

Never Giving Up **By Kylie Wong**

FRIDAY:

Our days outside of work are always at home. We pretend it's because we lack enthusiasm for late nights and socialization. But we both know that's not why we're really spending our Friday night watching an indie film on our lumpy couch.

The truth is: he won't admit it. No matter how long we've known each other, or how bad it's gotten, he won't admit the glaringly obvious problem in front of him.

It's his one great flaw. The Shadow, I call it.

It might be the very thing that will consume him. And it's taking everything in me to stop that from happening.

"I don't want to keep doing this dance."

"We're not doing a dance," he says.

"We are. Don't try to deny it, please."

"I'm not denying anything." I restrain from strangling him. "That's the dance!"

"What?"

"You denying the insanely obvious problem you have!"

He rolls his eyes, "I'm *fine*."

“You’re not! I don’t know how many times I need to remind you.” He stands up at that comment, his back facing me. “This is my life, okay? Let me figure it out.”

“I can’t. Not when you’re being reckless with it.” He rubs his face. “Why do you care so much?”

“You know why.”

“If I knew. Before. I would’ve been more careful.”

“You wouldn’t be here if you had.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do!”

“You care too much.” I almost throw the nearest lamp in his direction.

“How do you expect me not to care about the most important person in my life?” His eyes stare at the floor, his voice quiet, “Can we drop this?” I try not to scream, my mouth opening and closing. Fine. “Okay.”

Before he walks away, he looks at me, imperfectly himself. “Love you,” he says, voice neutral. My heart breaks; cracked open and raw. “I love you too.”

Please.

Let me help you.

SATURDAY:

Today is like every other day. Although it's not. No matter how much he's willing to pretend like it is.

Like any other, normal day, we woke up in our separate rooms, tired and lonely. I was out of bed by eight, motivated by my long list of to do's. Unlike him, who slept in until ten, hungover and unintelligible.

That morning, I worked on the kitchen island, like always, piano music playing through the speakers. He woke up midway, between breakfast and lunch, fixing himself a coffee. Today was his day off, his first this week. The grocery store works him too hard. They don't know about the version of him who has to restrain himself from downing a six pack before his eight-hour shift. They only know about the version of him who shows up hungover and lucid and competent. I know both and more, loving every version of him, like my life depends on it.

It doesn't, but his does.

For lunch today, we heated up leftover pasta from the night before. We talked about weekend plans, family, work, friends, normal things. Everything but the one thing we should be talking about.

Afterwards, I continued working. Emails, phone calls, video meetings, researching. All the boring parts of the job, the exciting stuff is tomorrow. Press interviews.

He worked on a commission all afternoon, an abstract portrait, his side hustle. It keeps him sane when his brain is out to kill him.

When we're both done a day of work, we reconvened in the living room, like today is any other day. Today, we put on a movie to unwind, Felix van Groeningen's *Beautiful Boy*. He tried to hide the obvious during the movie, but from the way he squirmed at the end, I know he's terrified that Nic Sheff's story could become his, even with the hopeful ending.

Showing him, that movie wasn't meant to scare him; it was a warning. *This is why I want you to be careful*. I don't say that out loud. Today is meant to be "normal," like any other day.

Dinner today was simple, Chinese takeout from our local restaurant. Fried noodles, spicy pork and dumplings. Without me, he would either drink beer for every meal or have whatever bland food he can muster that day. If anything, he will let me expand his diet to something other than alcohol and plain pasta.

At this point, I'll take any win, no matter how small.

After dinner, we spent our time doing the boring stuff. Cleaning or laundry or emails or dishes. Until all that was left was time alone: for reading or drawing or writing.

Until sleep arrived, our "normal day" over, our demons still hanging above us.

SUNDAY:

Yesterday was normal, today will not be. "I played your game yesterday."

“What game? We didn’t play a game.”

“We did. We, I, pretend like everything is normal. Like *nothing* is wrong. When, you know, whether you’ll admit it or not, is far from the truth.”

His jaw tightens, “Stop. Bringing. This. Up. There is nothing to talk about.”

“Stop lying to yourself! Every single day I see you, I see the way you’re falling apart. You are not invincible, you know. You need help. Why won’t you just admit it?”

After several long moments, he looks directly in my eyes. “I’m done, okay? Either I leave or you drop it.”

MONDAY:

Today he’s ignoring me. This shouldn’t surprise me. I shrug.

It started with his shift today, eight hours, from nine to five. He didn’t even tell me he was working today. Why bother? He just left and came back when he felt like it. At seven, skipping our normal six o’clock dinner.

Now it’s seven, and he won’t acknowledge me. He’s currently showering, hair first, then the rest second. Then, I bet, he will hang out in his room, a beer in one hand, a book in the other. He will stay there for the rest of the night, alone, but “happy.” I will fight sleep and pretend like everything is fine. It’s not, it never is.

He steps out the shower, wet hair falling in stringy clumps. Prominent dark shadows on pale skin, slender frame, permanent back hunch. The love of my life, and he won’t even listen to me. Five years later, and some things seem to never change.

He walks away, his back facing me, water running down his face from his hair. Okay. I guess the kitchen it is. Tonight, is a late, hours dedicated on my book. Classical music plays while my characters argue once more, their weaknesses driving them apart for good. I shiver, my fiction is becoming my reality.

