

Delicate

Natalie was always different. In and out of hospitals all of her life, she never had a friend. She had a heart defect; one that kept her out of school, out of any human contact that wasn't her family or the hospital staff. That was until she met Tom.

Nat was twelve and Tom was fourteen when they met. He was one person that she had a hard time not feeling sorry for, as soon as she learned what had happened to him. She was in a hospital room across from his, and she was always so bored, watching people go by. That day was two days before her birthday. She wasn't looking forward to spending another birthday in the hospital, but she had no choice. She couldn't breathe on her own, and needed an oxygen mask and various needles sticking into her to stay alive at that point. But she saw the boy come in and was curious.

Tom saw her that day too. She was tiny in comparison to the beds she lay in. Her body was lost in it. Her face was dwarfed by the mask, and there were tubes connecting to both of her arms. But then his view of her was cut off by the closing door. When he had finished his appointment, he decided to peek in her room again. Now she was sitting up and reading. He was only fourteen, but his first thought was that she was beautiful. Delicate, but beautiful.

Nat looked up when she heard the sound of his cane. Neither of them said anything for a few moments, but she lifted her mask to speak. "What's wrong with your leg?" she asked, the curious twelve year-old that she was.

“Nothing’s wrong with it. It’s just not there,” he responded, as always conscious of the empty space under his left knee.

“Well, why?” she asked. She didn’t stare at his leg, but kept her eyes on his. Having been in and out of the hospital for so long, meeting new people was her favorite thing, and she would ask endless questions about his life if he didn’t stop her.

“It got cut off. But I’m fine without it.”

“When?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

“When I was six.” He looked her over, taking in the small details. The sharpness of her eyes, the cleft of her chin, the thinness of her bones. He was fascinated. Only twelve years old, but able to take in all the details and turn them into answers. He already knew she was stubborn, brilliant, and didn’t have any tact. And he grinned, hoping he would still know this complete stranger as they grew up. He hoped she never lost the lack of tact. It was refreshing. She didn’t stare and ignore the fact that he was missing half of his leg. She got right to the point.

“Tom.” Both children looked behind Tom to see a tired woman with a gigantic bag. “We have to go. You need to rest, and you shouldn’t be bothering this girl.”

Nat shook her head. “He’s not bothering me! I never get visitors.”

“Well.... We still need to leave. Good night.” Nat’s expression flattened, disappointed.

“I’m Tom. Maybe I can come visit another time.”

Nat grinned, her eyes brightening. "That would be great. I'm Natalie."

"Bye Natalie." Tom smiled back, giving her two thumbs up.

Every time Tom came in to get his knee checked, or when it was cramping, he would visit Natalie. Sometimes her mother was there, but for the most part, she was alone. He would sit by her bed, and they would talk. She told him about her heart, and he told her about his leg.

"My father used to tell me to notice everything. He would quiz me on things, every day. He would tell me how useless I would be if I couldn't do it. It was just me and him. But I got mad at him. I didn't want to do it anymore. So I ran away. He didn't like that. He found me at the bus stop and dragged me home. He hurt me. They had to cut my leg off after that." Tom didn't want to look at her. He knew the look that would be on her face. The look that he called the "Awwww how sad" look.

Finally the silence was too much and he looked up at Natalie. She was looking at him as she always did, with a mix of curiosity and brilliance. But there was something in the back of her glance that said "I'm sorry," and that made him smile. She didn't say anything, just squeezed his hand. The conversation started back up as usual, but neither of them forgot.

It went on like this for three years. Tom would take the bus to the hospital three times a week. He lived with his aunt, who didn't seem to care what he did anymore. At fifteen, Nat was still delicate, still tiny. She was just less than five feet, and still dwarfed by the bed. Tom would sit on the bed with her, and they started talking about each other.

“Maybe you can get a prosthetic.” Nat said, leaning on Tom. It was always just the two of them.

She didn’t see her mother much anymore, and her father had never been around.

Tom rolled his eyes, like he did every time she brought it up. “Why? I’m fine just the way I am.”

“You know how much easier things would be?” she asked.

