

# **A day like any other**

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“You lived what anybody gets, [...] you got a lifetime”  
Neil Gaiman, *The Sandman*

## The young dreamer

I guess that my last day began after midnight. Friday October the tenth. I had been at Vincent's place for a few hours. We were playing cards, while listening to Pink Floyd. I lit up a cigarette – I was submerged by a sensation of pleasure, of pure happiness. James stood in front of me. He was cheerfully handsome. Everyone was enjoying the evening. We were talking about the future, what we expected from life. I stayed silent. His brown eyes peered into mine.

“What about you Ash? What do you want?”

“Me? I want you, all of you, all of this, I want it all!” I smiled. They laughed. “But I will content myself with a single moment. So perfect that it is worth a lifetime.”

“Does that even exist?” Marc asked ironically.

“What about now? This moment, for instance. It's not that bad. I don't want a *forever* I want now! I looked at James in the eyes. “I want to seize the day and keep it as such until I grow old.”

I am dead. I will never get old. And truth be told, I was not afraid of dying, but just, not now. Not when all was fine, and full of hope. That night looked as it'd never end.

At two, I went home with James. The walk felt pleasantly warm. I was so in love with him, so happy to have found someone. He had come out of nowhere six months before, turning my life all upside down. I'm gay. My parents had never approved. They had kicked me out when I was sixteen. Later on it got better.

I should have told him about how I felt, how I *really* felt. He would have known how much he meant to me, how much I loved him. I was afraid of losing him. Of getting hurt. But now I'm gone. What will happen to him? *How I wish, how I wish you were here.* I should have been brave that night, and said something.

We quickly fell asleep. I had to wake up early, at six. Waking was rough. The shower helped. I put my headphones on and got out. I loved waking up at dawn, even slightly before. You met a completely different city, all dark and empty. And as you walked through the streets, the city woke up. A new day began. And then there was the sunrise. The colorful sky, the sun casting the first shadows. All became warmer. I lost myself in the music and the city. Every morning I took the very same itinerary. Every morning it was completely different. Music changes it all. I could literally see what I heard. I think it's called synaesthesia. I saw the world through sound filter. Songs came randomly, a little bit of jazz with *Sinnerman*. Colors faded, all was flowing way too fast. Ten minutes in black and white. Her voice made the building larger, trees came to life again and again. Then the bridge slowed it down. Suddenly, colors! The blue became friendly, and the sky lost its sun. The piano: touches of flaming and crimson red. The blue jeans: hunter green on the pavement. Indescribable. I never tried to until now. The song ended.

Sounds conjure up my vision of the city. But that morning I experienced something new. There was a woman standing in the crowd. She seemed sad. Well, I felt sad the moment I saw her. Her green eyes. I heard a song I never did. It brought out to me a smell I couldn't define, maybe flowers. And a feeling of emptiness. I came closer. I felt afraid, but couldn't lose sight of her eyes. All those emotions and impressions were elating. They were

the most amazing experience I had ever gone through. I blinked. She took a step. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She passed by. And that was the end of that. *Ashes to ashes, funk to funky...* Bowie pulled me out of my daydream.

What happened? I heard something, original and terribly melancholy. Springing from her, from her gorgeous eyes. And I smelled a perfume, it had never happened to me before. Who was she? I looked at my watch. I was at only ten minutes from my workplace. I am a waiter at a coffee and tea stand. It's not well paid. But it was all I could find. I don't complain. I always thought I would eventually find something else, go back to college maybe. My whole world hinged on music, painting and cinema. I'm short of words to describe what I hear, so I painted what I witnessed. And still, it was never enough. James always said that I was a great artist. The truth is that I could only reproduce songs. I never painted original pieces in a way.

I turned off the music, and tried to remember what I had heard. Only that perfume of flowery fragrance came back, a mournful scent. I put the music back, *Sara* was playing. Definitely one of my favorite songs by Fleetwood Mac. There were more and more people in the streets. I needed to hurry up. Red light, I had to cross. The bus stopped, I stepped onto the road. A car came from the right. The curtain falls.

