

Prologue

Tap, tap, tap goes the roulette ball, each bounce makes the same distinctive sound as it cautiously decides where to settle. Who to bestow its favour and fortune upon this time? One innocuous little ball with the power to make a winner of someone whilst simultaneously making a loser of another.

Never could I have been described as a gambler in life, the fear of losing everything I held dear would far outweigh the thrill of a win. So, the realisation I made shortly after my death seemed odd. You see, life is a roulette table and every one of us is a gambler, our choices are the chips we place on the table. Each day we hedge our bets, waiting for the little ball to dance across the wheel and reveal whether we win or lose. These tiny incidental decisions silently build to shape and mould our future bringing about the major changes we just can't help but notice.

Now, my death may have happened in a moment but that moment came about because of one decision I made two years previously. Stuck in a rut, I'd been desperate to escape the fears that bound me so I decided to take a gamble and place my bet. Did I lose? Well, time will tell but invariably life is a game we all lose at, in the end.

But does anyone ever truly die? Every person leaves an imprint of their time here with even the shortest of lives leaving the biggest legacies on the hearts of those who loved them. A single memory acts like a solitary spark keeping the embers of love burning through the most painful separation. It's these memories that bring warmth to my heart; these are now my priceless possessions.

It is often said that everything must come to an end and whilst that's true, everything must also have a beginning. This story starts at the beginning of my end.

Chapter 1- Petal on the Beach

The wind whips past my ears as I stand alone on the cold stone shore, frost coated pebbles shine brightly under the winter sun. Reflected beams dance upon the boisterous waves like magical fairies, captivating me with their beauty.

You see, the serenity of the ocean acts like a magnet to me in times of turmoil, gently calming my troubled mind so I can think. Today, I sit here in fear of my own future, so scared I'll make the wrong decision; subconsciously I've stopped making any at all. Unsurprisingly, my life has ground to a halt and as I sit here upon the ice cold shore on this perfect winter's day, I know this has to change.

In the distance, I see the silhouette of a lone figure standing by the shore, a lady who appears to be throwing petals into the ocean. The colour red boldly streaks the sky as the breeze violently whips them out across the ocean. My eye is caught by the swirling petals against the crystal blue sky as they are held by the wind in precarious suspension causing them to almost sparkle.

After the last of the petals are thrown I return to my quiet contemplation, casually noting as the lady leaves the shore. My gaze once again rests upon the picture perfect scene before me. How can I make my life as serene as this view? How am I going to take that first step? Where do I even begin to try to break the cycle I feel trapped in? Suddenly, a softly spoken voice behind me interrupts my thoughts, momentarily making me wonder if I'd imagined it.

"There's nothing more beautiful than the beach on a bright winter's day is there love?" I turn my head to see the middle aged lady with her empty basket stood beside me, speaking a little louder this time.

"I'm glad I'm not the only one who thinks that, I always thought maybe it was weird to prefer the beach in winter."

"Well if it is weird, you're in good company. See, on a day like this it's hard to believe anything bad can happen in this world. It's just so perfect, almost magical."

I smile as I watch the lady look out to the horizon before closing her eyes for a moment.

"Do you mind if I ask why you were throwing petals into the ocean? From a distance, it really looked beautiful." My curiosity piquing as I await her response.

She smiles at me briefly before raising her head towards the shore line and sitting down next to me as she replies "I do it every year on my birthday. You see my husband passed away a few years ago, we'd been married for 42 years. Each year since we first met he would buy me a dozen red roses on my birthday, in the beginning of our courtship he would have to save up for weeks to buy them.

"What a beautiful gesture, he sounds like a wonderful man" I smile back at the lady.

"Oh he really was, we had so much fun together. But I don't think I ever realised how much those roses meant to me until I woke up on my first birthday without him and saw no roses in my vase. It made me feel like I'd lost him all over again. Even although I knew there would be none there, it felt quite traumatic. That's the stupid part."

"I don't think you were stupid, it probably never crossed your mind that you would feel that way."

"It didn't but I knew I could never enjoy my birthday without those roses in my vase. So I decided to buy him the roses instead, as a thank you to him for all the happy years we spent together. It's my new tradition and it helps me feel close to him. Now, each birthday I wake up to the familiar roses in my vase like they always were and for that day at least it feels as if nothing has changed".

