

Once upon a time.

by Adam Sifre

"Tell me a story." Susan sniffled and pressed the phone against her face, searching for a pocket of warmth underneath the blanket. Her eyes felt gravelly and burned from overuse. She didn't think she could keep them open another minute, but she wasn't ready to let go.

"Really?" The man — her man's — voice sounded muffled and scratchy at the same time. Susan smiled in the dark. He was terrible with phones and she never understood half of what he was saying.

But what I can hear is always wonderful. Fresh tears.

"Yes. Tell me a story."

"Hmm... Okay. Once upon a time..."

He's been crying too. He won't admit it.

"Once upon a time there was a beautiful woman."

Susan smiled. "Oh, I think I am going to like this story."

"Shh."

"Once upon a time there was a beautiful woman and she lived on an enchanted balcony."

That made Susan smile and cry at the same time. She loved her balcony. Coffee and cigarettes in the morning and wine at night. The only times she felt happy lately.

The man continued. "She was not only beautiful, however. She was also the most powerful person in the land and she didn't even know it. You see, whenever she smiled all the people would feel good. They would feel special. And not just the people. Everything became lighter, lighter and more important when she smiled." The man's voice cracked a little and he cleared his throat.

Tell him it was a mistake. Tell him to come over.

Tell him anything. Just don't let it end like this. But then he was talking again.

“Her smile made a man feel that everything was going to be okay. People came from all over the land just to wait under her balcony; hoping to catch a glimpse of that smile. And for a while, everything really was okay.”

There was a pause and she could hear him take a deep breath. He wasn't trying to think about what to say next. She knew he had no trouble telling these stories to her. They came to him easier than breathing. *He's thinking about that kiss in the rain. How warm it was and how right it felt. He's hoping his story will fix everything between us. And I want it to. I want it to so badly but I don't even know what's broken.*

“Every day she would smile and every day the people would leave feeling healed inside. The woman didn't know it, but she had become famous just from sitting on her balcony and smiling. Imagine that.

That made her smile. He always made her smile. *But it's dark and I am alone and there is no one to see. No one to heal, even if I really did have that kind of magic.* Susan put the phone on speaker and closed her eyes. They were in the small hours now and she really was exhausted. If she fell asleep during his story, he would understand. *He always understands. Except this. This he doesn't understand.*

“But then,” her man continued. “But then one day an evil troll named Jerk heard about the beautiful woman and her magic smile.”

Susan almost laughed then, despite the tears. “Jerk” was her husband. An angry, mean man who was bent on hurting her any way he could since she had filed for divorce. He knew his way around a courtroom and Susan didn't think she would ever be free of him. Turning him into a troll was a kindness, she thought.

“This is so —”

“Shh. Let's finish this last story.” Now there was no effort to hide the tears and they came through the phone clear as cool wine.

"I must have that smile for myself," the troll said to the night. "And I will keep it in a dark place until the beautiful woman forgets she ever had it." And so Jerk the troll, who was so ugly on the inside, pretended to be good on the outside. He talked to the beautiful woman and he pretended to love her. And the beautiful woman thought she was in love, so she let that disgusting, petty troll onto her balcony."

"Dillon, stop."

"What?"

"You know I *do* love you."

"Shh. I know. I just wish that was enough. Do you want to hear the rest of the story?"

"Yes," Susan whispered. *Tell it forever and ever and ever.*

"Okay. So the beautiful woman let the troll onto her balcony. Jerk the troll didn't waste any time. He talked in a soft voice and his breath smelled like Lunesta."

Susan laughed at that.

"Shh. Listen. His breath smelled like Lunesta and the beautiful woman was lulled to sleep. As soon as she closed her eyes, Jerk used his dark troll magic to steal her smile."

"How did he do that?," Susan asked. But she knew.

"There are so many ways for a man to steal a woman's smile that it breaks my heart to even think about them." Dillon stopped talking for a minute and she could picture him trying not to break down.