*Said Sara, you're the poet in my heart...*

## The selfish mother

My day pissed me off. I wanted it to end, and go back to bed. But now I'm dead. I guess that I was yearning so badly for a change in my life that Death heard me. You do not always get what you want – I certainly don't. My life has been a never ending disappointment. My last day was the last straw.

My younger son woke me up – he had left for college in September. He only called me when he needed something. So I was already in a bad mood. He said he had crashed his car. Well the car he had borrowed – my car. The conversation was tense, but later I called the insurance which settled it. I talked to my husband, and let him know about his son's latest brilliant idea – drinking and driving. The morning flew by without much being done. It was the start of a bad day.

I realized by the end of the morning that the fridge was empty again. I put my coat on and went out. The supermarket was small, and crowded. Usually I do my grocery shopping early in the morning to avoid the rush hours. I came to think about my stupid son. Sixty miles away he still ruined my morning. I couldn't get him out of my mind as I strolled through the aisles. He could have killed himself. Had he realized? After twenty minutes I headed to the checkouts. Only one of them was open, which was particularly annoying considering how crowded it was. The cashier was way too slow, and more and more customers were joining the queue. A bunch of impatient fools, getting on my nerves. Half past eleven. Every minute I would check my watch. People were talking, a baby was crying. Noises, too many noises.

Right before me there was a young woman. Outstandingly calm. Lucky her, she didn't have an ungrateful family to feed every day. She looked at her cell phone, and smiled. I could only see her from side-on. She wasn't particularly pretty. But she had a kind of natural beauty. Or maybe was it charisma? I could picture myself at her age. I was oblivious, like youngsters tend to be. I remembered one morning, waking up at dawn, stepping out half-dressed on my balcony. There was such a sense of opportunity. I remember thinking to myself: this is the beginning of happiness. And of course there will be more. I didn't realize, back then. But it was happiness, not the beginning of it. I have never been happier than during those days, in my tiny flat. Right then. I wondered if that young woman knew. Did she know that she was young? Like once I had been... And that it would be over soon.

All that was left was fake comfort. I finally got out of the supermarket.

In the afternoon my daughter visited me, with her son. He was already four. It was our weekly reunion. Well, that time wasn't planned, she would come at weekends, when everyone was home. It was always a pleasure to see her. To talk to her. She always had plenty of things to say. How come? I never had anything to tell her. My days were hung-up in a boring routine. Nothing happened, never.

As she was talking to me, my thoughts carried me away. I wasn't listening any more. One second before I had heard about a new restaurant she had tried. Even now I can't tell if she had liked it or not. I was trying to figure out what had gone wrong with my life. What have I done to finish right here, right now? I fell from happiness to this. A family. My sons, and my daughter. A simple conversation with her. I wasn't thinking that it was all a mistake. Not at all. It was all I had ever wanted in a way. A family, with Peter. But I had never

imagined it would be so boring. So slow.

“What about you, Mum?” She sent me back to my current life.  
An unpleasant silence pervaded the room. I could hear the clock ticking.

I was a grandmother. My daughter had a son. I looked at him, he was playing with a construction game. I remembered thinking seriously about having children when I was like twenty-five. I had met Peter when I was twenty. It was in the ordinary course of things. We fell in love, we thought it would last forever, and we got married. And had kids.

It was selfish. The children part. Willing so much to create someone, to have someone you can put all your hopes in. A part of you that would remain after your death. Immortality by proxy. Thinking Death can be defeated. I couldn't tell if I was trying to find a reason for my acts. All was so absurd. I may have thought that having children was a way to fulfill myself. That I could live through my children's happiness. Take my daughter. She had the same selfish desire. His name was Alexander.

“Your younger brother had a car accident this morning.”  
“Is he all right? What happened?”

I explained. Silence, again.

That young girl from the supermarket came back to my mind. Why was I so upset? She was smiling, radiating such a sense of opportunity. There was no need to spoil it.

