

Winter Lilies

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Winter Lilies

by [PunkyNemo \(TheVampireCat\)](#)

Summary

After rescuing Beth from Grady, the group travels north to Jersey. But they're still reeling from death and disappointment and they all need something normal so that they can start living again.

Notes

This was for the prompt Joy for 12 Days of Bethyl on Tumblr.

I'm sorry if it gets a little weird. Writing for these two has been difficult since the thing happened.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Soil and snow

He hasn't found the courage to go to her.

Not yet.

He's not sure he ever will.

It's not that he doesn't want to. Not that he doesn't want to talk, to laugh, to be close. It's just that when he does - when he gets near enough so that he can smell her, touch her, feel her - he finds his mouth dry, his palms sweaty, his words stuck like a bad cough in the back of his throat.

It's ridiculous when you think about it really. After everything. After losing her and finding her, after moonshine and one-eyed dogs, after past confessions and new ones. It's ridiculous, he knows this, knows he should man up, knows he should step up to the plate, knows he should do a million other things that empty cliches and emptier platitudes tell him to. And yet... and yet he still doesn't have the balls to go to her, to finish their conversation, to find out exactly what "Oh" means.

He always was the sweet one.

They'd been on the road for months. No, scratch that, they'd been wandering aimlessly for months. No real destination in mind. One way as good - or bad - as the next. Death lurks around every corner and if it didn't come from without, it came from within.

If it didn't come from the dead, it came from the living.

DC was a bust, a huge clusterfuck that only brought death and disappointment. Eugene's confession, which wasn't really news to anyone except Abraham, ended in a hail of bullets and the snapping jaws of the dead and rotted. Abraham had lost it out there on the road, turning on Eugene with a savagery none of them had expected but all had known lurked beneath the surface. He'd shot Eugene in the head and thrown himself headlong into a herd, Rosita's screams piercing the air as he was torn limb from limb. And then Rick and Tyreese had grabbed her and they'd run.

No matter what happens, they always run.

They'd lost more that day. Gabriel, Sasha and a kid named Dennis who'd come with them when they left Grady. So many gone, so many lost.

Maybe Carol is right, he thinks glancing at the haunted face of his dearest friend across the room where she sits wreathed in smoke from the fireplace, maybe they don't get to save people any more.

Except they had.

Except they did.

Except they will again.

Beth is here. Beth and her braid, Beth and her bracelets, Beth and her scars. Soft on the outside, steel on the inside. He thought he'd saved her. Truth was she saved him.

And herself.

And all of them.

She never gave up. Not once. And the truth was neither did he.

And the day they walked out of Grady Memorial and she'd flung herself into his arms was the day life started again, the day time began moving, the world began turning. He knows it's a cliché. He knows it's dumb. But until she'd coiled herself around him so close he felt her heartbeat in his throat, her hands in his hair, it was like the world was suffocating, slowly dying while it waited for him to find her, hold her and allow it to fill its earthy lungs with air again.

He thinks maybe he's using the earth as a metaphor for himself.

He thinks maybe he hadn't been breathing before he found her. It's all a blur really. Dead men don't breathe, dead men don't eat or sleep or shit. Dead men don't walk.

Except when they do.

She never gave up.

And neither did he.

And here they are. So far north, so deep into the snow and the cold that sometimes his mind plays tricks on him and he wonders if they've crossed the border and somehow made their way deep into the Canadian wilds without noticing.

Merle had always had a pipe dream about going to Nova Scotia. Daryl had never understood why. A sweaty, sun-worshipping, beer-chugging redneck like Merle freezing his balls off in Canada made no sense. But the fact remained that he had. It was a dream that never became a reality for him, much like everything else in his life. But maybe now he can do it in Merle's place. Become his proxy for that if for nothing else.

The truth is though, he knows that they ain't nowhere near Nova Scotia. Ain't nowhere near Canada, ain't nowhere near the border. They're headed to Jersey. No one knows why. He doesn't think anyone cares. But they needed a goal after DC, they needed something to work towards.

They needed a job to do.

They may as well do something after all.

But fuck if it isn't cold enough to freeze his balls off anyway.

They've stopped now though. At least for a while. The cold might freeze the walkers to the road, might make grotesque ice sculptures out of them, might save you looking over your shoulder every ten seconds (he does it every 25 seconds now, he's timed it) but trudging through heavy snow with a year-old baby, sleeping in cars or out in the open at night, cold winds blowing out your fires and chilling you to the bone through tattered layers of what were once considered clothes just ain't something you can keep up for too long. So they'd stopped. Found an old abandoned guesthouse on the outskirts of an old abandoned town in a remote corner of this old abandoned world, and they'd taken the decision to stop, to rest, to breathe.

They'd fortified the outside, dug trenches, chopped wood to form spikes and rigged some rusted barbed wire across the gate and up the drive.

It wasn't pretty. But then they ain't looking for pretty any more.

And they'd stayed. And somehow that was even worse than moving on. Not because the place was bad. It wasn't. Was nice actually, big enough so that they all had their own rooms, with a pantry of canned food and a stocked wine cellar in the basement. They even found clothes that semi fitted and shoes that didn't fit at all but beggars can't be choosers.

No, it wasn't the place.

It was them.

