

Kaylee Walters

With Love,

I don't think I'll ever forget the day I met you. It was the first warm day of the year, back in 1957. You had on a red dress that wrapped around your small frame like a blanket on a baby. Your blonde hair was pinned back by two jeweled pins, the shape and color of roses. And your smile, well, it was the most stunning smile I'd ever seen.

I was almost nervous to approach you. Your beauty was somewhat intimidating to a man of my modest experience. I'm not quite sure where I gained the confidence I mustered up that day, I think I just felt that if I let you walk away without ever speaking to you or seeing you again, I'd never forgive myself. That is what encouraged me to ask your name.

"Miriam," you said. Your soft, elegant voice matched your looks flawlessly. Your welcome was warm, but it was your charm I remember most. I had never been more intrigued.

I think that is the way I'll always remember you. I think that is the way I always have. To this day, you're still the beautiful girl in the red dress that took my breath away.

* * *

Dr. Meybin walked in scribbling something on a yellow legal pad. She had an uncomfortable expression on her face as she looked up at their hopeful eyes. Their palms were gripping each others tightly, and his arm was wrapped around her frail shoulder, gently stroking

it. For the first time in her career, Dr. Meybin got a lump in her throat as she opened her mouth to speak.

“We got the MRI back,” she managed to say. She was a professional, and knew that she was capable of telling them. But it was becoming harder and harder as she watched the elderly couple hold each other, knowing that nothing good was going to come out of her mouth.

Dr. Meybin had been seeing Miriam and Edmund for years. Neither would go to an appointment without the other, neither would let go of the others hand during the entire visit. It was these people, people she had grown to form bonds with, people she had seen in her local grocery store once a week, people she had mowed lawns for when she was fourteen, that made her job so difficult. But she knew her responsibilities as a professional. She knew she had to break the news.

“I’m sorry,” the lump was growing in her throat. “Miriam, you’re going through the early stages of Alzheimer’s.”

She had never seen a seventy year old man cry before, and from that day on, she prayed she’d never have to see it again.

* * *

Our wedding day was the happiest day of my life. I remember it as clear as crystal, every detail. Your ivory chiffon dress had a long train I nearly tripped on several times during the reception. Your veil, which was your mothers, and her mothers before that, hid your exquisite walnut eyes from me. The emerald cut diamond ring that I placed on your left hand had, engraved, the words *With Love* on the inside of the band. You were my shining star that day.

I accidentally walked in on you wearing your wedding gown the evening before. You immediately had broken down in tears.

“It’s bad luck!” You cried. I hugged you, and told you how much I loved you. I told you that nothing could ever break us. I told you that nothing could tear us apart. I explained that when it came to us, there was no such thing as bad luck. Your tears eventually turned into smiles, and later became giggles. It was that night that we made love for the first time.

When I saw you walk down that isle in that dress, it was like I had never seen you in it before. You still made my knees buckle and my palms sweat. You still made my stomach tie itself in knots. You always have, Mimi.

I have our vows framed next to your bed. I know you won’t ever again really remember saying them, but I want you to feel comfort in the fact that I always will. At the time, we never thought ‘till death do us part’ would apply to us. In my mind, we were going to live in eternal happiness, dying together, hand in hand in our sleep of old age.

When you said ‘I do,’ I got a little choked up. I think you did as well.

“I now pronounce you man and wife,” the preacher had announced. He turned and looked at me with a congratulatory grin. “You may kiss your bride.”

* * *

Edmund refused want to leave Miriam’s side. He couldn’t stand the idea of losing his beautiful wife, slowly and painfully. The thought of his wife ever forgetting the romance and deep passion they had shared for so long was simply unbearable for him to grasp. He dreaded

the notion that his wife's memories were slowly going to deteriorate until, one by one, they completely ceased to exist.

Miriam, on the other hand, had simply begun to disassociate herself from the reality of the disease. She acknowledged that she had become more forgetful recently, but she couldn't bring herself to consider that her memory was slowly going to deteriorate until she could no longer find the knowledge accessible for whom she, herself, was. The idea was simply too close to home, too gut wrenchingly tragic for her to come to terms with.

