

Time and Harmony



October 17, 2014

I remember how Gabe looked when I first met him. It was much like how he looked now, minus about three inches of hair. He had the same sharp nose and dark, piercing eyes that seemed to laser straight through the air, perceiving on a deeper level than most could even conceive of. His thin face was almost too intelligent-looking for his warm, jovial demeanor. He had one of those faces that you often prejudged before getting to know. He came across as arrogant when you first met him, to tell you the truth. I thought it was probably because he was so good-looking.

My opinion was a biased one since Gabe and I were together. We were engaged and living together in the cutest, albeit smallest apartment either of us had ever seen. We had moved the week before and were still unpacking. You wouldn't know it though, because I had started on the painting and decorating on the day that we made settlement. My parents had already been over and, although they hated the fact that Gabe and I were living together before the wedding, they absolutely loved our new place. I had hung three very large contemporary paintings above the chocolate brown sofa with the red satin pillows. Gabe had selected the pillows when we were at the furniture store a few weeks ago. It turned out that he was a fairly decent decorator. I had no idea. He was always surprising me that way.

He was pretty unpredictable, Gabe. One moment we would be arguing over where to put the new dresser and the next moment he would be laughing and the tension would abruptly dissipate. That's just how he was. I had never seen him stay mad for very long, especially with me. He would always find some way to laugh and was always playing jokes on me, especially if that joke involved using a ridiculously fake voice or accent. He imitated everyone from Dr. Phil and Bill Cosby to Jerry Seinfeld. I had never met anyone like him.

Maybe that was why I hadn't taken the situation seriously on that particular night:
October 7, 2014.

I suppose that on some level, I had heard the phone ringing that night, but at the time, I was too engrossed in the project I was working on. I had been trying to decide between painting the kitchen either tan or light brown, and after a week of indecision, I resolved to use both colors. But I turned off the loud rock music that was blasting in the room when I heard the machine beep. I knew that Gabe was busy hanging pictures in the bedroom, so I cautiously tip-

toed to the phone, careful not to drip paint onto the new ivory colored carpet. I nudged the little red voicemail button with my elbow and took the opportunity to glance around my beautiful new living room. *Our* new living room.

I was surveying the room, looking for drips in the paint, when a goofy, nervous-sounding voice spoke through the machine. It was the receptionist at the doctor's office. He began by mentioning that the lab results from our physicals were in. I listened for more, but was too distracted by the thick, whiny New York accent. I had to chuckle, though, when I made the connection. It sounded exactly like a male version of Gabe's Fran Drescher impersonation. The voice sounded sort of nervous and went on to say that the doctor needed Gabe to call back as soon as possible, and regretted that he couldn't disclose more.

By the end of the message, I was laughing uncontrollably at the ridiculousness of the voice. Typical. He sounded like Mighty Mouse after ingesting helium. Shaking my head, I slid my shoes off and trotted up the stairs to where I knew I would find Gabe sitting with the phone, shaking with laughter even more so than I was.

But, that was not what I found. When I entered the bedroom, I saw that Gabe was wearing his earphones, standing on the bed while he hung a very large painting above the headboard. In fact, it took me over a minute just to get his attention away from what he was doing before I could explain what had taken place.

After making absolutely sure that Gabe was not the screechy voicemail-leaver, I urged him to call the doctor's office that very moment while I lay down on the bed, my heart beginning to jump rope as I considered the horrifying possibilities. But Gabe remained calm. He cracked a smile and even laughed a little, for my benefit. I could tell exactly when the doctor got on the

line, though. I could tell because Gabe's beautiful smile gradually melted down into a hard line. It turned out that some of his results had been pretty bad, pretty *horrible*, actually. His white blood cell count was apparently way too high. He would have to go back in for a series of tests.

Time moved on and the only things I had to show for the few weeks that followed were a half-painted kitchen, a trashcan full of empty tissue boxes, and about a million sympathetic messages on the machine in the living room.

Normally, I liked my doctor. I had actually been more than happy to refer my fiancé to Dr. Marshall. He always came into the room saying things like "Okay kid, let me give it to ya straight." I appreciated the fact that he cut right through the fluff. He didn't keep you waiting or in the dark like most doctors seemed to do.

It was ironic though, because at that moment, lying on the bed all hunched over and red-faced, thinking back to the day of the follow up, I wished that the doctor had kept us there for hours, just talking about the weather, talking about his kids and what sport they played at school. I wished that he had told us anything but what he had *actually* told us, which was that Gabe was very sick; That he had cancer.

