

Lucas Sánchez

You feel her hand in yours and you remember the first time she took you here a lifetime ago.

Your distracted eyes wander as you wait for the show to begin. They scan past her terribly perfect face, her parents at the bar deliberating on what to order only to ask for the same thing they have seven times before, and the hundred plus other people who occupy this rooftop.

You look around and try to remember the world as it once was, and immediately, you regret it.

It comes back too quickly. You remember the old arrangement—pool table where the bar now is, old collected vinyl now replaced by a television set twice the size, and you remember the old furniture too, that of a different era entirely compared to what the new owners have done with the place in your absence.

You remember how serenely empty the world had once felt before the new Marriott, luxury high rise, hard rock casino, and a dozen other towers had somehow seemed to spring up from the ground overnight.

But years have passed, you remind yourself for a hundredth time, and now you're thinking back further.

You remember the time when her parents had been your chaperones rather than your guests, and when the weight behind each 'I love you' was enough to collapse skyscrapers like that which you stand atop now rather than an assurance you told yourselves more than one another.

You remember when the distance between her hand and yours, intertwined with one another, had felt non-existent, the forces of attraction gapping the mostly empty space of your bodies enough to convince you that matter was solid and that yours was truly touching hers. But now that illusion is fading, and you can feel the infinity of distance between your hand and hers.

You wonder if the only thing that hasn't changed is the sky, but even now as you look up you see that the stars no longer seem as bright as they once did.

The first rocket hits the sky, premature before the other, and explodes somewhere over your head in Taqqadum. You freeze for a moment.

You're off to a bad start.

Her words ring back in your head now asking you a hundred times before you left if you were sure you wanted to come, if you were sure you could handle it, and a hundred times you assured her you were.

She is stubborn and you love her for it.

Your free hand reaches for the pair of headphones in your pocket for a moment, but then you decide against it.

She must have felt something. She looks at you and smiles, but behind her eyes, you know she just wants to make sure you're smiling too, to ask if you're okay. You look back at her, and smile like you know she's hoping to see. Because you're stubborn too.

She would rather forget them, but some of your best memories are the wars you would wage against each other over the most menial of things: if cats belonged indoors or outdoors, if modern 'art' truly qualified as art, if it was justifiable to watch an episode ahead in a show because one of you couldn't stand the suspense.

You likely enjoy the memories of these fights more as language was always your strong suit, and it was a rare thing not to find yourself the winner at the end of an argument.

You retreat into these memories as a distraction, and perhaps to add a layer of sincerity to the smile you wear, but it is a mistake. With every war you won, you lost one too, none worse than the last.

Another stray rocket whistles into the fair and explodes somewhere you cannot see it.

It's been months now and you know well enough now how to tell their pitches apart: which is close enough to warrant ducking for cover, and which too far to justify taking your attention away from a long-distance argument you are determined to win.

She is right. As she is so very often.

But you won't give her that satisfaction.

She reminds you that to leave was your choice, as though you don't already know that. It is a cheap shot, and you tell her as much while also arguing it's hardly an excuse for premeditatively doing something she knew would make you uncomfortable.

You are told you don't have the right to control her when you're the one who chose to be away. You hate that word—'control.' One single utterance and suddenly you are the villain, so you turn it on her, and ask if it was 'control' with what you sacrificed back home when it was her choice to go to school out of state.

Now you've only made her feel guilty, and you realize you didn't need her help at all to make you the villain. She wishes you goodnight as she prepares to get some dinner with her friends, and you say nothing, hoping she will be the one to apologize first.

She won't.

Your hand is no longer holding hers, you realize, having slipped away on its own.

She realizes it too, and looks up at you with eyes that you wonder how you ever could have gotten angry at. You are quick on your feet and tell her you are going to get a drink, and ask her if she wants one too to help sell the lie.

Chances are she is smarter than that and sees past you, but she lets you off the hook, smiles, and says, "sure" so you can feel useful too.

Her parents are at the bar, getting the same drink that they always do. They are in conversation and so you say nothing, hoping you might slip by undetected, ordering two mojitos under your breath. It does not work. Her mother catches you and pulls you into conversation as the father pats your belly and comments that you've gotten skinnier.