They'd become wild, feral even. Still reeling from their losses and then reeling again from their disappointments. Still in shock about all those they'd lost. Sometimes at night he still says their names like a prayer before he sleeps: Amy, Jackie, Sophia, Dale, Shane, T-Dog, Lori. He always stops before he gets to Merle. Finds he can't say it. Knows that if he does he'll have to say Andrea and Hershel too. And he just can't. He thinks Carol does the same thing, he heard her once as he passed her room on his way to take a piss. But the only names he heard were Sophia, Mika and Lizzie over and over again until he had to leave because he couldn't take on her pain too.

And that's why it's hard. Because they didn't know how to stop, how to relax, how to be. Their bonds may be bonds of blood, they may be deep and unbreakable only shattering when death comes knocking but at the end of the day they each carry their own burdens, guarding them almost jealously, keeping them like martyrs and hiding them in the darkest corners of their souls.

They don't share.

It's too painful to share.

And they needed something. They all knew it. They just didn't know what.

They'd been in the house a week when Glenn suggested they celebrate Christmas. Glenn the timekeeper, Glenn the historian, Glenn the post-apocalyptic wiseman.

Or wiseass, depending on your point of view.

Maggie said no almost immediately. She always did these days. Daryl doubted she'd even heard the full sentence. There was a hardness to her lately, a resignation that walked a fine line between determination and nihilism. She didn't want to remember the old world, didn't want to remember times of basting turkeys and carving pumpkins, times of playing in the park and catching snowflakes on your tongue. That was the old world and hanging onto that was what stopped you being able to survive the new.

This is my life, she'd said, right here right now. It doesn't get any better, it doesn't get any worse.

He hadn't needed to look over at Carol to know she agreed. To know that the darkness infecting them was spreading.

But it was Beth who turned the tide, Beth who came to save Glenn from his inevitable failure. Beth with her big eyes and soft voice and a smile that even the hardest heart couldn't deny. Beth and all the goodness left in the world.

It's Beth. It's always been Beth.

She didn't debate it, didn't try and win Maggie round, didn't even act like saying no was a possibility. Just walked right in there and started delegating. Told everyone they all had jobs to do if this was going to work. That they all had to pitch in, whether that meant hunting, cooking or decorating. She took charge, she organised, she gave them a goal. And they weren't even grudging when they got to it.

A few days later and here they are, fat and full and over indulged. Happy even, after a fashion. Talking, communicating, laughing even. They've eaten well, they've drunk too much, they've told stupid jokes and sang bad carols, some of them have exchanged gifts. And even though Daryl Dixon has never in his life had a "normal" Christmas he guesses that this is what it feels like.

And he doesn't want it to end.

Not now.

Not ever.

He glances towards the piano where she sits, fingers barely touching the keys as she surveys them, enjoys the wintry fruits of her labours. This was all her, all of it. The food, the tree, the candles, the wreaths, the cheap booze and the not so cheap they'd found in the cellar.

(No moonshine Mr Dixon, she'd said as she shone her torch on the wine racks and, embarrassed, he'd turned away. Embarrassed because they hadn't spoken yet, even though he wants to, even though he craves that closure, even though he never wants to speak about that night again.)

He shakes his head. Best let these things go. Best forget it all, the country club, the cabin, the funeral home and the white dog that went with it. It was so very long ago, so very, very long ago that he tells himself the ache in his heart was always there, that it lived inside him since the day he drew his first breath and suckled at his Ma's breast. Since the first time his old man took a belt to him and Merle looked away and pretended not to see. He tells himself the ache existed long before Beth Greene was born. Tells himself that it had nothing to do with their time alone, the feel of her snuggled against him, her small hand in his. Tells himself it's not her.

Tell himself a lot of things.

Tells himself a lot of lies.

He realises he's staring, staring at her as her hair glows golden in the candlelight, as it shines brighter than fire and he realises then that he might have the wings but she's always had the halo and, like a lovesick schoolboy, his breath catches in his throat and his skin burns. When she catches his eye across the room, he looks away, looks down at his feet, looks at Judy rolling and gurgling on the threadbare carpet on the floor, looks at Carol and sees the knowing in her eyes.

He thinks she always knew. Thinks she saw it in him in those first days they'd reunited. Thinks she just needed a time out from her own demons to see it. She offers a smile, a smile and a nod and it feels like he's been granted permission he never asked for, permission he never knew he needed.

"Beth, would you sing us something?" that's Rick standing so near the flames it's a wonder he hasn't set his ass on fire. "Would you sing us something nice?"

There's a moment of silence, a moment when he knows they're thinking of Hershel, when he knows that they're back at the prison sitting on the grass, Lori's belly big with Judith, and Beth is saying that no one wants to hear, that her singing is nothing anyone wants or needs, that singing isn't part of their lives now.

And, as she turns in the seat and lays her fingers on the keys, she glances at him, so quickly he almost misses it and he knows she's back in the funeral home, back right there with him, because he's there too and there's nowhere else he'd rather be. She thought her singing annoyed him. She thought nobody wanted to hear. She thought she needed to change.

She was wrong. She was so, so very wrong.

When she starts to sing, her voice is clear and sweet, but it's also mournful. Mournful and haunted.

They're all haunted now.

*Have yourself a merry little Christmas,
Let your heart be light
From now on,
our troubles will be out of sight*

*Have yourself a merry little Christmas
Make the Yuletide gay
From now on your troubles will be miles away*

The song is a lie, they all know it. But it's a lie they need. And they all listen, even Judy who stops gurgling and chewing on her fists long enough to roll onto her stomach to watch. He wonders about that kid sometimes, wonders how it must have been for her when she was with Carol and Ty. If she cried for Rick, for Carl ... for Beth.