The thing is, I'm a very practical person. The first thing I had tried to do when I got back to the apartment, secretly, was to *attempt* to picture my life without him. But I couldn't do it. I suddenly felt more alone than I ever had, even before I had met Gabe at all. Gabe wasn't doing too well either. He mostly just sat on the sofa in the living room, punching the remote control until it cycled through the channels at a rapid rate, the light reflecting off his dark,

unseeing eyes. Since we had gotten the news, I might have heard him utter three different sentences, but I couldn't remember what they were now.

Because of this, I had been particularly interested one night, about three weeks later, when I could hear his voice resonating through the hall as if someone else had been in the room. I rose from the bed, which was no easy feat in itself, and ventured into the living room, afraid of what I might see.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I actually *did* see.

I saw myself. I actually saw *myself* looking back at me. The same dark hair, the same large golden brown eyes with the little mole at the corner of the mouth, only it wasn't exactly like looking in a mirror. Not really. I looked older somehow, weary. I gasped at the sight of her. My pulse increased to that of a hummingbird's and every bone in my legs abruptly disappeared. I struggled for words, my mouth fumbling for a scream. I searched Gabe's tired face for an answer.

"Harmony, it's okay."

We both turned at the sound of the name, the stranger and I.

He took a deep breath. He was losing strength quickly, though I didn't know if was due to the sickness or to the depression that had entangled him since we had left Dr. Marshall's office.

"Remember last week when they had that whole write-up in the paper about that famous scientist and his theories of time-traveling or time-bending, or whatever he called it?" I wanted to

nod but couldn't. The world was still muted. "Well, uh...I think it might be real. Or, um...it *will be real.*"

The stranger nodded and turned to address me. "Harmony, I'm...you. I know it sounds clichéd but I'm from the future, five years to be exact. Anyway, I can't stay long. I know this is hard for you, but I have a message that's so important I can't even waste time trying to explain how important it is! Does that make any sense?"

I nodded slowly, unable to form a reply. The scream was slowly working its way up, creeping into my bone-dry throat.

"Good. Now listen to me carefully. Get a pen."

My eyes darted to the table next to me. I was still unable to speak and apparently unable to use my hands. What kind of nightmare....?

Luckily, the stranger produced her own pad and paper. She began frantically to write her message, as it was obvious that I could not. "Okay. There is a Dr. Kenneth Logan at the University hospital in the city. You have to go to him. He has an experimental surgery. It's just been developed and has only been performed once before, but you must let him save Gabe. It CAN work! Do you understand what I'm *saying* to you?!" She said the last part through tears she had been choking back but could no longer hold in.

"Listen, umm future *me*," I had finally found my voice. Her obvious pain had somehow temporarily broken me out of my own stupor. "I don't understand. There's an experimental surgery? But the doctor said it was in too delicate of an area...he said that that kind of brain surgery would either kill Gabe or cause him to lose his entire *personality*." I could feel

the sting of the old, familiar tears surfacing again. The weight that had been temporarily alleviated was back and resting dully on my shoulders once more.

“Yes, but Harmony,” (It was so strange hearing myself say my own name like that). “You have to. You just have to,” Future me was getting desperate now; “It will work. It *has* to! In the future, it works. You have to trust me. In about four years, Dr. Logan receives the Nobel Prize! He cures cancer! His book becomes Oprah's number one 'favorite thing!'”

My palms had started to sweat. I stumbled a bit and grabbed at the wall behind me. I felt the blood rushing to my head as a million thoughts bounced around, knocking into each other, colliding and forming their own universe, one in which Gabe could be saved and we could go about our lives in the way we'd planned and taken for granted for so long.

“You have to do it, Harmony. You *have* to. You think you understand now, but you *don't*. The reason you have to take him to Dr. Logan is...because it's his only option. You won't be able to live without him, you know that. But, Harmony, if you don't go to Dr. Logan, you won't have much time. You'll have practically *no* time!”

I wiped my watery eyes with my hand and looked up into her face, into my face. It was then that I noticed what she was wearing. Her black heels and simple black skirt were ordinary enough, but suddenly I couldn't believe that I hadn't noticed the rest of her outfit. I let my eyes travel up her slender body. Above the black skirt there was a tight-fitting black button-down blouse. She even wore black-framed glasses. It didn't even bother me to know that I would need glasses in the future. It didn't bother me because I was too busy staring at her (*my*) left hand. My heart fluttered higher and higher, threatening to burst through my chest and into my aching throat as I saw the rings, one which I recognized as the engagement ring that Gabe had

given me three months ago, resting sadly next to a larger one, a man's ring, which I could only assume would be Gabe's. Only, why was it on *my* hand?