Edmund never allowed himself to let Miriam know just how heartbreaking it was to be losing his love, his partner, his beautiful girl in the red dress. Despite his devastation, Edmund couldn't allow himself to mar the small amount of time they had left together before Miriam would begin losing her ability to function normally. He was determined to cherish the moments they had together while she was still capable of being herself. So, Edmund began a project to keep his mind off his wife's failing memory. He crafted three elaborate photo albums for Miriam to look through as her memory began to leave.

The first album was devoted simply towards the two of them. In it, Edmund put pictures of them horseback riding on their first date; his horse had gotten stung by a bee, and Miriam had to chase after the panicked animal to get Edmund's two feet back on the ground. He put pictures of their wedding; they fed each other cake, but Miriam ran half heartedly from Edmund when he began smearing it on her face. He put pictures of every anniversary, a different loving memory for each forty-nine times. Every picture had a narration, and at the bottom of each page he wrote the words *With Love, Ed*, even though he knew, one day, she wasn't going to know who Ed was.

Another album Edmund devoted to Miriam's family. In it, he put pictures of her mother, who died years ago from Alzheimer's, as well. She had her mother's big round eyes. He put

pictures of her father, who had also passed by now. Miriam's dad blessed her with her large cherry lips. He put pictures of her siblings, her children, her pets, and most importantly, he put more pictures of himself. Each picture was narrated, and at the bottom of each page were the words *With Love, Ed*.

The last album Ed made was the most important. It was an album dedicated solely to his wife. He put pictures of every one of Miriam's major accomplishments, from her college graduation juxtaposed to a copy of her college degree, to each of her children's births, with laminated birth certificates next to them. Each picture displayed a narration, and at the bottom of each page were the words, *With Love, Ed*.

It took him three weeks to complete. When he had, Edmund went through each of the albums, reading out loud to Miriam each narration, and explaining each picture in depth. They stayed up most of the night holding each other. Ed let Miriam cry as much as she needed. He stroked her back until she fell asleep in his arms. Then it was his turn to cry. A man's true breaking point is found when he has to watch his wife come to accept death.

Edmund awoke the next morning to Miriam cooking breakfast. He smiled as he thought of all the times he had with her, and the time they still had.

He walked up to her, gave her a passionate kiss, and took her in his arms. The aging couple slowly danced together around the kitchen, both with smiles on their aging faces, both ignoring any depressing thoughts that made way into their heads. Ed twirled his wife around the room the same way he had spun her on their wedding day, the same way he had dipped her the night they first met.

But the moment was cut short as Ed noticed his albums. They were sitting on the corner of *his* desk, next to all of *his* photo albums and picture frames. He stopped dancing and looked to his wife.

“Why did you put these here?” Edmund questioned as he reached for the albums.

Miriam shot her husband a confused glance. Her eyes seemed glazed compared to the way he remembered them. The furrows in her forehead and the wrinkles that lined her lips seemed more defined in the bright kitchen light. “Why?” Miriam asked. “What are they?”

* * *

We had been married for six years when we found out you were pregnant. You were caught off guard, but I wasn't. You had that glow, that aura that people always talk about. In fact, I've always thought that, if it was possible, you became even more beautiful when you were pregnant.

I was working at the mill, when I heard. I had never been more anxious, yet I had never felt so proud. We were being congratulated right and left. All the men offered to buy my drinks at the bar, while all the women fought for the rights to plan your first baby shower. I did everything I could to help you, even though I know I wasn't able to do much, and I'm sorry for that. I rubbed your stomach when it hurt, and I never missed an appointment with the doctor. As your stomach grew, my protection for you grew as well. You were so beautiful, Mimi, and we were so happy. I often wonder why every day can't be like that. I wish you could always know that feeling.

It wasn't until you were eight months pregnant that I finally felt a kick. We were lying side by side in bed, and my hands were cupping your tummy. It was an indescribable feeling.