She probably did, probably cried a whole helluva lot.

Not nearly as much as him though. Not even close.

*Through the years
We all will be together,
If the Fates allow
Hang a shining star upon the highest bough.
And have yourself a merry little Christmas now.*

She ends like she starts, haunting, sorrowful, but firm, confident, her words wrapping them up and keeping them safe. The final note lingers and when she turns around her eyes are shimmering and Maggie and Glenn move to pull her into an embrace. He knows that this is their grief. The grief of sisters, the grief of family. It's a private moment and even though they are all here - what's left of them at least - he feels like an intruder.

But then he sees she's looking at him over Maggie's shoulder. Her eyes too bright and cheeks too red and he suddenly thinks that the image of the three of them in front of him is off balance, like a puzzle missing a piece, like there's a wayward cog needed that'll get the wheel turning.

And he wants to go to her, move himself into that embrace and even them out, play his part and fulfil his role. But that's crazy talk. Crazy talk and crazy thoughts and he's starting to wonder if he had more of cheap wine than he realised.

He didn't though.

He knows he didn't.

But she's still looking at him. Her eyes big and blue and wide and he feels like a dick sitting here and like an idiot if he goes. So he looks away, looks at his shoes, at Judith, at the understanding and realisation in Carol's eyes.

He sees it all and none of it as he makes for the door and gust of freedom he hopes he'll find outside. It's too much and too deep and the ache in his heart is too real and he feels like he's choking and drowning and like the earth has decided to stop breathing again. And he can't help it as he barrels out into the night. Away from Christmas, away from his memories, and most of all, away from her.

It's cold outside, really cold and he hates it because, like Merle, he's a sun-worshipping, beer-chugging redneck and he misses the sweat-soaked shirt sticking to his back and doesn't understand the scratchy closeness of layers of vests and sweaters.

It's quiet too, the noise from inside so muffled he can barely hear it. There's something disconcerting about the silence of this new world. No cars honking, no trains rattling, no people shouting in the streets. No, now they have the groans of the undead, the occasional caw of carrion birds. Death, death, death everywhere. They die and the world dies with them.

He remembers when they first lost Sophia that he'd found one of Dale's books and tried to distract himself with it. He doesn't remember the title, but he does remember a quote.

"death is not a lover"

*"oh yes he is"**

He stopped reading then, the book too depressing, the subject matter too close to home. Why read about the apocalypse when you're in it? When you're living it? When you don't need someone else to create images for you because they're here? Here, brazenly showing off their grotesquerie for the world to see.

But it's true, night's like these it seems like death is a lover, a clingy one at that and he wants none of it. None at all. He's been a walking dead man, been one for too long. He's over that. Time to move on.

Or not.

It doesn't matter now.

Or maybe it does.

He's checking his pockets for cigarettes when the door next to him creaks open and she steps out into cold. She's not bundled up and he wonders why because she's so damn skinny and her lips and fingers are always tinged purple and blue.

"Hey," she says moving to his side.

He grunts. He thinks she gets that it's a greeting.

"Missed you in there," she says, not looking at him.

"I was there," he answers, forgetting about his cigarettes and letting his arms hang limp at his sides.

"And then you weren't."

She's right and he has no answer so instead he stares into the distance, at the stretch of snow before them, at the barbed wire, at the once grassy verge beyond the wall and the frozen walkers lying in the street beyond that. He can't think on Beth now, can't think on them, even though he does and he must. But his heart is too twisted and his thoughts too fractured and he

just wants to stand out here in the snow and breathe and breathe and breathe until things feel normal again. Until the world rights itself.

So he does. Deep breaths. Slow. Easy.

Easy.

Slow.

He realises then that the air smells clean and that's new. The stench of decay is all but gone and he guesses that's another of the advantages of the cold. Rotten meat now turned to ice, decay now frozen. It's like everything is on hold and time has stopped until those spring rains arrive. But by that time, they'll be long gone.

Gone like everything and everyone else. Gone like the whispers and the screams. Gone like the living and the dead.

When her hand slips into his it's like they're back at that grave, Hershel's grave even if it wasn't. Even if Hershel has no grave and is just another body for those carrion birds. He squeezes firmly and she responds by leaning against him, letting her weight rest on him and he wonders if he should put an arm around her, pull her a little closer, hold her a little tighter. But he doesn't. Doesn't because he wants to recreate that moment, wants to pretend that it's just them, all alone, all quiet and still and frozen in time in that funeral home that became a twisted garden of Eden.

He realises then that he wants to go back. He'd give anything to go back. Anything for a few more minutes to finish their conversation, to find out what "Oh" means. If it means anything at all.

He wonders if he'd ever have the courage to ask her. He wonders why he hasn't. He wonders how they have gone from what they were then to who they are now. If they've gone too far.

Stay who you are and all, but maybe he wants a little taste of who he was all those millennia ago. The man who carried her into the kitchen, the man who fell asleep to the sound of her voice.

The man that made her say "Oh".

He decides then it's what he wants for Christmas, but if he doesn't get it, then standing here holding her hand is good enough for now.

"I missed you Daryl Dixon," she whispers into the cold and it's like her words are the night and her voice is the air and it wraps him up more than any sad Christmas tune did. This isn't a lie, this isn't a deception, this isn't denial. This is real and it's here and it's her and it's everything in the world. And he wants it and he wants her and suddenly he feels like he's bursting inside and he has to tell her before he explodes, before he falls apart, before tomorrow and the fresh horrors the world will bring.