They both make small talk about how long it's been since you've all been up here, affording them the chance to easily segway the conversation into how they're glad to see that the two of you are together again.

He asks if it feels like old times and you obviously say it's better, and even think you might mean it.

She asks about your relationship with God, and you remember to tell her it's good, knowing how important that had always been to her when first you'd been introduced, and so smile and nod along as she talks about how being up here always makes her 'feel closer to Him.'

You don't hear the whistle of the next small series of three or four rockets that streak into the sky and explode. Instead, you smell cordite where you did lime and rum just seconds ago, see the smoke that trails up from where munitions have struck the center of Al-Hamzah. You wonder as you're sent in an hour later to assist local wounded if they were yours or theirs, not that it matters much anymore.

You spend your afternoon clearing rubble from streets so medevac vehicles can pass through. From there, they'll take the wounded to a camp where their families can come later to either be reunited with their loved ones or be given the bad news.

You spend your evening on sentry duty for the camp set up adjacent to the Al-Bassami mosque. Even from the outskirts, you can hear their wails and screams that don't sound too different from the screeching of a fifth rocket that explodes right over your rooftop.

You only turn on your phone again when you're back in Taqqadum to find out that six hours ago, after three months of not speaking to one another, she decided she deserved better.

You haven't responded to their last three attempts at a question, and you spill on your shoes half of a drink you'd forgotten you grabbed when you snap awake in time to hear their fourth, asking if it feels different being home now after being away for so long.

You struggle for an answer and the father asks if you're feeling alright. You say you are, and the two of them smile because they believe it. You don't tell their daughter much of what happened, but still, you tell her more. All her parents know of your past is that it happened. You sometimes wonder if you should have spared her the same way you have them.

Her mother reminds you how lucky you all are to be here after all the stories she's heard, even detailing a few, and you no longer wonder, excusing yourself to return to her daughter.

She's wearing a dress you hadn't seen her in for years, leans over the railing with a view of the bay as the show finally begins. She leans to her left to save your spot, and every few seconds, turns her head to look for you.

You're no longer with her parents, instead standing in the center of a terrace with one and a half drinks in hand. Seeing you there now when she turns her head back again, and with a smile that is half-inviting and half-pleading, she cocks her head for you to join her.

It's a look you've had 8 months to recognize—that of somebody who believes she can still help. That of somebody who listens to you tell the same story for the dozenth time because you can't get it off your mind, who dares not overcook a meal, let alone a single slice of toast because you cannot stand the smell, who offers to switch to the driver's seat whenever traffic gets to you.

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It is the look of somebody you tried to push away and yet whose stubbornness would eventually outmatch your own, hers at the airport the first face you would recognize upon your return home.

You love her for it.

You love her, you love her, you love her, and yet still, you want to hate her.

And so too do you hate yourself for these brief moments that you feel this way.

When you used to think about hating her, you always thought true hate would spawn from something else: from past relationships you could never come to terms with, present friendships you still don't quite approve of, or the same resolute independence that attracted you to her in the first place.

But none of that is what brings you to the threshold of hating her, because it isn't her that you could ever hate.

Instead, you hate that you need to rely on her to shift conversation when the two of you are out with friends and family. That on otherwise meaningless days of the year she must instead dedicate herself to keeping the two of you occupied lest your mind wander back to that same day a year or two. That when she cut open her leg on a cracked bathroom tile, she wore long pants over the course of Spring and only told you once it'd healed so you wouldn't have to bear the torn flesh and blood that'd come with it.

And she never lets any blame fall upon you, even when, as far as you're concerned, it should.

She stands in front of you now and you remember the excuse you made in the first place to roam away from her. You hand her the drink, that which you didn't spill, and she takes it. She thanks you and asks you over the booming of constant explosives and his terrified screams next to you if you want to come with her and see the fireworks from a better angle, the choice always yours.

The lights of the rooftop bar have gone out, lit only now by the sporadic flashes of close-impact shells that threaten to shower you with fragmentation. You lie and say you want to, and though you know she's smart enough to not believe you, she does not fight you.

Your mistakes are yours to make as you've had a hundred times before, and whether you like to admit it or not, she'll be there to catch you as she has a hundred times before.