"What a beautiful way to honour your husband, turning something so painful into something so positive. It's exceptional. I hope I meet someone as special to me as he was to you. "

"Oh love, I know that you will. Now, my mother used to always say to me, your heart is your map to love. Do you ever have an impulse to do something but don't know why? The lady looks at me expectantly.

"Yes, sometimes."

"Exactly, that's your heart guiding you and if you follow it rest assured it will lead you to the love of your life. Love may seem temporary and disposable these days but don't be fooled; only the right love can endure and what isn't strong will never last. It can't be forced or manipulated; it has to be pure

and genuine. I mean, what are you most likely to come across walking down the street? A plastic bag or a diamond ring?"

"A plastic bag".

"Precisely, and if you do find a diamond ring what would you do?"

"I'd try to find the owner as it wouldn't belong to me".

"And that's the same with love, if you're with the wrong person it'll fail because your heart will seek to find the one it belongs to. You can fool your mind but never your heart. You know another important thing when it comes to love? Timing, it's everything."

"Timing? How do you mean?"

"Well, time has real power. You see we can control a lot of things in this world but never time, it just marches on with or without us and stops for no-one. It's time that decides when love crosses your path and there's absolutely nothing you can ever do to change it. So do you know what that means? Don't worry about it until you have to."

"Huh, I've never looked at it like that before. I suppose that could be true of everything in life."

"Absolutely! However, don't let that make you think you don't have to try as nothing falls into your lap either. If everything in life was achieved by inactivity it would be so easy. You still need to work hard but look for the signs and don't run when you should be walking. Accept that things will go wrong but that sometimes it's just making room for better things to come and sometimes it's just pure bad luck."

"So what you're saying is I should just not worry and go with the flow in life. Is that it?"

"I couldn't have said it better myself. It's not always easy to do especially when emotions are involved but it'll make you happier in the long run and ultimately that's the one thing we all want to be. Well dear, it's been lovely to chat to you. Who knows, maybe our paths will cross again in the future and you'll be able to tell me all about your own love story. I know it'll be every bit as beautiful as mine."

“Let’s hope so because I’d be very lucky to find half as much as happiness as you did with your husband. Thank you for sharing your story with me. It’s been really lovely to talk to you too.”

I bid the lady a final farewell, tears threatening to spill down my face. What an extraordinary conversation to have when I came here to find the confidence to follow my heart. To make the decision I’ve been fighting against for so long despite knowing deep down it’s the right thing to do.

A blast of cold air forces me to wrap my coat tighter around me. Glancing down, I notice a single blood red rose petal resting gently by my foot before it’s swiftly carried away by the wind to the other side of me. It’s vulnerability against the hard stones visible as it lays upon a soft white chalk stone. Quickly retrieving my phone, I take a photo. This can be my symbol of hope, a reminder of my own inner strength. For too long, I’ve locked myself in a prison without walls, choosing to live in a world of uncertainty and fear. But today that changes with this symbolic petal of hope. As I lower my phone, the breeze whips the petal away and I watch it bounce and tumble across the icy stones, out over the sea in honour of its rightful owner.

Sitting alone once again on the beach surrounded by the calming influence of the sea and the gentle squawk of the birds above, I finally know what it is I need to do. I have to move away completely. I have to go to a place where no one knows me, no one expects anything from me and most of all no one cares about me. I know this might sound like I’m enforcing isolation on myself but I’m not. Sometimes people close to you can stifle you with their concerns and influence you to do things you didn’t want to because they think they know what is best for you. I want to know that I’m strong enough to stand on my own two feet, to really try to change my life and to live my own dream. If I fail then I can get some comfort from the fact that I’ve tried. I’d rather regret what I have done than what I haven’t done.

I think back to the last time I felt really happy and carefree, it was last year and as a treat my friend Casey and I took a trip to Dublin. For one long week we basked in the July sunshine and explored the strange but familiar city. Our nights were spent in the pubs meeting people and laughing like we had never laughed before. I often think back to that week and I know it was just a holiday. I know they never last but what if they can? Maybe I could make it work? I’ll never know if I don’t try and if it all

went wrong, it's only a plane ride to come home again. I've absolutely nothing to lose and if there is ever a time to make a massive jump then surely it's now?