"Did you feel it?" you asked me with an eager smile. "That one was hard!" You always had a smile on your face when you talked about our baby. It brought you a newly found happiness that nothing else will ever match.

"I felt it!" I said back, my face lighting up. "It's a boy, Mimi, you know it is!" You smiled blissfully.

It was April 8th when you gave birth to our baby boy. You named him Edmund. He had your eyes.

* * *

"What the hell?" Edmund screamed as he approached the smoky room. "God Damn it Miriam, the kitchen is on fire!"

Miriam looked up at her husband, confused, but worried. She watched as Edmund struggled to extinguish the fiery red flames that had enveloped the gas stovetop. He was trying desperately to appease his frustration towards his wife as he doused the fire. When he no longer saw flames, Edmund sat Miriam down and looked into her eyes. "Why did you leave the stove on Mimi?" Edmunds voice was loud and intimidating to Miriam.

Miriam's eyes began to swell. She felt her face flushing and wet tears filling her eyes. She didn't know why she left the oven on. She couldn't remember. She remembered being in the kitchen, cooking for her husband, but that was all she could manage to extract from her memory. She wasn't sure if she had eaten dinner. She couldn't even recall what she was doing

when she smelled smoke. Miriam began to cry. She didn't know what else to do. A long river of tears poured down her face. She had never felt this overwhelming feeling before. She excused herself with an apology and retreated to her couch.

It took Edmund almost an hour to clean up and air out the kitchen. He was irritated, but felt guilty for his exasperation. But he felt even worse for yelling at Miriam. He was still just beginning to get used to the idea that his wife's memory was vanishing more and more by the day. He left the kitchen to find his wife.

Miriam was lying on the red couch she had recently taken a strong liking to. Edmund had no idea why she liked it. The cushions felt similar to foam, and there was no real backing on the couch, just a rigid, unfriendly board with upholstery over it.

"Mimi," he began. Edmund noticed his wife's tears had faded. "I'm sorry for yelling at you." Edmund's voice was beginning to tremble. He was watching his wife slowly break with reality, but he couldn't let her know just how difficult it was for him to see. "I forget that you're going through this. I know it's not your fault." He looked into his wife's eyes for a hint of forgiveness. But Miriam greeted him with a puzzled expression.

"When did you yell at me?" Miriam asked her husband with an uncertain tone. Edmund didn't quite know how to respond.

"When you left the stove on Mimi. Do you remember leaving the stove on?" It broke Edmund's heart when he caught himself slowing down his words as if his wife was a child.

"I left the stove on?" Miriam looked worried. She glanced around the room and surveyed her surroundings, as though she was expecting to see a fire.

Edmund gave up. He didn't really want Miriam to remember what he had done anyways. Instead, he leaned down next to her and held her hand in his. "You know," he said as he gently stroked her palms. "You're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen."

* * *

For our tenth wedding anniversary, I wanted to surprise you. I wrapped a bandana around your eyes and drove for three hours. I led you to sandy beaches and warm blue water before I untied the yellow band from your eyes.

I packed sandwiches and champagne to occupy our time. We stayed for hours, but it seemed like days. When night fell, we lay on our blanket in the sand and stared up at the night sky. I felt the same as I had the first day I met you. It was a feeling of pure bliss.

"I have a surprise for you, as well." You said while I watched your twinkling eyes reflecting the luminous stars. You skipped to the car and shuffled some things around until you found what you were looking for. You came back to our blanket and kneeled down, holding an album.

"It's a photo album." You said as you handed the large book to me. You were so excited, and it was apparent that you had worked for a long time on this project. Each page was numbered with a year; each year was broken into categories. You had our accomplishments, our dates, our children and our memories placed in pictures in the book. Each picture was narrated, and at the bottom of each page were the words *With Love, Mimi*.

"This way," you began, "we never forget anything about our love."

* * *

It was getting more and more difficult for Edmund to continue watching after Miriam. She was no longer able to do daily tasks she used to love, like cooking or driving. They were simply too dangerous for her now. She had gotten lost in parking lots, had gotten turned around on highways, and had put herself in dangerous situations far too many times to allow her to continue. Edmund hated seeing his wife enduring so much suffering.

