

Bethany, My Love

By
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Edgar, now such a desperate soul, sits in his kitchen as the frigid, bleak winter pours down its first blanket of white upon the Earth. The cruel elements took his first and only true love, Bethany, just one winter ago; and now the falling snow seems to mock him incessantly. He is an artist; an artist in torment. His dusty attic holds hundreds of paintings, hundreds of sculptures, hundreds of sketches...all of fair Bethany. *Why did you leave me so early, thinks Edgar. Why couldn't you have stayed home that night? Why couldn't you have stayed with ME?* The answers to these questions Edgar will never know, and that's what pains him the most. He spent a few months wasting away in his attic after Bethany's disappearance. He worked himself down to skin and bones during those months, throwing paint on canvases, punching hard clay in frustration, thrashing sketchbooks with chalky stumps of black charcoal. Meals and sleep were of less importance.

Edgar lives in a large home in an affluent, but rather spacious, mountainside area that could barely be called a community. Walks to the neighbors' homes take quite a while along the rocky streets, especially in the cold months when a coating of snow slows everything down to a snail's pace. The snow used to be beautiful. Edgar sits in his kitchen, looking out upon the mountainous landscape, wondering if he might ever see poor Bethany emerging from the snowy pines. *I was lost all along*, she would say. *They never found me because I had lost my way and walked what seemed like an eternity in the wrong direction. But none of that is important anymore. I'm home! And we're together again, Edgar. You and me. Together.* Bethany never emerges from the snowy forest. Edgar never really expects her to. But oh, what if there were enough magic in the starry skies to return her? Stranger, more impossible things surely have happened. *After all, we never found her. There's no actual proof of her demise...but deep in Edgar's soul he knows she's gone. There is a feeling of emptiness inside that he cannot begin to explain, but he knows that at its roots there lies some distant, sudden loss of footing while hiking up a mountain; or some avalanche bearing down upon helpless souls underneath while Edgar sat in his home completely unaware. Yes, Bethany is gone. Part of Edgar is gone; and he wonders if there's any way that emptiness could possibly be filled. As if there were a sudden sign from the heavens he recalls the conversation he had with Addie Fisk about the upcoming show at *La Belle Fontaine* art gallery with this year's theme being "Everlasting Beauty."*

"Have you anything you'd like to display, Edgar?" asked Miss Fisk with a sympathetic smile, holding his bony hands in hers to give him a bit of comfort.

"No," said Edgar reluctantly. "No, not this year."

But there is still time. Two months, at least.

Edgar looks around his home as he sits in his lonely kitchen. The house is quite a marvelous piece of architecture. It's a Victorian house, decorated with white and gold, held up by lavish columns, decorated with works of beauty by those artists to whom Edgar owes his livelihood. The faintest dash of inspiration hits his mind as he looks back out to the snowy, tree-laden landscape that so regularly haunts him with memories.

A tribute! thinks Edgar. *If only there were a way for me to create a tribute to Bethany that would come close to her beauty. I wonder.*

Edgar stands at the foot of the stairs which seem to climb forever up to that heavy wooden door that leads to his abandoned cave of once-inspired art. He's scared of what he might find there now. *Where have you been*, his paintings would ask him. The dusty sculptures would look his way and scowl, half angry and half sad that their creator left their company for such a long while. *You're no longer welcome here*, they would say. *We have a new artist now*. Out of anger they would approach him as he stood teetering on the edge of the stairs. The paintings would bulge outward and the sculptures would hold their arms out and advance on him slowly. "You don't understand!" Edgar would shout.

Edgar snaps out of his fearful trance and realizes he's been standing at the foot of the stairs for ten minutes. There is no new artist. There is nobody for miles. His artwork is not hostile. Edgar sighs at his near-senility. The first step creaks at him as he steps down on it. On his slow journey upward, the rest of the steps mimic the sound like a diagonal piano where all the keys are tuned to the same ugly note. Edgar's ears find them repulsive.