On some level, I knew the answer, knew as soon as I saw this familiar stranger standing in my living room. But it wasn't until I saw Gabe's father's watch on her (*my*) hand that I could no longer deny the truth of what was to come. Because I knew what the watch meant. I could remember the conversation that Gabe and I had had about the watch. He had said that the watch had belonged to his grandfather, then to his father, and now belonged to him. He had said that he intended to give it to his son someday, to *our* son. He never wore the watch and never, ever let anyone borrow it. But here I was now, wearing Gabe's watch. Instantly, I knew what it meant. Gabe was dead. Gabe would die in five years' time without a child to pass his watch on to. Gabe would die and I would be left without him, to grieve, to walk around in black clothing, crying to past versions of myself, pleading for the only chance that I thought I had left.

A month crawled by, each moment picking and pulling at whatever sanity I had left, seeming with each passing moment to take down what we had built so meticulously. I wanted to be there for Gabe, to comfort him in whichever way he needed, but I was not myself. I was a hollow Harmony-looking skin. I remember feeling as though someone had sucked my soul out like a vacuum and that the disembodied me was floating along the top of the high ceiling, able to watch over the apartment but just out of reach of my dying fiancé. I felt so disconnected from him. He was all I thought about, but in a very different way than I had before. I was ashamed of myself for not having taken adequate care of him and for not being strong enough to care for him now. Mostly I thought a lot, receding into myself. I just sat quietly all day and thought, though I hadn't reached any new conclusions, just that Gabe needed the surgery. We had talked about it and he had agreed.

“On some level, I think I must have known.” He had said to me one night. We were sitting at the kitchen table, both staring into space. “I mean, maybe those weren’t migraines, after all.”

I tried not to burst into tears. Of course. How had I not seen that?

I didn’t know if I could trust this Dr. Logan or his experimental procedure. I didn’t even know what that procedure was. But I could trust myself. I only had to assume that in five years’ time, I would be just as trustworthy as I felt now.

After the surgery, Gabe felt worse than he ever had in his entire life. His head was all bandaged in white gauzy material that had to be changed when it turned yellowish orange with blood and what I assumed to be brain fluid. I suppose I should have known more about the physiology of what had been done to him, but I was more concerned with my role in the situation, which was changing his bandages while trying like hell not to let him see my revulsion at the sight of so much gore in the place where his smooth honey hair should have been. He kept assuring me that he felt fine, but I knew better, knew him better than I knew myself even. I just held my breath and anxiously awaited the day of his follow-up appointment with Dr. Logan.

“It looks like we got most of it, Gabe. In fact, your scans are the best I’ve seen thus far. I don’t want to get your hopes up just yet, but I think we’re looking at a full recovery. That should buy you a little more time, huh? What do you think, Harmony? Err, Harmony?”

We were sitting in one of Dr. Logan’s exam rooms with the sterile smell of rubbing alcohol and the harsh fluorescent rays assaulting my senses. But nothing was as harsh as Dr. Logan’s words. Was I not *supposed* to be alarmed at those words: “a little more time”? A *little more time*?

I stroked Gabe's hand as he sat on the cold exam table. A glance at his face showed me that the vacant expression that he had been wearing of late had not left. He was a ghost of the man I loved so much. It wasn't fair.

"Doctor, I must not have heard you correctly. Did you say 'a little more time'? I thought we were talking about a cure here."

"Err, Harmony, the procedure is still in its experimental stages. I thought we had made that clear. The nurses explained to you that while the best case scenario would be cancer-free scans, we wouldn't be able to tell until months after the initial surgery."

My astonishment was plain.

When we went home that night, we sat up watching television later than we had in a long time. I couldn't even tell you which insignificant film had been playing, only that I had held Gabe's hand throughout the whole two hours and that he had stayed awake, stroking the back of my hand with his smooth, weak fingers. He tried feebly to make a few jokes about the actress in the movie and her fake body parts and I tried my hardest not to let him see the tears that squeezed through my pained and loving eyes as I tried to find some way to record his perfect voice in my memory.

"I know you're not ruining this moment with tears, baby." He slapped my hand playfully. "How often is it that you let me stay up past ten o'clock anymore, after all? Huh? Huh?" He chuckled weakly. I sighed and sunk in closer to him. I didn't need to respond.

A sudden knocking hammered through the warm softness of the moment. I tore my eyes away to the direction of the door, which was already opening. Whoever was there

apparently had a key, narrowing the suspects down to one. An icy, bone-chilling realization descended and squeezed my shoulders in a vice grip, threatening to take everything that we had hoped and suffered for since the supposed *miracle* surgery.