Miriam would cry when she forgot where she was, which usually happened about two to three times a day. She would occasionally forget they were married. But the hardest part was that each day she became a little sadder. Each day, her eyes would look at him a little more unsure about who he was. Each day, she would get closer to forgetting him completely.

Edmund struggled most with his inability to comfort his wife. It was so painful to see her falling apart, that sometimes he'd take a break so he could build the strength back to continue. When she started wandering, he had to stop taking breaks. He once found her in the neighbor's driveway digging through her trash. She didn't know where she was or why she was there.

Today was a day Edmund was dreading. Miriam's brother had passed, and he was taking her to his wake. Edmund worried the entire day about Miriam's possible reactions. He had explained to his wife what had happened, but she was confused during their conversations and kept forgetting what was going on. Edmund wrapped his arm around Miriam's shoulder and helped her up into the car. She began to cry almost immediately.

"What are you doing?!" She wailed at Edmund. Edmund rubbed her face and assured her she was okay. She couldn't be appeased, however.

“Who are you?” Miriam calmed her voice down. A worried expression overcame her eyes.
“Do you know where my mother is?” Edmund’s heart sank.

When they arrived at the funeral home, Miriam was in even worse shape. Her memory was fading in and out, but she didn’t seem to have much of a recollection of her immediate family at all. Edmund brought Miriam up to the casket containing her brother.

“Mimi,” Edmund sighed, “this is your brother.”

“Oh, okay.” Miriam was calm, but apathetic. She was confused as to what was going on and had little idea who was lying in the mahogany casket.

“Miriam,” Edmund called, his voice trembling. “It’s time to say goodbye.”

Miriam gave her brother a kiss on the forehead. Edmund restrained tears.

“Can I go to bed now?” Miriam pleaded.

* * *

One of the toughest times in our marriage was your mother’s death. She had Alzheimer’s for over a decade, and you watched her go through a frightening hell that seemed to know no bounds. I knew it hurt to have to go through. I knew you were aching for her.

We took care of your mom in our home for a while. Eventually, however, she became far too difficult to continue watching after her. You would cry a lot during that time. You couldn’t stand watching her suffer. Sometimes I would find you in her room while she was sleeping, rubbing her forehead, and telling her stories, while you lay beside her on the bed.

“I’m your daughter.” I heard you explain. “I want you to know, mom,” you began to cry.
“I hope you know how loved you are.”

Your mother was hardly speaking at that point, but she knew. You were the person that always seemed to make her smile. Occasionally, she'd even remember your name and call out to you. But, in due time, we stopped hearing your name at all.

The day we took her to the home was one of your most difficult days.

"I just don't want her to wake up tied to a bed, surrounded by a bunch of faces she doesn't recognize." You said. Your eyes filled with tears. "I just can't see her like this anymore." I watched you sob as she occasionally asked us questions from her seat. You couldn't take her inside. You stayed in the car, with Kleenex in your lap, still gripping your mother's medication in your right hand, and the blanket you wrapped around her on car rides in your left.

You cried yourself to sleep that night. But you woke up several times. The last time you woke up, you shook me and called out my name.

"Edmund," you had started to cry again. I turned to you with drowsy eyes, and gave you a half hug to appease your anguish.

"It's too hard." You sobbed. The tears were streaming down your face. "I don't want her to go through it."

Your lips puckered slightly and you reached for my hand. "I couldn't go through it, Ed." You paused, let a final tear fall down your fair, but wrinkled skin, and took a deep breath. "I'd rather die than to forget my life, Ed. Everyone who matters, everyone who loves you. I'd rather die."

* *

Edmund struggled to lay his wife in her bed. Miriam no longer had any recollection of who he was. She hardly remembered who she, herself, was. She woke up, morning after morning, confused and in tears. It was slowly breaking his heart to watch her deteriorate.