The attic is a cavern of black. The door clicks and creaks open, casting a long rectangle of yellow light across the floor with the shape of a man beaten by life interrupting the middle.

Rip rip. glop. cling-clang, Bang! Mumble, grumble. "Yes!" plop. glop. tap tap tap. ting ting. CLANG! Scritch scritch. "Ha ha!" glop. Thud.

If there were such things as casual passers-by in a spacious, wintry desert such as this, they would surely note that these sounds continually come out of Edgar's attic window both day and night. At night, shadows continually pass over the light beaming out from the circular opening near the roof. Edgar has kept very busy.

"It's *beautiful*," exclaims Edgar aloud as he stands in his attic and marvels at the wondrous creation in front of him. Two weeks have passed since the beginning of the project, and Edgar has forgotten every aspect of life except for Bethany. It is a perfect tribute; a perfect sculpture of clay, foam, and paint. A metal armature skeleton, clay flesh, foam at the joints, and plastic detailing. A wig of real hair from Bertha's shop just outside of town. Plastic eyes, hand painted. *She couldn't be more real*, he thinks. Before him sits Bethany; an artificial Bethany. Any casual glancer would have no idea she is false. This is no ordinary rendering of real life. Edgar knew to avoid the stereotypical wax sculpture, the kind in tourist museums that look like celebrity corpses dipped in gloss and made to smile so children can take pictures next to them on family vacations. This rendering is *real*. As real as something artificial can be. Golden blonde hair, bright, loving eyes, perfectly curved eyelashes, smooth vanilla skin, and a tall, proportionate figure all clothed in an elegant blue dress with white and gray trim, fashioned by Edgar

himself. He had never considered himself much of a fashion designer, but he could think of no other outfit that would be more fitting.

Edgar brings the light, pose-able Bethany down the creaking staircase, no longer discomfited by their repugnant tune.

"You shall sit here," he says to the sculpture, setting it down on the kitchen chair in which he was so used to sitting, wishing upon stars for his lost love's return. The bright white walls illuminate the false Bethany's eyes. Edgar picks up his telephone, feeling through drawers with his other hand in search of Addie Fisk's office number.

"Everlasting Beauty she surely will see," boasts Edgar.

Before Edgar can dial the number, he is captured by the false Bethany's beauty once more. He drops the phone from his trembling hand, and sighs in desperation as he kneels next to his creation. A hard snow has fallen, robbing the landscape of any color but white. The layer is tall and thick. The windows in Edgar's house are half blocked by the snow, which creeps up to the middle of the glass. Edgar, realizing his foolish impulsiveness, reconsiders the notion of delivering this work of perfection off in a truck to be displayed in a sad collection of amateur pseudo-intellect.

"It would be a dishonor to you, Bethany, for me to place you there for public view next to a hoard of lesser creations. You would surely be the spotlight, but even that high position would still do you no justice."

Edgar sits in silence with the artificial Bethany for the rest of the day, eating little and speaking none. Like a child who has just acquired a new puppy, he struggles to think of anything but her. Eventually, night falls. The owls outside *hoo* in their nocturnal awakening. Edgar needs to retire to bed, now that he *can* rest, so he leaves a small light turned on to keep the sculpture's figure illuminated.

The dim light makes the false Bethany's skin glow a dull orange next to the blackened atmosphere around her. A large shadow is cast on the wall directly behind her, shrinking her figure in distortion. Edgar heads upstairs to his master bedroom and falls asleep, satisfied.

He dreams that night that Bethany lies beside him.

The morning is beautiful! Edgar rushes downstairs and prepares a breakfast, all the while keeping an ecstatic eye on the Bethany tribute awaiting his attention. He has his fill of rich bacon, golden eggs, and hand-squeezed orange juice.

"If only you could taste this," Edgar says as he sits across the table from her. Her eyes stare past him in their lifeless artificiality. "What a marvelous piece of magic you are," he says with a smile.