“Yes, so you tell me every time.”

“For good reason,” she answered.

“How about I get a new leg when you get a new heart, huh?” he looked at her, concern filling his gaze. She was even weaker than she had been when he’d met her. Her heart just wasn’t strong enough for her, even though he swore she had the biggest heart of anyone he’d ever known.

Just like every time they talked like this, she shook her head. “You know it won’t happen. They don’t think I’d survive the transplant. So I’m stuck here mister.” She always said it with a smile, and he had no idea how she did. But she was always upbeat, holding onto his hand until it was time for him to leave.

One day Tom came in and they wouldn’t let him see her. She had been moved to the Intensive Care Unit, and she was having trouble breathing. Her heart beat was too fast. That was all they would tell him for ages. He stayed at the hospital for hours until they let him in. He could hear her harsh breathing as soon as he entered the room.

“Hey,” she whispered, her face lighting up with a smile.

He grinned, tears in his eyes. "Hi there beautiful." He took her hand, sitting down. "How are you?"

"Fantastic," she answered weakly. "Can you do something for me?"

"Anything."

"I want to have a picnic. Outside."

He bit his lip. "Natty, they won't let you outside, you know that. You're having too much trouble breathing."

"I'm dying Tommy. I just want to breathe fresh air. Please." She said, her weak grip tightening on his hand as Tom shook his head.

"No. You're not dying. Come on Natty. You're not."

Her eyes filled with tears for the first time since he had met her, and he knew that he would do anything for her. If she was scared, he would do anything to fix it. "Okay Natty. I'll get you a picnic." She grinned, her eyes shutting.

"Love you Tommy."

He kissed her forehead and whispered "I love you too Natty. Forever."

It took days of talking to doctors and nurses to get them to agree. They all loved Natalie. She'd been in and out of the hospital for fifteen years. He talked to her mother, who came in after she heard that her daughter was in the ICU. Tom wanted to scream at her. She never came to see

Natalie, and now she was dying. What kind of parent could do that? He remembered what Nat had told him. Her mother was a drunk who had inherited money from her parents. All of the money went to medical bills and more alcohol.

Finally though, he got everyone's permission to set up a picnic behind the hospital. It was the best he could do. He made her favorite foods, peanut butter and banana sandwiches, and chocolate covered strawberries, and set up a blanket. It took a while to get her there. Once they reached the exit to the hospital, he had to carry her, and one of the nurses helped, holding the IV stand.

Natalie looked radiant, even with her pale skin, and her wheezing, and Tom was so glad he had helped her. She was so beautiful. They spent two hours outside. They didn't talk much. It hurt her to talk. They never let go of each other's hands, and Natalie leaned on him. Eventually though, he had to bring her back.

The next five days Tom refused to leave her. She only let go of his hand to take showers, and she slept most of the days away. She got weaker and weaker, but never lost her smile.

Tom had just drifted off to sleep on the chair when he heard her whispering. "Tommy."

"Tommy." His head jerked up to look at her.

"Natty? What's wrong?"

She whispered "I would've married you, you know. I would've asked you if I could have.

Eventually."

He teared up and nodded. "I know."

"I love you Tommy," she breathed.

"I love you so much Natty."

She nodded. "I think it's coming. You gonna be okay?"

He started to nod, but shook his head instead. "No." Natalie nodded.

"I know. But you will eventually. And you'll have an angel watching over you. Forever. I promise."

He nodded.

"Can you kiss me?" she asked. "I've never been kissed."

He nodded. "Of course I can," he whispered. He pulled the oxygen mask back gently and brushed his lips to hers. She sighed, and he could feel her smiling.

"Love you." She whispered as he pulled back.

"I love you too. Always." She nodded.

"I gotta go now," she said, squeezing his hand.

"Please don't Natty, I need you," he squeezed her hand, scared.

"I need to. But you'll be okay." She whispered, and he heard the machine speed up. She closed her eyes and her hand went slack against his. The beeping became constant, and tears fell down his face.

His little piece of delicate sunshine was gone, watching him from the heavens now. He would always love her and he would never forget.

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