I never thought about changing my life. About leaving my children when I still had the chance. I just couldn't be that selfish, I tried to comfort myself. My mother didn't have qualms of conscience. She just walked out. I can now understand.

There was a sound of broken glass. Alexander was standing near the remains of an old vase. His mother immediately took him in her arms, and headed to the kitchen. I couldn't take my eyes off those shards. I had never really liked this vase. I had bought it on one of our trips to Asia. A souvenir. Because that's what people do, right? They buy knick-knacks, they take some pictures. Peter always insisted on taking pictures of the five of us and we hung them in the living room. I never looked my best on them. Travelling was not my thing, for sure. I disliked taking the plane, being left in the middle of an inhospitable country. Amidst strangers, and other tourists. And then the hotel, always disappointing. But still, I kept going on vacation with my family. Peter was no fool, but he never said a word. He used to be so considerate when we were young. But it soon faded. He was the one to choose the vase.

I could hear Alexander's cries. And then a thud. My vision became blurry. I felt myself falling down. At that exact moment I thought, or maybe even said: “I bet *she* has no room for an ugly vase.”

That is how I died.

## The old cowboy

My day began just like any others. Slowly. I stood up and painfully headed to the kitchen. All was quiet, the city was asleep. I put some music on. An old jazz song. I'd been awake for an hour, and all I wanted was a proper cup of coffee. I was given a modern coffee machine at Christmas. It was only used when my daughter came. I preferred my old Italian coffee-pot, even if, with the loss of muscle mass and strength it had got harder to use. The smell of coffee pervaded the flat. Like it did every morning. And God, how I loved the early hours of the day. It took me back to my youth, to my wife. Today, I couldn't get her out of my mind. Lauren. I pictured her in her thirty's, sitting in front of me, laughing. I suddenly missed her. You could imagine my surprise when, that afternoon, I met what I can now describe as the only woman whose company could compete with Lauren's. Ten years later I finally enjoyed someone's presence like I didn't even remember I could.

I spent the rest of the morning reading a book I had started a few days before. *The picture of Dorian Gray*. I wanted to stop reading as I turned the pages. I hated that character. I will never know what happened to that despicable man. Will his unhappy self forever roam through time, suffering from his arrogant youth's desire? Isn't death a relief?

I cooked a simple thing. Ate in front of the news, and got ready to get out. I often go for a walk in the city, and end up a wreck on a park's bench. I was wearing a brown coat a hat and my leather gloves. It was the beginning of fall – definitely my favourite season – the landscape was stunning. I never took the same itinerary. I let my senses guide me. The city's sounds and scents would tell me to turn right, go down the street or stop and enjoy the view. I found myself in front of St Margaret's Church. Crowded, a tourist hot spot. People were fascinating: some of them in a hurry, others slowly, making sure they take the best photographs. And then there were the Londoners, recognizable in a glance. I was caught in the middle of the world. The flow of incoherent passers-by dragged me to Parliament Street, and left me in front of Trafalgar Square. I was standing in the heart of London top sights. I needed more quietness. My feet carried me to the west, to Pall Mall and Waterloo Place. It wasn't that peaceful and silent. It was London's calmness. The one I always enjoyed. I had been raised in the midst of subway stations, high buildings and parks. So the quietness I needed may not be the one expected.

Regents Street. Its gorgeous facades, trendy shops and the tourists they dragged. I no longer avoided them. They sometimes tainted the city's beauty. But nothing, even at my age, could keep me at home. Everything had changed since the first time I had come here. I had never been away for too long, so it had never struck me before. I had always been in accordance with the city's changes. Little by little time acted. And it did so slowly that I never had the chance to testify to its alteration. But today I saw. I noticed the nuances, the subtle details. I was caught in the flow of time. I was walking through Portland Place, and one step forward brought me back a week before, may be five years before. I could see the city as it was then. I noticed the seasons, the sounds, the cracks on the buildings, people's fashion trends, the faces I had once looked at. Everything came back with a vengeance. What a wonderful sensation! At that exact moment I stopped in front of Regents Park and looked right. The wind was blowing from this direction and carried a pleasant perfume. She was beautiful – my first thought. Splendid – after ten seconds, as she came closer – and elegant. I was captivated by this woman so much so that I decided to follow her. She was wearing a long and red duster style coat, denim jeans and black boots. My reaction