"The next day the beautiful woman woke up feeling sad. She tried to be happy because until that day, being happy was all she knew. But the dark troll magic was too strong and Jerk made her feel blue and small. That was the first time the beautiful woman didn't smile for a whole day. Can you imagine that? And each day after that, Jerk worked his troll magic and each day the beautiful woman forgot to smile, and each day the world grew just a little darker. Until finally people stopped coming to the grassy space underneath her balcony. Without her smile, they all forgot why they

wanted to be there and eventually every one of them stumbled home in the dark.

Except for one man.”

Susan kissed the phone, quietly so that he wouldn't know. “I'm smiling now.”

“No you're not. You're crying, but that's okay,” Dillon told her. “Some stories make you wait to smile. But sometimes they are the best ones, I think. Now shh.”

“Except for one man. He was a strange man. A little odd looking and awkward in the way he stood and swayed there, on the grassy spot under the beautiful woman's balcony. The thing was, the strange man had never been in love before and didn't think he ever would be. He was resigned to live an ordinary life. Can you imagine what that would be like? Your narrator shudders at the thought.”

“You are certainly not ordinary, crazy man,” she laughed. She thought she could hear him smile on the other end of the line.

“I think we have definitely established that much. But this isn't about me. This is just a story. So let me finish.”

“As I was saying, the strange man was resigned to live an ordinary life. \But that was before he happened to look up from his walk and see the beautiful woman sitting in a wicker chair on her balcony. She was not smiling of course and her eyes were *so* sad. All that dark troll magic made her look like just another person.

But the strange man was not fooled.”

Now she really was smiling. *How does he do that? How does he know just what I need to hear? And why isn't that enough?*

“After that brief look, his heart was already hers. And the love he felt was strong. Stronger than all the dark troll magic in all the land.

Don't stop. Don't end this story, Dillon. Please.

“So the strange man stood below the balcony and started talking to the beautiful woman. It was at once the hardest and easiest thing he had ever done. ‘She will never talk to someone like me,’ he thought. But at the same time he knew that she would. He was

filled with doubt and completely sure of himself. That has always been the way with the strange alchemy of love."

Tell me more. Tell me more about the love. Don't skip anything, my love. Talk to me forever like this.

The tears came back and the story continued.

"Because the man's love was stronger than his fear. A lot stronger. So he talked and he talked. He talked about the weather, about his favorite foods. Anything he could think of. Sometimes he would stutter and sometimes his voice would fall into a whisper and sometimes he felt like an idiot, standing there and talking nonsense."

No. Talk nonsense to me forever. Never stop.

'Better to act a fool than to live anyway else without her,' he thought. And of course he was right.

The strange man was eager. And so silly. But the beautiful woman could see, even from her balcony that he really did love her. He didn't know what to do about it, so he was doing everything!"

Keep doing it, love. Susan squeezed her eyes shut.

"Seeing the strange man made the beautiful woman feel good. It made her happy. And finally, one day while the love sick man was telling her the most awful jokes, the woman thought: *'This is a man who will never be mean. He is goofy, but he is an open soul. He sees something in me. I wonder what it could be.'*

"The man kept talking and stumbling and bumbling underneath her balcony. And then, without thinking, the beautiful woman smiled."

No! Not yet! It's too soon. Susan started to speak but no words came. She had no idea what she wanted to say.

"She smiled just as the sun was rising. She smiled a smile that no man had ever seen. A smile that no troll could ever possess. It was filled with simplicity and love and promise and wonder. It was so strong that it made the strange man stop talking. I think he forgot how to speak at that moment."

In her bed, Susan smiled and cried and cried and smiled. She was a mess. *But we already knew that.*

“Somewhere in the forbidden woods, a troll screamed and died.
Killed by envy. And the man? He spent the rest of his days trying to
show the beautiful woman how much he loved her. “

“And the beautiful woman spent her days smiling at her goofy
man and they lived happily ever after.”

“The end.”

Susan lay in the darkness.

“Good night beautiful. I hope you enjoyed the story.” Dillon hung
up because they both knew there was nothing more he could say.

Susan fell asleep thinking about love and loss.

Dillon fell asleep thinking about his beautiful woman.

And the story?

The story changed nothing.