Edgar hops into the living room and searches through his record collection next to the stone fireplace for their special song. Edgar and Bethany shared many things in her lifetime; music was surely one, and one of the most beautiful at that. Edgar lowers the needle onto the vinyl record, and music begins to float about the house like wind in the fall. Edgar moves gracefully across the room to the kitchen, waving his arms to and fro to match the melody, imagining his first encounters with Bethany and wishing her lifeless body might get up from that kitchen chair and dance with him. He picks the sculpture up as he moves, rhythmically swaying and twirling in circles. He holds the false Bethany by the hips and left hand. Her right arm loosely swings as he moves; her head rolls left and right with every twirl Edgar executes. Her toes drag on the floor, scuffing the shiny, wooden surface. Edgar dances for longer than he realizes before he sets her back down in her chair.

“I remember the first time I met you,” he says to the clay form. “We were so shy we barely said a thing to one another. I went home feeling embarrassed and you later told me that you felt the same way. Remember what broke the ice for us? When we both were walking on the frozen pond out in Gavindale, and the ice broke underneath our feet?” He laughs. “It gave us conversation for a week. It’s strange, how that happened, making that old expression literal. It’s as if we were instantly meant for each other.”

Edgar had this same conversation with the *real* Bethany many times. He feels now that he owes it to her clay tribute to reminisce about the way things used to be. Maybe the real Bethany can hear him somewhere, and the sculpture acts as a means of communication. Edgar has always kept a sense of far-fetched hope.

Edgar is quite healthy now. It’s been a little over two weeks since he created the false Bethany, a month since his inspiration for the project. His bones are barely visible from the outside anymore. When he drives into town to pick up groceries and random life necessities, his neighbors constantly comment on how glowing he looks. *You look so good*, they say. *I’m glad you’re feeling better*, they say with a sympathetic voice. His cheeks always used to be quite rosy, especially in the deep winter as it is now, and after a year’s hiatus the rose hue is back. Edgar spends his days speaking to Bethany, though she never speaks back. Edgar dreams of her at night, though she never greets him in the morning when he comes downstairs for breakfast. She just sits there, in her same place, staring through the walls in a lifeless heap.

Edgar trots along the rows of food in the market near his home. He is to prepare a feast tonight, the likes of which would surely impress Bethany: steamed carrots on a bed of wild rice, boiled potatoes, and tender, lean steaks, topped off with an aged merlot wine. Suddenly, the music wafting through the air in the store is interrupted by chiming from the bells on the market door. In walks a beautiful brunette wearing a small, gray jacket and a blue scarf wrapped around her chin and neck. Her cheeks glow even brighter than Edgar's. She kicks the snow off her boots at the welcoming mat just inside the store. *There's something captivating about her*, thinks Edgar, who tries not to stare. He has a safe-haven behind a rack of bread, and he can hardly stop looking at the beautiful young woman who might soon take notice of him. Edgar might have seen her before. *Who is she? A teacher? A librarian? ...An artist?*

The woman walks his way as he steps out from behind the bread rack. She glances around the aisles, swaying her arms gracefully as she walks. She makes her way toward Edgar, not noticing him immediately. As they both grab for the same can of black beans, she looks up into Edgar's eyes.

"Oh, excuse me," she says with a laugh. Her eyes are big and blue. Edgar surely is captivated.

"I'm sorry," Edgar says to Bethany. He shuts his front door and tracks snow in behind him before kneeling down next to the sculpture. "I was there at the market and I met a woman whom I haven't seen in years. We knew her once. Remember that green and blue painting of the willows you loved so much when we went to the art fair in New Hampshire? That was the work of this woman. Her name is Evalyn. Isn't it a

strange coincidence? She's in town for another show. She lives not far from here now. Oh, I'm sorry, Bethany."

Bethany does not respond. She just looks off through the walls as she has for more than two weeks; sitting there, unresponsive, unaware of the world.