"Beth..." he starts.

"Daryl look," she whispers. "Look."

So he does and he sees it's started to snow again and somehow he can see by her face that she's finding something in this. Some beauty, some light, some hope. Even though it's been snowing for weeks now, even though they've done nothing but grumble and moan and bellyache about the cold and the wet, even though this very setup they have going is because they didn't want to deal with the snow any longer.

And yet, here's Beth, wide-eyed and smiling as she watches the snow swirling in the wind. Smiling like it's some kind of fucking miracle, not the same damn thing they've seen every goddamned day on the road. And the ache is there, the ache he tells himself has always been there.

Even though he knows that's not true.

She pulls away from him, fingers slipping out of his own, leaving his thumb in mid rub, leaving a cold emptiness as she walks out into the moonlight.

She spreads her arms wide and lifts her face to the sky and for a second it's like she has no scars, no wounds, no past. For a second it's only her and only him and even though there is only a dim light from the fires and candles inside the house, even though the moon isn't full and the buzz of street lights long since faded and died he sees her in perfect detail. Her eyes, her golden hair, her porcelain skin. He can count her lashes and see the dusting of freckles on her neck, can see the pink of her tongue as she catches a snowflake and the flash of her teeth like a warning behind her smile.

He remembers what it felt like to lose her and what it felt like to find her, remembers nights spent on cold ground with Joe and the gang, remembers the coldness of the boxcar, the fear that lived inside the very ground Terminus was built upon. Remembers finding Rick and watching him pull a man's throat out with his teeth, remembers how Carl had cried and how Carol had wept and how they'd all reunited outside that cabin in the woods. He remembers how he just wanted to lay down and cry when she wasn't there.

But they don't get to do that.

Except now, except maybe they do.

He feels tears prick in his eyes, feels the world shift under his feet and his vision blurs. He tries to blink his grief - or is it elation? - away. Tries to right himself. But he can't. He can't as those names he whispers every night before he sleeps come back to him. There's no order to them now, no sequence, it's just all of them. And this time, he can say Merle and he can say Hershel and be grateful that he doesn't have to say Beth's name too. That he'll never have to say it.

He tries to focus on her, see her in the snow, but the world tilts and it's actually a field of lilies and she's laughing and dancing. And it's not cold any more with the hint of a spring in the air. And he sees her spinning and spinning while the sun caresses her skin and she falls to her knees and digs her fingers into the wet soil, mud coating her knees and the pale pink sundress that sits high on her legs.

And in that moment he knows what she is and he knows what he is. And it doesn't matter. Doesn't matter one bit because he loves her and she loves spring and all their troubles *will* be out of sight. And he can't breathe and he can't move and he can't speak but it's ok, because he doesn't want to. Doesn't want anything but to watch her in this field of lilies and dreams and know her as the singular joy she is. He wants to say something, wants to tell her about the mud and the lilies and the snow, wants to scream that he loves her as loud and as long as he can, but his tongue is stuck and his mind is reeling and he feels like he's falling faster and faster through space and time and that he's going to fragment into tiny pieces, into individual cells, into nothingness if he can't find something to hold onto, something that's real.

But he can't and he thinks he's about to burst into flame, that this is the end. And then it's her voice, her voice through the snow and the lilies, through the winter and the mud.

"Daryl?" she says and his eyes snap to her. "Daryl, come out here."

He blinks. He shakes his head. And the world rights itself and he can see again. Can see properly but no less clearly.

She's still standing with her arms outstretched to the heavens and the snow falls softly in her hair. He can see the faint white band of her belly where her vest has pulled out of her jeans, an expanse of flesh that he wants to kiss and touch and lose himself in.

He realises suddenly that even as she has changed, even as her will has turned to steel, she has become their backbone, their spine. She's the one that keeps them together, even as they fall apart. It's like the moonshine cabin all over again but this time it's not him falling apart on her, not him crumbling at her feet while she puts him back together, it's all of them. Every last one. This is what this Christmas is about, this is what she's done, this is how she's drawn out the threads of what they were and patiently started sewing them back together.

He knows that without her they are nothing, without her they'll all spiral out of control, flinging their pathetic lives and bodies to the four corners of the globe, going wherever the wind takes them. The thought doesn't scare him even though it should. He thinks he knew it already. He thinks he always did.

She's everything, she always has been.

She's watching every step he takes towards her, watching him keenly and quietly, watching him like she knew it would all come to this, that it was inevitable and undeniable. That it was destined. She falters a little when he falls to his knees before her, but only a little. And the doubt that crosses her face is gone before it was even there.

The tears are back as he places his shaking hands on her waist, his thumbs tracing the pronounced lines of her hip bones, warm and smooth even though she should be freezing. He wants to kiss her, wants to hold her, wants to take her right there in the snow, spread his jacket out like a mattress and use his body like a blanket. Fist his hands in her hair and breathe her breath into his mouth, his lungs.

Instead he leans his forehead against her belly, letting his cool skin rest against her warmth, letting his tears fall onto her, smelling the scent of her through the ice and the snow and the

cold. And when he thinks he's gone too far, when he thinks he's startled her and pushed this more than it should ever be pushed, he feels her hands in his hair, her fingers against his scalp, nails scratching gently against his skin. And they rock together for minute, an hour, an eternity.

And it feels like home.