"What the hell are you moving to Dublin for" is my father's reaction; he isn't pleased with the news, especially when I tell him I'm going in less than a week.

"I've nothing to lose here; I've no job, no money, nothing. What can I lose except pride, dad?"

Equally displeased is my mother who thinks any city is far too dangerous for her daughter especially ones in other countries. "Autumn, can't you reconsider and move to Exeter instead or Bristol if you have to. There's no need to go so far or to another country for god's sake."

"I want to go to another country. I want to see how it feels to live on my own two feet. I'm 24 and still live at home with my parents I don't want to be here at 40. I need to do this."

"We're your family, we can help you move out and get a place of your own?"

"No, no, no! I don't want to always be struggling to make ends meet, working a job that I hate and living for just two days out of every seven wishing away my whole life until I'm dead with nothing to show for it."

"All you'll ever have to show for your life is children; you don't need to go to Ireland to have a baby."

"I don't want to have a baby, not yet, there are things I want to do and see. How can I have a child or a relationship when I hate myself and my pathetic life?" I feel the tears well up in my eyes as I sit at the kitchen table with my head in my hands.

"You're not pathetic and neither is your life. We all have times when it's hard, things seem to go wrong whatever you do but running away never solved anything. Now more than ever you need your family."

"Mum, I know I have a family who care which is why I can go away. It isn't forever and if it all fails I can always come home but at least I'll have tried. I just need to try."

“Look Autumn” my dad walks over from the doorway where he has been observing this, he gently ushers for my mum to step aside before kneeling in front of me.

“If this is what you want to do then of course we support it, you’re old enough to make your own decisions but you don’t know anyone in Dublin, we have no family there and you have to understand why we’re concerned.”

I look at my mum and see the flame of anger in her eye, almost as if dad has committed the biggest act of betrayal. I do understand their concern but I can’t let it stop me.

The place I once called home has become my prison; its gentle loving arms have turned to thorns that chain me here against my will through fear, guilt and familiarity. We’re all scared of change but there comes a time when we have to either embrace it or get left behind with opportunity and hope leaving us in the same cold bed we made all those years ago. Now, most of my friends have moved away. I feel as if my home has become a land of strangers. The streets once awash with familiar faces is now a shallow stream of unrecognisable faces enjoying the fruits of their retirement but making me feel like an outcast in my own town.

I, like my friends moved away to university. I did my degree in Drama, my parents never thought it was a real subject. I can’t count the times they’d begged for me to do something “proper” like Mrs Jones’s daughter down the road who was training to be a solicitor. However, I loved the world of film, of theatre and drama but my confidence always held me back. The parts I craved always eluded me. I had a few minor roles, one in a company promotional video but my big break was providing the voice for an animated cartoon. But apart from that, things didn’t really plan out the way I thought they would.

Something told me that I had to move away or I’d never get anywhere. I never felt good enough, as if I didn’t deserve these parts. Gradually, I began to believe it; as a result my confidence plummeted. I’d search auditions but always find reasons why I couldn’t go. I became scared of them and in the end I stopped trying altogether. That’s how I ended up where I am now, loathing myself and my situation.

Living back with my parents, wallowing in my own self-pity, wasting time that could’ve been used doing something productive. I’d said I was only coming back for a few months but that was over a year ago. Anytime I thought of leaving, the same fear and excuses that stopped me from auditioning

always managed to keep me right where I was. Trapping me in a cell without walls, a prison of my own making.

Now I've made the decision to move I feel free, as if a weight has been lifted off my shoulders but I'm still surrounded by a fog of nerves. When I think about what I'm going to do my hands start to shake but I know I have to do it. Don't they say you should always do the things you fear first?

As the magnitude of my decision becomes clear, the fear starts to grow. I begin to tell my friends, explaining to them my theory of how it will all work out. But as I begin to convince them, I find myself becoming less convinced and ever more fearful of my chosen path. But like the lady on the beach said today, if you follow your heart you cannot fail. Although I can't see how that success will look right now, I know if I just believe in myself then it will lead me to a happier place than I am in now and that's good enough for me.