It's nighttime and Edgar tosses in his sleep. He dreams of Evalyn. She walks with him, hand in hand, along flowery paths flowing with light and vivid life.

He wakes in a cold sweat. His guilt is driving him mad. He does not dare tell Bethany that he had arranged to meet Evalyn again, but he thinks she knows. She's downstairs right now, sitting at that kitchen chair in the dark, the dim glow lighting her face and scattering shadows about the room. She's looking through the walls and hating Evalyn.

"No, she's not!" screams Edgar as he jumps out of his bed. He dashes down the stairs in his pajamas and stops when he reaches the kitchen. Bethany's beauty overtakes him once more. He sits in a chair next to her and takes her hands in his.

"I'll tell her goodbye when I see her next," says Edgar with a quivering voice. "You don't deserve this."

Bethany stares past him.

Edgar walks hand in hand with Evalyn across a vividly lit terrace full of families and delighted passers-by. He dares not tell Evalyn of Bethany. He is intimidated, picturing Bethany pacing back and forth in the kitchen while he's gone, looking over his serrated knives. She's planning to kill Evalyn the moment they might come in contact.

"You are amazing," Edgar tells Evalyn. "I've never met anybody like you before."

Evalyn looks into Edgar's eyes. Edgar wonders what life would be like had she always looked into his eyes like this; if she had always been there to take Bethany's place. He looks at her; her rosy cheeks, her breath fogging in the wintry air, her once-cold hands keeping warm in his gentle grip.

"You're torturing me!" Edgar yells as he slams the front door behind him. He doesn't care that he's tracking in snow or that he dropped his gloves in the yard on the way in. He's stomping and screaming, thrashing and crashing about his home in a whirlwind of rage and confusion. He storms into the kitchen, grabs the table, and throws it out of his way. Dishes crash and silverware clangs. He kneels on both knees in front of the lifeless Bethany. She takes no notice.

"You sit there!" Edgar screams. "You sit there and pretend you can't hear me! You swallow up this spotlight as if you're the center of the Earth, but you're not! I didn't say goodbye to Evalyn. What do you think about it? Do you care? Can you cry, or shake, or tell me your feelings?" Edgar sweats and trembles. "You've taken enough of me, Bethany!"

Edgar's world becomes a twisting swirl of blurred colors. In half-consciousness he finds himself walking toward the knife drawer. There is no sound in his world except for a dull buzzing that wavers in his mind, dizzying him. His trembling hand shuffles through a drawer. He finds a cold, shiny metal. He approaches Bethany with a large, silver filet knife in-hand. He walks as if intoxicated, stumbling, struggling to keep his mind.

"I'm sorry for this," he hears himself say. "I can't bear to look at you any longer."

Clay fingers fall to the floor. A beautiful plastic eye bounces past them. *rip. tear.*
A metal shoulder joint becomes dislocated. *clang. whimper. rip. snip.* A lock of beautiful
blonde hair floats down to the floor like a feather.

"I don't know what else to do," Edgar says softly.

It's nighttime now, and a dull glow shines in through the attic's circular window.
A mangled Bethany is in the spotlight now, slumped in a corner all alone. Unless
Edgar's imagination was playing tricks on him, the paintings of Bethany seemed to smile
a bit more than they used to as he discarded Bethany in the corner. The other sculptures
seemed more relaxed, more contented. He looked back at her before closing the large,
wooden door when he left. She was no longer the piece of magical beauty he had
originally created. She looked cadaverous. Rotted. Like an old, beaten corpse. The
sight disgusted him as he left. He would soon be rid of her, though, when the snow
stopped pouring down around his house; when he could take all of those works of art
and burn them in the pines where they could become ashes and stay where they belong.
He would forget about them for good. He would start over. He would be rid of his
haunting past...