You take her hand and walk with her, just as another rocket explodes overhead in a display of red, white, and blue, away from the center of the terrace to a foxhole somewhere in Anbar where you can't tell if it's your hand or his shaking more.

In his left side is a piece of fragmentation that, just from what is observable to you, is no smaller than a baseball.

Your ears are still ringing from the impact, and for once, you're thankful for it, the ringing the only thing able to drown out his screams.

He clasps onto your right hand with both of his, fingernails digging into your skin. You only hold onto him with one, your left hand pressing down on his wound with enough force you start to cut yourself with the shrapnel too.

You wish it was darker, wish that you don't need to see his blood spilling between your fingers, but you aren't so lucky.

You can smell the copper, feel its source slip away from your hands no matter how hard you press down. And even so, the earth is lit by the flashes of intercepted missiles that burst in the sky and scattered fires that still have yet to go out. You can't hear your own voice, but from the motions your mouth and tongue are making, you think you're telling him to stay calm and yelling for a corpsman.

There is no solid cover for a mile and a half, and you've forgotten where the closest foxhole to yours is. You are too afraid to go up and look, to leave his side, too afraid to go out there and risk being hit yourself.

So, you stay in your hole, feeling his grip loosen around your wrist as you grip his back with even more strength, your way of compensating, of holding on to him if he won't to you.

For every dozen strikes they launch, only one touches the ground, and for every dozen that touch the ground, only one even stands a chance of posing a risk to you, but still you are frozen, still your chest pounds and you mutter words that have lost all meaning to you.

You no longer are able to distinguish from where they come or on whose half of the steppe they will land.

You taste the salt of the tears you fail to bite back as you look up at a night sky whose stars have had their places taken by sunbursts of intercepted missiles. Their gilded streaks are terminated only to be replaced by more as they rain down upon the world, what little faith you have left perceiving in them the calluses and creases of an angry god whose wrath is now released on children who have failed their one last commandment.

Somewhere between your still-ringing ears and a brain that rattles against your skull is their voice. Between your tears, you scream out that you are sorry even if you do not know who to: to the love you pushed away, the man who died in your arms, or to something greater than them, greater than you.

You rest your head against his and pray for a chance to turn time back to when you could still feel the pulse in his hand, to when your life and its burdens were not only yours to bear, to before you decided it was, to as far back as before the mark of Cain had first touched mankind.

But you cannot.

You can only hear the voice that grounds you back to the present that is yours, a familiar soothing melody that after seven years, you could pick out from a grouping of thousands.

You don't remember retreating into the stairwell, or descending two stories to the point that only a muffle remains from the world outside, and you do not remember her following and sitting down next to you.

She asks you to take deep breaths, tell you that you are at a celebration with her and her family, then asks you to continue taking deep breaths again.

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She asks you to describe the room around you and you do, listing the white walls, the stainless-steel rail, and the 12 black steps between the landing behind you and the landing ahead.

You are you again.

She asks if you are feeling alright and if she can touch you.

You say yes to both. She puts an arm around your back and rests her head against your shoulders, the curls of her hair tickling at your neck the way they always do whenever you're lucky enough to have her so near.

She loves you.

And you love her. Every second you wasted on hate comes back to you now, not as anger, at least not towards her, but regret for the countless moments of a life you chose to spend chasing at phantoms rather than holding onto what it was you had, and somehow are lucky enough to have again.

You begin to cry. You tell her you're sorry.

She hugs you tighter and tells you don't need to be, that neither of you do.

She asks you if you want to go home early and watch a movie she remembers you've been recommending to her for a while.

You ask about her parents, and she dismisses it, saying they're too drunk to notice.

She offers you a hand up that you take, and let your thumb run its familiar course across a ring you're still amazed she said yes to.

For a brief second, there is shame, and hiding behind it, a shadow of anger yet to come, but you've seen, and you remember what came of a belief that you alone could handle the world. You let it pass.

It will come again, you know, lying somewhere behind those missile-lit nights in a world that wasn't yours, but as they will come again, you will remember, and so you will love again, and you will live again.

Her hand holds yours, and you let her take you home.