And when he eventually finds the courage to lift his head and look up at her, the moonlight frames her face with shadows and all he can see is the halo of her hair. And his breath catches in his throat because she's not Beth any more. She's not Hershel's daughter or Maggie's sister, she's not the woman he loves or the woman that loves him back. She's something else, something else completely. Something ethereal and fantastical. Something that has seen the world and all its secrets. Its horror and its beauty.

He tries to choke out of her name but he can't so he looks down again, trying to get the thickness out of his throat, trying to find the words that he never knew and he feels as weak and vulnerable as a newborn. He wonders insanely if he'll need to learn to talk and to walk all over again, if he'll need someone to care for him day in and day out, because all his faculties are gone, erased. He wonders if she'll need to build him anew.

She did it once before though. Ain't no reason she can't again.

And then his lips find their way to her skin, her stomach and he draws on that reserve, that courage, that madness to press his mouth against her, to feel the smoothness under his dry roughness, to breathe her in and breathe himself out. And she's soft and sweet and perfect. And he knows he could spend his life like this, on his knees, head bowed, drinking her in, drinking in the woman that she is, the woman she was and the woman she will become.

His lips ghost over her again and her skin prickles with gooseflesh as he sticks his tongue out to taste her.

To know her.

And she tastes like snow and sunshine, like lilies and starlight, like earth and ice. She tastes of the old world and the new and he doesn't want to stop, wants to stay like this forever until the rest of them come looking. Find them out here like ice sculptures, melded to the ground and each other in an embrace that will never end.

But when he hears her say his name, her voice heavy and husky, he goes still and it's the moment his mind needs to catch up with his body, to understand this picture they're creating of him and her and them in the snow. Him on his knees, her with her hands in his hair, his mouth lingering a hair's breadth from her belly.

"Beth, I..." he pulls back, trying to drop his hands from her hips, loosen her grip on his hair and stand all at once. But he can't, because he barely has the wherewithal to form words and her hands are strong and her body is firm and the truth is he doesn't really want to move at all.

And then she's on her knees in the snow too, her face millimetres from his and he can see the snowflakes caught on her lashes, can see the red tip of her nose and the flush of her cheeks. He tries to say something else but he doesn't know what and it comes out garbled and mangled and stupid and he sees the lilies again and he sees the mud but also the snow and another image of her naked and smooth beneath him and he tries to tell her, tries to explain why she needs to move away and let him go and why they need to go back to the house and why they can't be out here in the snow and soil and the sex and the cold and the heat and...

"Hush," she whispers, palms on his neck, fingers threading through his hair. "Hush now."

And he wants to hush but he can't, because he knows what will happen when he does. But he can't talk either because he's never had the words and never had the chance and never had the balls to say what he needs to say, so he stutters into the air as his hands flutter against her hips and his heart pounds like a jackhammer in his chest.

But when she kisses him it's like all feeling leaves him and he becomes boneless and liquid, held up only by the press of her body and the weight of her hands. Her lips are soft and smooth and her tongue is wet and warm and tastes as sweet as that Champagne they found, as sweet as the scent of lilies, as sweet as everything that is Beth Greene.

And he knows he should but he doesn't have it in him to fight, to think, to leave. So he doesn't. Doesn't even try. Just lets his hands dig into her waist, lets his palms slide under her vest and shirt, lets his tongue explore her mouth as her hands grip his hair fiercely and tightly. Lets himself believe in the lilies and the earth and power that is Beth Greene. Let's his heart fill up with her so that there's no more room for that ache, for that pain, for that longing.

And when she pulls away, slowly this time, maybe a little shyly, trailing chaste kisses along his cheek and jaw, the scruff of his beard and the sharp prickles of his neck, he allows his knees to sag and lets her see the tears in his eyes.

Death is not a lover

"Beth, I..." he starts again and she puts a finger to his lips, kisses the wetness from his face.

"It's ok," she tells him. "Me too."

And he doesn't need to ask her what it means, doesn't need to pry. Because he knows. Knows she means it and knows he doesn't have to say it.

But he does anyway.

He pulls her into his arms and whispers into her hair that he missed her, that he needs her, that he wants her and finally that terrible truth, that somehow, in a world gone to shit and stone, he loves her. He loves her more than life and he never wants to let her go.

And her arms tighten and her breath quickens and he swears he smells the lilies again.

He'll never give up.

And neither will she.

And the ache is gone.

And the puzzle is finished.

And it really is a merry little Christmas.

How hearts work

Chapter Notes

Ok so I wrote this sequel ages ago but because I wasn't entirely happy with this story I didn't publish it. But then I reread it and didn't hate it and people started asking about it and the general consensus was that people seemed to think I should publish it, even if it seemed like it borrowed a bit from *Sometimes* (which to be fair it did, I never intended to publish *Sometimes*) and was also a bit smutty like the last (and upcoming chapter of *Burn*). So here it is.

They have a fireplace in their bedroom and he wonders at that. Wonders if this dumbass guesthouse advertised it on their flyer back in the old world when flyers meant something ... when guesthouses meant something.

Wonders if people asked for the room with the fireplace when they called to book. Wonders why anyone would think having flames where they sleep is a good idea...

(He doesn't think of his Ma though, he *won't*).

He guesses that it's a blessing though in its own way. Easier than worrying about heaters and radiators and generating electricity for these things to guzzle. Guesses it makes sense for the now, if not for the then.

And he likes chopping the wood. Likes the feel of the axe in his hands, the rhythm, the gentle *nick nick chop chop* sounds as he blocks the world out. It gives him something to do besides worry.

