to the elevator that would take me back to the ground floor and my waiting car.

I stabbed the button with my finger, then watched as it lit up and the digital display above the cold, steel doors started to click methodically upwards towards the eighth floor.

After what seemed like a millennium the doors finally parted and the elevator opened.

I paid no attention to the man inside.

Then he looked at me and I was shocked to see those familiar green eyes locking onto mine beneath heavy eyelids. The man smiled and began to shuffle out of the elevator. Physically he looked ruined: his body frail and thin, his hospital robe hanging off his frame in a billowy way like a ship's sail. Beside him, being dragged along by his weary arms, was an IV machine pumping whatever life-giving medicines kept him functioning.

I shot my hand out as the elevator doors "dinged," to stop them from shutting. As the man with the green eyes passed I wondered if I was again seeing my future projected through this individual, who was still no more than a stranger to me.

I watched as the old man made his way down the hall, one small, shuffling step at a time, then entered the elevator and didn't look back.

That man had taught me always to look forward in life, and I had kept that promise throughout my life. It was also not one I was going to abandon because of a doctor's diagnosis.

I went home and put my mind to creating a fantastic dinner for my husband and daughter, which allowed me to take my mind off everything. I broke the news to Will that evening while we were in bed.

We cried.

We cried a lot that night, but then we moved on. In some ways knowing how long you have left can give you some peace of mind. I've been able to settle any qualms I had in life -- tie up loose ends, if you will. These last eight months have been some of the best in my life simply by virtue of knowing that I have to seize the day because I only have so many left.

My family has found it hard, but I think it helps them to see how well I've accepted what is to come. I know this isn't the end, and that it isn't a time to mourn but instead to celebrate my life and all that I have done. I've made it well known to my family and friends that they are to hold a festive funeral for me, very much in the tradition of the Irish: celebrate my life, not mourn my death.

I began by saying how it was funny, the things and people that roll through your thoughts when you have nothing else to do but think. This was a story of my life and the forces that shaped and changed it. Yet little was said about those that were most important to me and much was told about a stranger.

You don't even know the name of my daughter or the colour of my husband's eyes and yet you know much about a man whose presence only had the briefest of contact with my own. That isn't to say that my loved ones didn't have an impact on my life and making me who I am; instead, it points to the fact the biggest and most monumental changes in a person's life can happen in an instant.

I lay here and think about these things a lot these days and have come to many conclusions about my life and those that were important to me. I feel strong (mentally, at least) but that hasn't stopped me from looking back at the hard time and the happy times and crying with equal grief and sadness. If there was anything I have learned in the last several months it is that everything around you, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem to you, is important and is worth exploring.

I think about the green-eyed man often and in many ways it feels as if I knew that one man better than I knew my family. All this, despite the fact that he was in my life for no more than a few minutes total. And so that leads me to wonder if he ever truly existed at all. Can such coincidence really exist outside of a Hollywood script?

One thing I have come to realize is that the green-eyed man had little direct impact upon me; instead he was a catalyst for change within myself. He allowed me to find myself, to find the life that was hidden away within me all along and allow it to be set free and carve my existence through a world so full of inconsistencies.

My life was shaped by many different forces: family, friends, strangers, cars; but, most of all it was shaped by the single most important force in my world: Me.