astounded me. It still does now, but I can better understand my attraction for that woman. It was not physical. I mean, she was pretty, but that wasn't the point. It felt like I knew her, those green eyes. She was heart-warming, even if she had just passed by and we hadn't even exchanged words. So when she entered the park I followed her. She sat on a bench. I sat right next to her. How could I engage in conversation? She saved me the trouble.

“Excuse me, Sir. I know this may sound silly but I have the feeling I know you. Could it be possible?”

“Well, that depends.”

“What do you mean?”

“It depends on how you spent your free time when you were younger.”

“Do I remind you of someone?”

“No, I think we've never met. But I was an actor. That could explain it all.”

I smiled, she had tied back her black hair in a very simple and yet graceful way. When was the last time I had noticed someone's hairstyle?

“What kind of roles did you play?”

I was a cowboy in a soap opera – not particularly proud of it. She'd probably never heard of it. We talked and talked. About all kinds of topics. London to start with. She was living in Camden, on top of a library, and played the bass. Quickly she gave me confidence. Made me talk about my life, about my wife. About her death. Time flew.

“She seems to have been a lucky woman. What about you? Do you feel any regrets?” She asked, hesitatingly. “Well, I'm sorry,” she added, “maybe I shouldn't have asked you that.”

“No, no, don't worry. I am happy if that was your question. I have no regrets from the past. Maybe, hum... I wish I had met you before. I am really enjoying our conversation.”

She beamed. And then apologized. She needed to leave. I remained on the bench a few minutes after she'd left. Everything felt so empty. Like a shore after a storm. I didn't have the strength to walk home. I took a cab. It left me in front of my house in Pelham Street. It was raining, and the sky looked beautiful. It was still bright, and colourful. I stood there a few minutes. It was calm, I could only hear the rain. Then I realized I was going to be soaked.

The house was as silent as usual. I lived alone. That evening I wasn't particularly hungry so I skipped diner. I turned on the TV, nothing really interesting. All felt so empty. I thought about the young woman once again as I was falling asleep. What a surprising afternoon... Then I lost myself in Lauren. In my memories. She was there when I died, alone in my king size bed.



## The conceited sinner

It was 4 o'clock when I woke up for the first time. I was thirsty, and wanted to smoke. Quietly, I stepped out of the bedroom, trying to get to the kitchen. I found my jacket on a chair. There was only one cigarette left. The glass of water could wait. On the balcony the wind was chilly. I didn't need to stay out long. Now come to think of it, my day started just the way it ended. Cold. In a few hours I would only be a corpse on the roadside.

I didn't want to wake up the girl, didn't have the time nor the desire to talk. I just wanted to leave. I didn't care about her. I'm dead now, so I can say it aloud. I was the selfish kind, who only looked for profit and acknowledgement. And I was quite good at it, manipulating, lying, betraying. That morning was no exception. I had to leave, go back to my place, sleep, have a shower and work. I collected the rest of my clothes. There she was, calm and peaceful. Her dark skin partly concealed by the blue sheets. She was gorgeous, such a shame she'd met a guy like me. I stared at her naked back, the curve of her hips. Stunning. I don't even remember her name.

Five o'clock, in my bed, can't sleep much. At eight I woke up again. I worked from home – the nicest advantage of all. It saved time, money, and a stupid penguin suit. I sold things. Anything. People are willing to buy anything. I was self-employed, and good at my job. I gave people what they wanted. I'm flexible. *Was*. Sometimes I forget I don't exist any more.