And, even he has to admit that the fire has other advantages. Like the warm glow it gives to the room, like the way it makes the shadows flicker and flutter on the walls ... like the fact that sometimes, just sometimes - even though it's crazy and dangerous and stupid - it means that Beth doesn't wear anything to sleep in.

Like tonight.

She's lying with her back to him, hair tousled and bright like a flame against her back, spread across the pillows. It's so long it covers much of her flesh and yet... and yet, he can count every muscle, every dent, every vertebra that leads down to her tailbone where she's semi covered by the blanket. She's so thin, so very thin that it breaks his heart and he feels tears prick in his eyes. This world finds a way to put its marks on you. If it's not scars - and lord knows they have their fair share between them - one way or another, it makes sure they're all tainted, broken, bloodied.

My girl, my lovely, kind girl. If only I could have spared you this

He reaches out and traces the curve of her shoulder with his fingertips. She's pale too, but that's ok, that doesn't choke him up, bring him down, make him feel like a failure and a cheat. Too much sun ain't good for you anyways. Not that there's much sun here at the moment. The further north they go the colder it is and well, they ain't about much else other than safety. Creature comforts are few and far between.

But we have this, he thinks as he slides his body against hers, laying a rough hand on her hip and kissing her shoulder.

We have this.

Even though they probably shouldn't. Even though there's every reason in the world why they shouldn't. He's not afraid to admit that this thing between them tortured him, worried him, scared the shit out of him, until he realised that no one else cared. No one else gave a fuck and then he realised neither did he.

I'm yours.

You're mine.

I'm with you to the end.

The smell of sex is still heavy in the air when she stirs next to him. The truth was she hadn't actually come to bed naked but she may as well have because she ended up that way fast enough anyway, her rumpled nightgown tossed recklessly on the floor a testament to their desire. He leans his forehead against her back and her hand covers his on her hip. She's smooth and soft and he buries his face in her hair as her fingers tighten around his. And he wishes they could stay like this forever. No sex, no kissing, no heat, no desire. Just the two of them like this, the smell of her filling him up, his belly pressed to her back so tight that he can't be sure where he ends and she begins. Not that he cares. He doesn't want to know.

It's been a month now. A month since "Christmas", a month since the night of the lilies and the starlight, a month of having her in his bed, of being able to touch her and kiss her and hold her until dawn. It hasn't nearly been long enough, but he's grateful for every second they have. He knows it won't last. It can't. That's not the way of the world any longer. That's not the way things are. You lose people, you gain people and then you lose them again.

In some ways though, this is different. There ain't no shame in it, no judgment. You take the love you can find and you pray to God that he lets you keep it, if only for a while.

To the end, the bitter end

He shakes his head. There ain't no room for dark thoughts like these here. Not when they're like this. And they're naked and warm. And he's just lost himself in her and he'd like to think she lost herself a little too. Breathless whispers and gulped words aside, he can see it in her eyes, can hear it in the lilt of her voice, can feel it in the stiffness of her thighs at his hips. For his part he tries to keep it together, tries not to let his words pour out of him as he comes, tries not to be such a goddamned sap.

He fails.

Pretty much every time.

And yet, strangely he thinks she's grateful. Because, despite this new Beth Greene, the one with scars on her face and her soul, despite the fact that she can and does hold her own, despite the fact that she holds them all in the palm of her hand, he thinks she's like him. Just like him in fact.

At the end of the day, she just wants to be safe.

It ain't a big thing, but it's the biggest thing in the world.

And somewhere deep inside it breaks his heart. And somewhere deeper than that it mends it.

And it's like every night is that night all over again. The night of the lilies and the snow and the tears and the soil. It all led to this. To her in his bed or him in hers depending on your point of view.

He'd held her outside in the cold, held her and kissed her and told her things he never thought he'd say. Not to her, not to anyone. And she'd folded herself into him and shattered his bones and broken his heart when she confessed that she felt the same. That she didn't want anyone else and that it would be him for whatever time they had left. And she didn't want to wait and she didn't want to hide and she didn't want to pretend for another second. She was done, she whispered as she pressed frantic kisses along his cheek and down to his neck, done with living like nothing had happened. Like the moonshine shack and then the funeral home hadn't meant anything. Like they hadn't decided that they were going to stay there forever, like a twisted Adam and Eve in an even more twisted Eden. Like they didn't both know what would have happened if they did. No, not the dog and the candles and the singing, not the white trash brunch and the pigs' feet. The "oh" and whatever came after that. The "oh" and the secrets it held. The "oh" and the promise of a future. And she wanted that, didn't he know? she asked, couldn't he see it in her eyes? Because she could see it in his. She could see it every time he looked at her, she could hear it in his voice and feel it in his touch, light and apprehensive as they were.

And he'd realised that she was right and he could see it in her eyes. Could see it clearly now that he knew what to look for.

So he kissed her forehead and let the strands of her hair fall through his fingertips and it could have been hours or days later that she was tugging him to his feet, telling him that they needed to go inside, that it was late and it was cold and they'd catch their death out here,

And all he could think was that death didn't sound that bad. Not right then, not when he's all wrapped up in her. But he'd stood anyway and made his way stiff-legged and heart sore back to the house.

The smell of venison and pine needles lay heavy in the air when they slipped inside, Beth treading lightly up the stairs to muffle the clicking of her boot heels across the wooden floor. It was dark and everyone had gone to bed except for Rick who sat staring out the window,

down the drive to the gate, a shotgun across his legs. Alone and armed. Much like the rest of them.