Watching the person you love most in the world slowly and painfully die is hard. But Edmund and Miriam had the kind of love that's most rare. It was the kind where one just doesn't feel capable of ever being without the other, the kind filled with mutual respect and love encompassing a bond that only grows stronger, day after day. They had passion, they had memories, they always considered themselves one cohesive unit. And now, Edmund was merely a useless half of what he used to be.

"Help me." Miriam called to Edmund. Edmund cringed. Her frail little voice was getting weaker by the hours.

The days were passing slower and Miriam's condition was only worsening. She spent her days on the uncomfortable couch that she had grown so familiar with. She'd begun a cycle of sitting up when she got scared, then sitting back down, and then repeating the cycle within minutes, as she couldn't remember that she had just done the same thing. Occasionally she'd call for help, and occasionally she'd cry.

Edmund hardly could get her to eat anymore. She'd purse her lips as tight as she could and claim that she wasn't hungry. Edmund just would keep trying to feed her, comforting his wife as he delicately pried her withering cherry lips apart to give her food. She'd occasionally get upset, but for the most part, Edmund had a way with her. He'd charm her into eating, the same way he charmed her into spending her life with him, one step at a time. Once he got the first bite down, it was easier for him to continue, putting the spoon in her mouth before she had the opportunity to resist again.

When he finished feeding her today, Miriam let Edmund kiss her cheek, and he was convinced he saw her smile at him. It was like somewhere deep down, she could almost remember the face of the man who she loved for nearly fifty years, the same man she went to church with every Sunday, and the same man who she had two successful sons and one beautiful daughter who had her eyes with. At least, that was what Edmund prayed.

“Can I go lie down?” Miriam asked Edmund, as if she needed permission from him to do so.

“Of course you can, love.” Edmund said.

Edmund watched her begin walking to her couch. All the sudden her steps became smaller and smaller, but quicker and quicker. Edmund ran towards her but didn’t manage to catch her. She fell, breaking her nose in three different places. Blood was everywhere. Edmund was helpless.

Miriam was forgetting how to walk.

* * *

I just want to let you know, Mimi, that you are my favorite person. You always have been, and you always will be. You can walk into a room, even today, and the whole room just lights up. It’s just your way.

It’s been hard, watching you slowly go. I never imagined I would have to see you this way. You were the greatest thing that ever happened to me, and I’ll always love you for that reason.

Today you fell again. You broke your hip this time, and I never saw you cry so much. I hate seeing you cry, Mimi. It makes me cry with you. The unsubiding pain you're going through makes me ache. You're becoming so difficult to take care of, being the aging man I am. I was advised by numerous professionals to put you in a home. They recommended the same home we took your mother to. The nurses said they'd take care of you as best they can. But I can't bring myself to take you there, because the best they can is just not enough for my girl.

Instead, Mimi, I asked Dr. Meybin for her help. I asked for her opinion as a friend, not a professional. Dr. Meybin offered us a solution.

Dr. Meybin gave me a needle with a controlled substance in it. The substance stops the heart within twelve seconds of injection. It's completely painless. It feels as though you're falling asleep, is the way Dr. Meybin put it, and it's relatively undetectable. She knew I needed help. She hated seeing you like this too.

I waited until you fell asleep tonight to administer the shot. You looked like an angel. I still look at you the same way as the first day I saw you, you know. I'm sure when I find you in heaven, that's the way you'll look. You'll be wearing the same red dress and your hair will have two pins in it, the shape and color of roses. You'll remember my name, and you'll be able to recall every memory we shared. You'll remember each of our children's names, and the days each of them were born. You'll never cry there, you'll never break your hip, nor will you fracture your nose. You'll never have to ask for help, and your formerly uncomfortable couch that you like will make you feel like you're lying on a cloud.

I'll meet you there, in heaven, Mimi. I'll be there soon- when it is my time. But, for now, I'll kiss you on your forehead, and wipe the tear that's brimming your right eye, and I'll

watch you as you go to a happier place. And I'll tell you how you are the most beautiful girl I've seen, and how I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you.