That afternoon I didn't have much to do, so I decided not to work. I loved running. I put on my trainers, my gloves and cap. The cold air filled my lungs, bringing tears in my eyes. I felt the hard ground with every stride. My muscles ached. I wanted to go further. My limits were my own. I was gifted. I never failed. Everything was so easy, I always had what I desired. But when it came to running, I was all alone. And I exploded, I couldn't go faster, couldn't soldier on. I was weak. How I hated to lose, to bow down. So whenever I kicked the ground, when I faced my own limits, there was this slight possibility that I could flinch. And it made me turn into someone else, someone willing to do anything to be better, faster, tougher. But I never failed. On my last day, I outreached myself.

I came back to my flat. I lived on the fifth floor. I don't know what will happen to it now. Who will get it? Probably my brother, if he is still alive. I haven't thought about him for ages. Will anyone be concerned about my death? I'm not even sure anyone will attend my funeral. I guess I have what I deserved. Anyway, who cares? I'm dead. I remember buying the flat five years ago. I found it perfect: beautiful location, gorgeous view. Just in need of a little refurbishing. In a couple of months I had made it my home. Visitors were few. It was my lair – me in a way. I can't imagine my brother collecting my belongings, penetrating into my sanctuary.

I had no friends. But I needed to maintain some relationships, some people I could use. I knew them more than they would have liked. I knew what drove them, what inspired them. I needed to control the way they saw me. I had understood at an early age that living amounted to coexisting with others. And two conclusions could be drawn. I could be myself – different. I knew I was weird. I don't know if I can fall into a specific definition. Family, friendship, love, affection meant nothing to me. Human relationships, feelings, smiles, cries. I only sought my own pleasure. But I saw what people could do to misfits. I had quickly

understood that I needed to fake emotions. That was my second conclusion. So I studied, I learned how people reacted, how they thought. I succeeded in dissecting each of their facial expressions, their behaviours and what they connoted. I worked hard, not to seem different. And then I realized that what I once thought would be my greatest handicap happened to be a real asset. I was gifted for social interactions. How ironic right? And I practised my skills twice a week.

The bar was crowded, some of the regulars were already there. It was basically a businessmen's pub. People came all suited up to show off, and made sure everyone knew how successful they were. Absolute jerks no one really appreciated. And then there were the girls. Uninteresting for most of them. Only one or two were worth the conversation. They were beautiful and smart, thinking that they couldn't be impressed, they couldn't be seduced. I was here to prove them how wrong they were. But that evening was different.

The bartender recognized me. Everyone was drinking quite sophisticated beers. I grabbed mine and headed to the far end of the pub, where I spotted Damian. And as I made my way through the crowded place, that woman turned around and spilled my beer on my pullover. She immediately apologized, saying that there were too many people. She wasn't in the right place. I mean, a quick glance gave me all the information I thought I needed. Twenty-five years old, nervous, alone. Jeans – chicks wore dresses, or skirts – a white tank top, not really attractive. No makeup, or at least not enough. And tattoos. I wondered for a second if she knew where she was. Clearly she did not belong. I wasn't interested in knowing more. She insisted on buying me another beer. I should have accepted and got back to my own business. But well, I couldn't let a common girl buy me a beer, right? There were some rules to follow here. And in that bar, the first rule was that women did not have their say. I smiled and decided to offer her a drink.

“Well, as I am the one who was wronged,” I added pointing at my stained pullover, “So the drink should be on me, right?”

“Oh, please, no fuss about a spilled beer. My jeans are soaked too. This is all about you, a man refusing that a woman can buy you a drink. But that's okay with me, I don't have time to argue with you anyway.”

She headed to the bar, ordered a drink. The bartender knew her. How come? I wondered. I joined Damian. I was upset. Who did she think she was? She had caught me by surprise, I would never have expected a girl like her to be in a place like this. I spent the rest of the evening studying her. She was talking to Alex, the bartender and was clearly on her own. Some men came near to her, offered to buy her a drink. She declined their offers, with great confidence. She was not the fragile girl I had imagined her to be. How dared she? Come here. Break the codes. Flirt with women, seduce the men. Was it jealousy? She was good at manipulating people. That was what I did. That was my bar. My hunting ground. Did she know that? Had she spilled that drink consciously? Now, come to think of it, it made sense, didn't it? Gosh, I was losing my mind. I had to do something.