How dare she come back to this house? More importantly, how dare she have the audacity to suggest something so radical and horrible without knowing *for sure* what the effects would be? I sat up straight, suddenly empowered by pure hatred of my supposed “future self,” hugged Gabe tightly, and promptly stormed toward the slowly widening front door with more force and determination than I had shown in weeks.

I fully intended to hit the girl as soon as I caught the first glimpse of her aging face with the stupid thick black frames. Before now, I had never considered hitting another human being. I was always harder on myself than I was to others, frequently blaming and beating myself up for mistakes. Well, wasn't that what I was about to do? I laughed at the irony of it, but I attributed the laughter more to my heightened anxiety than to anything else. That was, until I saw not the face that I had been expecting to see, but an older version of that same face, *my* face.

The skin was a bit drier and more puckered at the corners of the eyes and the thick black frames had been traded for some sort of frameless glasses that seemed to be made more of a futuristic plasma material than of glass. But the outfit was similar. Black. Everything was black. My *life* was now black.

“Ah, Harmony,” This new stranger began, shakily. “I had forgotten what it was like to see a younger version of myself. It's been three years.” Her words were choked a bit at the end.

I nodded, sure now of the reason she had come back. Three more years, that's all. I sighed. I felt exhausted, feeling myself succumb to the depression as the colors slowly faded around me and the world became black and gray.

"It's only been a few weeks for us."

"I know, I know. But I chose this time because I thought that you would want to know as early as possible. I've learned that hope and uncertainty are funny things, Harmony. I'm sure you've heard the saying 'Ignorance is Bliss.' Well, it's a lie. Had I known not to hope, not to take for granted the things that I now wish I had appreciated so much more, maybe I would still feel like a living, breathing, whole person. But I *don't*, and I've figured out why."

Her eyes began to widen and an almost maniacal smile crept through her hollow face.

"The answer was you. *Me*. If I had known what was eventually going to happen, I would have appreciated our time together so much more. Don't you *see*? I would have savored the time we had!"

I couldn't bear this, any of it. "What?" It was all I had the strength to ask.

"I've been living with a hole inside of me, Harmony. There's something that I have to make you understand. You have to live each day in the moment, never taking for granted your time with...*Gabe*." It pained her to say his name, I could tell. "You understand that you and I are the same person. That means that you could save me from being ripped to shreds, as I feel right now. I need you to do that, Harmony. I'm begging. I have no other choice. I can't go on without some type of healthy closure."

She let go of her erect posture, looking like she wanted to sink to her knees but understanding that she needed to remain composed. She was in obvious physical and emotional pain.

“I have to go now. I only paid for fifteen minutes of time. The world is a very different place in eight years time; you’ll find out. Ah, I know what you want to ask me. It’s okay.”

I cleared my throat, testing my voice. “So, eight years then? The surgery, it didn’t...?”

“It worked. Technically Dr. Logan only promised a temporary solution. I remember telling you that his technique was becoming celebrated worldwide as the ‘miracle cure.’ Well the truth is that just over a year later, the patients started having ‘relapses.’ Gabe was one of the first to undergo the surgery and had one of the longest periods of remission. But that’s all.”

“Oh.” The gray of the walls and ceiling were tightening around my head and shoulders. Eight years.

Pictures littered the apartment. Mismatched frames containing photos of every size, shape, and color were the dominant features now. The 8x10 of Gabe and me on the beach hung above the flat screen in the living room. A large bulletin board, which Gabe had insisted on hanging himself, hung on the far wall and was jammed with 5x7s of the two of us walking along

the boardwalk, at the top of the Millennium Eye in London, on a weekend cruise to the Bahamas, and even posing with celebrity hand prints in Hollywood.

As soon as Gabe had felt up to it, we had taken the advice that I had been given very seriously and after a short period of quiet deliberation and despair, we had decided to experience as much as we could in as much or as little time as we had.

It had been a year. We had gotten married. It was a very large outdoor ceremony. We had gotten married in a beautiful park, next to a waterfall. The pictures were amazing. I thumbed through the wedding album almost daily.

Most importantly, we didn't take anything for granted, not a second. It was strange, but that first year became the best of my life. We were both in such high spirits that most people could not believe the situation that we were *actually* dealing with. Our days were filled with excitement and laughter and new experiences.