Ain't nothing different day to day.

And that crazy thought had hit him again. That realisation of how quickly they scatter when Beth is gone. How her presence is the glue that binds them, the spine that kept them on the straight and narrow, how she's everything and how it hurt to think on it too long.

How it breaks your heart when you do.

But then she turned on the top step and kissed him and he forgot all about glue and scattering and pine needles and lilies. Forgot about everything but her taste and her scent and the feel of her on his lips and how her small hands had slipped under all his layers and were grasping at his flesh, nails digging into his hips, thumbs pressing against his belly.

"Stay with me tonight," she whispered between hard, small kisses and he wasn't sure if it was a request or a demand. But it didn't matter. Not one little bit. Because he knew he would stay. Stay forever.

Until the bitter end, my love

And before he could answer she kissed him again, long and deep and hard and he thought he was going to drown in her. And his feet felt like lead and his mind like a vortex, but his heart was singing as she led him into her room and bolted the door behind him.

"Beth," he whispered, running his fingertips through her hair.

And she told him she knew even though he had no idea what he intended to say.

She was Beth. And it had always been Beth.

And then she'd asked him if he would make love to her, in those words. Sweet, simple, straightforward. And he'd said yes. Not because he's a sun-worshipping, beer-chugging redneck like Merle, but because there really wasn't another answer to that question.

He was also done with pretending, done with living like it didn't mean anything. Done with it all. Because if he could have this - *if they could have this* - then maybe everything would be ok. Maybe the world could right itself even if they couldn't. Maybe there was something good left in this world. And maybe it was Beth Greene.

And he'd let it happen.

And so had she.

He only remembers bits and pieces from that first time and he knows that will haunt him till the day he dies because it feels wrong. It feels like every moment with Beth Greene should be seared into his mind, branded there, never to be erased, but that, that unholy tryst where his body tangled with hers for the first time? When they shared whispered sighs and needless

stark words neither meant to say? To lose that is nothing short of blasphemy, an affront to man and nature. To not know every second of it, of her, is obscene, vulgar,

And yet he doesn't.

No matter how hard he tries now, he can't.

He wonders sometimes if she does. If she remembers what he felt like looming above her in the candlelight and later crouching between her thighs. The weight of his chest against her breasts, the first time his hand dipped between her legs or the roughness of his sloppy kisses on her neck and shoulders. Or is it all shattered and scattered for her too? Sometimes he thinks if they put what they both remembered together they might have a clearer picture, but he knows he'll never ask.

He thinks he can't remember because it had been so long, and because he'd loved her so long and wanted her so long. And he thinks it's because he was overwhelmed. And he thinks it's because never in his life had he felt anything that would even compare. But he doesn't know. Can't be sure.

He remembers that her shirt came off quickly and he thinks it was her that did it. His came off too even though part of him wanted to keep his clothes on, but there was something cheap and salacious about the thought of fucking Beth Greene with his pants around his ankles, that forced him to undress.

He remembers them on the bed, how he'd looked at her breasts and seen they were small but full and that her nipples were almost as pale as the rest of her. He remembers her hands in his hair and his knee pressed between her legs and the way she'd looked up at him with a small smile playing on her lips.

And he'd kissed her and touched her and tried to be gentle and tried to be slow. But she'd been impatient and he'd realised that this wasn't about pleasure for her, it wasn't about desire. It was about need, it was about consummating this thing between them, acknowledging it and she didn't need his sorry attempts at being a lover.

But he'd tried anyway. Tried kissing and touching, tried reaching between them to stroke between her thighs but she'd grabbed him in her hand and twisted her legs around his waist.

"Now," she whispered into the dim light. "Please Daryl now."

And he was desperate and so was she, but still he persisted with the kisses and the light touches, the licks and the strokes.

"Daryl," she whispered. "Daryl this ain't us."

And he'd looked at her hard and long and he thinks there was something in his gaze that made her gulp, bite her lip. And it felt like they were both drowning.

"Yeah Beth," he said. "Yeah it is."

Because it was.

Because it *had* to be.

Because *they* couldn't be anything else.

"Ok," she whispered. "Ok. But please. Please now."

And he'd kissed her hard and long and worked his way between her thighs, slowly, surely, head bowed, one hand on her shoulder the other spreading her wide.

He'd come soon, too soon, jaw clenched, body stiff, arms planted on either side of her head while she lay sweat soaked and panting beneath him, hair tangled and damp. He'd tried to be quiet, but he cried out a curse before burying his head in her neck to muffle the sound and lap at her skin.

"Beth," he whispered.

"I know," she said turning to plant small kisses on the crown of his head as her fingers traced the scars on his back and her thighs tightened at his sides.

"I'm sorry."

"Why?" she asked, the southern twang in her voice harder than before. "It ain't no reason to stop is it?"

She was right. It ain't no reason at all.

And he'd withdrawn from her and kissed his way down her body before settling himself between her legs, lips hovering millimetres above her wet pink flesh while she forced herself up onto her elbows to watch him.

"Alright?" he asked, waiting for her to kick his ass out just for being so goddamn presumptuous.

But it was them. Even though she said it wasn't.

It was them.

Until the bitter end my love, until then

And she'd nodded, gulping and he thought he heard a thick, yet quiet "yes" pulled from her throat. And that's when he'd tasted her, fresh and warm and heady. Earthy like the soil, clean like the snow and sweet like lilies.