“Hi, I think we did not hit it off the first time. Shall we try again? What's your name?” I asked, smiling.

“Who's asking?”

The hunt was open.

The tracks were not easy to follow, but we were on my domain. I knew I had to be

patient, to pay attention to every detail. She would make a mistake, and I would catch my prey. She smiled, I was drawing closer. In a moment she would be cornered, with no way-out. I was already enjoying my victory. I never come home empty-handed. Just one more drink and it would be over. But the tracks ended. I was suddenly helpless. I lowered my guard. From hunter I became prey. Every time I thought I had understood something about her, it turned out to be completely useless and insignificant. She was aggressive, violent. I smiled foolishly. She had the upper hand all along.

The worst part of it was that she never intended to strike the coup de grace. She vanished. Leaving me alone, harmed and vulnerable.

I got into my car and drove home. A stag came out of nowhere. Did I even try to avoid it? I died. The icing on the cake.

## The conscientious worker

Kate was sitting on the grass in Primrose Hill when the sun rose. Wrapped in her long coat, it was time to stand up. A common situation for the young woman. But the sensation has always been slightly different. No matter how many times she lived it. It only lasted a few minutes, the light was now casting the tree's shadows. And hers. London was waking up. People came slowly on the streets. Morning routine found its way through the city. A performance that never needed a rehearsal. Dumbly, everyone knew their parts. And she was there to enjoy the show. Her eyes lingered on the crowd. No one stood out. No one caught her attention. A scent did. A smell of spring, of wet flowers. The provenance wasn't clear. She sank more and more into the city, leaving the park behind.

She stopped for a second. A young man was coming toward her, lost in his thoughts. She stared at him. He seemed happy. He was. She wondered what song he would associate with her. With this simple encounter. Their eyes met. It was her gift. Kate kept on walking.

She loved London. One of her favourite places. Coming here was always a pleasure, but for now, she was expected elsewhere. Not always pleasant constraints. She never complained. It just had to be done. Sometimes she even fancied quitting. But it never went further, only an innocent thought.

By the end of the morning she found herself in a little supermarket. She saw the lady in the can aisles. She was the picture of frustration. Just a glance made up her mind. Talking to her would not be necessary. Kate headed to the tea section. Timing needed to be perfect. It would. At the checkout, everyone was annoyed. She could feel her gaze, and simply smiled. Time to move on.

Sometimes she really liked her day. This afternoon was a great example, she thought. She was particularly sensitive to other people judgement. He struck her as a nice person right away.

"I'm Kate, by the way," she said to the old man. It was more of a nickname. Hekate sounded a bit old fashioned.

"Eli, nice to meet you."

He seemed to enjoy the conversation as much as she did. Seeing how she could impact someone's day always made her consider the importance of her task. Leaving was all the more difficult. Ironically, she always forgot the clock ticking out. She had to leave.

Complete change of atmosphere in the evening. She needed to stand out. He needed to see her. In a place like this, she just had to be herself. He entered the bar like he owned the place. No suit for once. Only a pullover and cotton trousers, sending just the same message. The friendly young girl vanished. Kate became what he wanted to see.

She turned around with perfect timing. She may have enjoyed it more than she would admit. The perfect bait. This kind of encounter always caused mixed feelings for her. On the one hand, it never made a pleasant evening. No one enjoys being hated. On the other hand, disposing of a guy like him would leave her rather cold. But it wasn't for her to pass judgement. She even felt pity for him when he realized he was fighting a losing battle.

Getting out of that bar was a relief.

The city was calm when she arrived on the island. She easily found her way through the silent streets. Some boats were anchored in the port. She took off her boots and socks, pulled up her jeans. The water was cold. The sun was still playing hard to get. She waited a few more minutes in the dark. Finally, the lights of Byzantium – how silly, they called it Istanbul now – gave way to the warming sunlight. She smiled, back to business Hekate.