Edgar sleeps uneasily in his bed. His room is dark and empty. The wind blows the hard falling snow in circles outside his window. He dozes in and out of consciousness. He sees the dark, blank walls in his bedroom. He dozes away and sees a lovely Bethany walking his way. He wakes and sees his feet sticking out from his blanket. He dozes off and sees Evalyn. Then Bethany. A mangled, disgusting, rotted piece of pathetic failure. Her clay skin falls from her false skeleton. She reaches out to grab him with hands lacking fingers. Her teeth fall from her mouth as she opens it underneath her severed nose and deep, hollow eye sockets. She moans and her tongue rolls out. Edgar wakes up in his bed, terrified. He's shaking. He has pulled his blanket up over his head. Nothing is in his dark room but him. *What woke me?* In his half-consciousness he had heard a hollow *thump* that may or may not have taken place in his dreams. Edgar sits quietly in his bed, breathing shallowly, listening for another disturbance in the silence throughout his house.

thump.

I heard it. That time I know I did. He sits up, clicking on a small lamp on his nightstand. It struggles to halfway illuminate the large room. He stares at his bedroom door, knowing it is not locked, wondering what sort of terror might be lurking around searching for a victim. *This is ridiculous,* thinks Edgar. *Did I really hear something? Maybe it was a car door shutting outside. But then, who would be outside my house at such an hour?* Edgar looks over his left shoulder to a far window across the room. All he can see is a quiet blizzard swirling outside. He wishes to get up out of his bed to get a bird's eye view of the yard, to see if he might make out a figure walking toward his home as he squints through the falling snow, but he's frozen. If that thump came from inside, he

surely doesn't want to walk around his creaking floors and alert an intruder of his presence. He sits with a nervous lump in his throat, still as a statue. *Thump.*

I felt that one, thinks Edgar. No light shines out from the crack between that distant door and the floor underneath. The intruder is walking around in complete darkness, in a cavern of black space, from room to room in a cold, spacious maze. Edgar is paralyzed. He sits in his bed with a small lamp casting an island of dim light in an otherwise pitch black confinement.

He hears another *thump* followed by the sound of something dragging across the floor. The sound seems to be quite close now, but in Edgar's large, hollow house, echoes confuse the origins of traveling sounds. He has no idea how close the intruder might be.

Until the doorknob to the room begins to slowly turn. *click. creeeeeak.* The door opens. Edgar's heart drops and he drifts off to visions of his past, memories his heart and his mind had held so dear for so long. He is merely an onlooker as he watches his younger self meet a younger Bethany for the first time. The world has a glowing, radiant blur about it. As young Edgar and young Bethany meet for the first time, and every time after that, their laughs echo in Edgar's memory. They play in the snow that fate and time has taught Edgar to hate so much. They keep each other warm as they watch the orange, red, purple sun set behind the mountains, not realizing yet how numbered those magical nights really are. As vivid as real life, his past with Bethany is replayed over and over again in Edgar's mind as he sits in his bed, each second a lifetime. He wants nothing more than to be with Bethany again.

And he will be soon. In the dark, cold bedroom, the dim lamp lights the intruder that sent Edgar into his visions of the past. A mangled, disgusting, cadaverous Bethany

takes two steps closer to Edgar's bed. She has escaped from the attic. Her right foot hits the ground. *thump*. She drags her dislocated left foot behind her. She looks at him with one crooked plastic eye, the other socket empty; a small, black abyss. Her hair is tangled and torn, as is her dress. Her clay skin is reminiscent of cold, clammy flesh. Her lips are absent from her skeletal face; her plastic gums host few broken plastic teeth. *thump*. As she walks closer to him, Edgar tries to speak. A crackled "Bethany" barely escapes from his breath. Bethany's jaw opens diagonally with a rusty *screech*. A raspy, muffled groan leaves her mouth, sending tingles across Edgar's skin. Bethany approaches, inching her way forward. *thump*. Her dislocated left arm dangles from her shoulder. In her right hand, gripped in the thumb and two remaining fingers, she holds a shiny, silver filet knife.