Until Gabe got sick again. At just over a year after the surgery, he had started experiencing headaches again. The next day, he became very weak and I began to panic and to brace myself for what might happen. Paranoid thoughts began to race through my mind at all hours of the day, keeping me awake at night. What if the future Harmony had been wrong? What if he was dying *now*? What if I had done something, changed something that had resulted in him actually *losing* seven of those eight years that we had been promised,

Gabe's birthday rolled around on the weekend that he became sick again. The day was a source of stress for me as I began to imagine it as being his last birthday. I tried my best to make it the greatest birthday that it could be, all things considered. I baked a very large and ornate birthday cake from scratch and decorated the apartment with cheesy streamers and signs. I

invited our parents and a few friends over, all of which looked so uncomfortable at the sight of Gabe in his weakened condition that I wanted nothing more than to throw them out as soon as they arrived.

We cut the cake and I began to look forward to our guests' departure when a hurried knock at the front door caused me to drop the heavy silver cake knife I had been using. What was it about the knock that reminded me of something? I hesitated before heading to the door, partly because I dreaded who I would find there and partly because it would be the first time I had left Gabe's side all night. He was clutching my hand feebly and glancing up at me behind his soft, dark lashes. The redness of his eyes scared me, as did his pale complexion and persistent cough. The coughing was new and I could only assume it meant that the cancer had come back and was now spreading further throughout his body, stealing him away from me bit by bit.

Reluctantly, I dropped his cold hand and inched toward the front door. The old, familiar tears began to surge from my eyes and cascade downward, wetting everything in their path. I felt like a character in a storybook leaving a trail of sadness for someone to follow so that they might rush forward and save me from this untimely ending. I reached for the doorknob with one shaking hand, unable to control my grief now.

But I did not meet who or what I was expecting. Instead, there was only an empty hallway save for a small white envelope which lay delicately on top of the welcome mat and displayed the words "For Gabe & Harmony" in a sprawling script. I picked it up, wetting it with my tears before turning it over. Curiously, yet forebodingly, I ripped the top of the envelope and attempted to throw the strip of paper across the hall in vain. Suddenly, the envelope represented everything that we had struggled against these past weeks. Dumping its contents onto the

carpeted floor, I left not a single square inch of white paper intact. It was only *after* shredding and mutilating the envelope in my fit of rage that I realized what it contained. A birthday card. A simple birthday card, the likes of which I hadn't seen at all since the new musical "singing cards" had come out about ten years ago, or the popular "video cards" that had come out in 2011.

Delicately, atoning for my actions, I opened the card. And then dropped it, picked it up again, and ran.

The guests looked extremely confused at the sight of me as I ran back through the hall and living room. They were nothing but nameless, unimportant faces to me. I saw only Gabe, only the back of his covered head as I ran, emotions pouring through my every pore. He looked alarmingly into my eyes, scared of what I had become in the past three minutes.

I thrust the card into his hand, wanting to see his face when he saw it for the first time. He opened the card slowly, not daring to tear his eyes from my face as he did it. When he felt something slide out onto his lap, his eyes darted quickly to the unexpected object. A photo, yet not quite the type that we were used to.

It was thicker than a normal photo and curiously heavy. Gabe turned it around to inspect the battery at the back. Turning it back over to the front, he immediately gasped, as I had. The people in the photo were *moving*. There were almost too many people, too many things going on in the photo to be able to understand it at first glance. About thirty people all crowded around a large table which displayed an amazing five layer cake. Most of them looked as though they were very old, almost ancient looking. I could tell when Gabe saw the two people in the back because his eyes lit up in a way I had never seen. It was us, Gabe and I. We were very, very old looking but still looked like ourselves. Another gasp escaped his lips as his eyes traveled to the

top of the photo, above our heads, where a cheesy-looking silver and blue sign hung with the words “Happy 99th Birthday, Gabe Spencer.”

Confused, disbelieving tears streamed down his face. Every guest was looking at us now, not daring to speak. I thrust a small piece of paper into Gabe’s hand, which had come attached to the photo. It was written in a version of my own handwriting and contained only a few sentences, addressed to both of us.

I write to you from Gabe’s 99th birthday party. The doctors say that his full recovery all those years ago was due to his eternally positive outlook and unparalleled support system. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for never taking a single second for granted.

PS. If I remember correctly, at Gabe’s 24th birthday, he was merely suffering from the flu, which was a relief to us, but which highly inconvenienced the eighteen very angry guests who had to call out sick the entire following week.

Our tears and laughter combined in an explosion which filled the silence of the room.

“Everybody out, Gabe has the flu!” I choked out between hyena-like laughs. “I said out, now! You’ll be sorry!”

Guests ran for the door as Gabe and I embraced tightly. We held each other until the last guest got bored of asking unanswered questions and finally left. We sat like this for what seemed like an eternity and, for the first time in as long as I could remember, I hugged him without trying in vain to remember the contours of his body, his smell, and how it felt to have my arms around him. I simply remained in the moment.