When midnight approaches, I shut my laptop for good, the blue light still shining. As the bigger person, I should be the first to initiate. But as the confrontational coward, I would rather spend another sleepless night alone than resolve our biggest issue.

There is always tomorrow. Or rather, I hope there is. I would hate our last interaction to be reduced to furtive glances and scowls.

TUESDAY:

I called in sick today. My agent and publisher didn't question it. They know, they understand. Today is not my day. Nor his. I know I am not improving. He does not know that he is not improving. I am the one carrying both our demons. Can we survive another day? Or will we both crumble to the ground and never breathe again?

Maybe.

Only the future will know, it holds the answers of the past.

It's unclear to me if he leaves his room or not. For all I know, he is lying still on the floor, a beer still in hand. I close my eyes, willing the image away.

Maybe this is a sign. I need to be the bigger person.

Since we met, I believed I could do it. That I could help him through his worse. I really believed sheer love, will, and hope could save a broken person. Turns it doesn't work, especially when the person saving needs saving too. Then it become a double-edged sword. I have been killing us both. And now we are past the point of saving.

Falling, falling, falling.

Towards the world beyond.

WEDNESDAY:

He lets me see him this morning. It feels like a sort of miracle, although it shouldn't be, most roommates get to see each other on a regular basis, and it means nothing. For us, it's everything and more.

It's a miracle I don't scream at him at first glance.

His skin has become a sickly yellow, paper thin and waxy. His hair is disheveled, clothes wrinkled and unwashed, he looks years older than he is. And thinner, much, much thinner, he's a skeleton at this point.

He holds onto onto kitchen counter, knuckles white, hands trembling. "What have you done to yourself?"

"Nothing." Tears threaten to spill over.

"I wish my words were enough for you to help yourself." He shrugs.

Hours later, I find him sleeping on the cool kitchen counter; face smushed, clothes falling off his small frame. I rub the small of his back, skin and bone beneath my fingers. My heart is breaking. I wonder, if he knew what his demons were doing to me, he would finally, finally cave.

He wakes hours later, disoriented and hungover. "Hi sleepy."

"Hey," he croaks. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Is it about me?"

"You know the answer to that."

He covers his hands with his face, voice muffled. "I'll be okay. Really."

"I don't know about that."

"Trust me." That's the thing, I don't think I can, not anymore.

THURSDAY:

I shouldn't have let it get this far. I should've tried harder. I should've driven him to the nearest facility, against his will. Then everything that happened today, would never, ever have happened.

Why did I let it get this far?

The lingering alcohol hit me first. Strong, dizzying, vomit inducing. Then the shards of glass on the floor, cutting my feet.

At last, came his limp body, pulse just beating, sprawled on his bedroom floor.

My memories of that moment are hazy, still. Only fragments remain.

I know I crumbled to the ground. I know I screamed. I know I called 911. I know I held him. I know I turned him onto his side. I know I cried. I know the memories of us flashed before my eyes. I know I told him "I love you." I know my heart sank. I know, I know, I know, that there was a very real, *small chance* that this was it.

I know I was never going to forget this moment, no matter what happened next.

I still remember the moment my world almost ended. We were slumped on the hardwood floor of his bedroom, waiting for the paramedics to arrive. I was shaking, crying, scare beyond words. He was still unconscious, skin blue and clammy. His pulse was still beating; the one light in a moment of indescribable darkness.

I cried like a blubbering baby, drying myself out until there was nothing left to lose.

I expressed my deepest gratitude to him, retracting every hurtful word I have ever said, thinking that this was our last moment. My last time to say what's most important. My hands were shaking, his body limp, cold.

I was losing it. My world disappearing before my eyes.

“I’m so, so, so sorry, for everything.” His finger twitched. My heart, already beating repeatedly, threatened to jump out of my chest. “Please don’t leave me. I- I can’t.” He stirred. I wrapped my arms around his dead weight. The door burst open.

Two months later

What does one wear when picking up the love of their life from prison? Hell? Genuine question.

It has been two months since I dropped him off and told him to fix his mess. I promise it was not heartless. It was desperate. Pleading.

Since then, we have had no contact.

I don't know if that was the right move.

People say don't have regrets. Well, unfortunately I do.

And they say life is short. Well, I say life will be whatever I make it. And right now, life is him, life is making sure he's okay, alive. I and everything else will follow soon after. My well being will come when it's made too. That is not today. It might not be for a while.

"I'm sorry," is the first thing he tells me. My knees are weak, heart falling to the floor. "It doesn't matter. You're here, safe, alive."

"You should've given up on me." His head is buried in my shoulder, arms hugging me so tight to the point I can't breathe. I am not letting go. Not ever.

I whisper in his ear, "I couldn't. I'm never giving up on you, okay? Not as long as I'm breathing."

He muffles a sob in my shoulder. "I love you. You're too good to me."

"I love you; you are more than good enough for me."

Tears soak my dress, “You didn’t need to do this. You could’ve found someone else.”

“Never. It’s because I love you. I will always stay.”

Our lives didn’t become perfect after that day. I have never wanted them to be. With him by my side, no matter what, life will be exactly as it’s meant to be.