It hadn't taken much, but he knew that had less to do with his skills and more to do with the moment and the fact that she was like him, seemed to have been waiting for this forever.

Minutes later and she was shaking against his mouth, under his fingers, undulating to his imperfect rhythm and gasping his name out in small breaths before roughly pushing his head away when he tried to lap at her.

"Too much," she whispered. "Too much. Too good. Too much."

And he felt proud as he planted clumsy kisses up her body, over her belly, over her breasts to suck on her collarbones and lick her neck while she trembled beneath him.

And he traced the line of the scars on her face with his thumbs, feeling the bumps and ridges of the badly administered stitches. He kissed the marks, small slow kisses that burned him as much as her. He told her she's beautiful. More beautiful than anyone he'd ever seen. And when her tears fell he'd kissed those too.

Later in the flickering light she'd told him about Gorman.

Told him how he put his hands on her, how his palms were soft and his fingers clammy, how his breath had smelled of eucalyptus and how it disguised a rot inside. Told him about the green lollipop and how he'd used it on her mouth. Told him all of it.

And even though he held her tightly and breathed her scent so far into his lungs he'd never get it out, even though he didn't rage and scream and throw things, he'd ground his teeth and balled his hands into fists. And he hadn't let her see his tears, nor the set of his jaw. Hadn't shown her the red rage in his mind, the curtain of hate and loathing that suffocated him. Hadn't shown her any of it. And he's grateful and thankful that what little wisdom he had prevailed.

But he had pulled her so close to him that it felt like he was trying to swallow her with his body, had put his hands over her breasts, her stomach, the space between her legs, like he was guarding her. Like he could guard her wherever he touched her.

"I am strong," she said more to herself than to him.

"Yeah," he whispered kissing her shoulder. "You are. But I still ain't ever letting anything happen to you ever again."

"Can't rely on anyone for anything," she whispered.

"You ain't anyone," he answered. "And keeping you safe ain't anything."

And then she kissed him. And he was ok. And they were ok. And the thing between them was ok.

And he tried to be extra gentle when she rolled on top of him and straddled him, and lowered herself onto him in a smooth movement that seemed far too experienced for either of them. Tried to be slow because the last thing he wanted in the world was to ever remind her of the hospital and the insidious evil that lived there. But when she pulled his roughened hand between her legs, guiding his fingers to her and showing him how to rub, how to touch and how to tease, he forgot all about handling her like glass. Instead he treated her like fire, let her sear him, let her flay him, barely able to look at the obscenity of his hands scraping down her body as he gasped and gulped and sobbed into her. And when she arched backwards, brazenly, fingernails digging into his knees, hair shrouding her face, he'd been powerless to

stop himself from grabbing at her, her arms, her shoulders, her hips, turning them over and fucking her hard and slow as he could into the bed.

He may have blacked out for a few seconds when he came because he didn't remember rolling onto his back, but when he opened his eyes afterwards, she was lying across him and his hand was fisted in her hair, tangled tight between his fingers and she'd given him a small smile and rubbed her cheek against the scruff of his neck. And he'd held back a sob.

"I love you," she whispered and he'd kissed hair and cupped the back of her head with his hand, holding her close.

And that was it. That was how it started. In snow and soil and scars and death.

He suspects that is how it will end too. There's almost no doubt in his mind.

But not now Beth, the end is still so very far away

He thinks he's in love.

He thinks this is what they go on about in sappy songs and cheesy movies. Fact is he wouldn't know because his Mom and Dad... well they were never like this. Maybe once, maybe before he was born, before Merle was born, maybe they had an hour, a day, a week maybe to be like this.

But he doesn't know, can't be sure. All he knows that when he's with her his heart is full and his mind has found some kind of peace. All he knows that if he were ever to lose her again, he would be lost. All he knows is that he feels it deep in his bones and it shatters him into a million pieces and rebuilds him almost instantly.

He thinks he's in love.

She's sweet to him, she's kind. She makes him feel like the man he could be. And despite everything that's happened, despite Dawn, despite Gorman, despite the fact that her face is scarred and her body ravaged, she still has that optimism, that goodness. Once he thought it was naivete, he knows now that it's pragmatism, it's survival, it's living.

Guard your heart Daryl, Carol had said when he finally told her that it had happened, I'm happy for you, but she's small, she's young. She could be gone in the blink of an eye. We all could. So guard it. Don't let your heart get broken. Not again.

But he realises now that that is not how hearts work.

With her or without her, he loves her and losing her won't hurt his heart any less.

My beautiful, wonderful strong girl. My love, my heart.

He moves his hand from her hip to run down her back, squeezing her ass gently, before tapping a tune out on her thigh with his fingertips.

She shifts against him, winding an arm around his neck and he lays a kiss on her shoulder. And she smells like strawberry soap and honey and everything that is innocent. But she also smells like sex and musk and sweat and everything that is not.

Some nights she's still like she was the first time. Desperate, needy but all business. Wanting him immediately and without preamble. He thinks it's a way of reminding herself that she's here with him. She's alive. Dead women don't eat, they don't sleep, they don't fuck. But she's here. So she's not dead. So he reminds her she survived and then afterwards when he's caught his breath, he moves between her thighs and reminds her that she's alive.

But tonight wasn't one of those nights. She was languid and slow. Her hands and tongue tracing the hard planes of his stomach, his abdomen until she took him into her mouth and licked and sucked and tasted until all he could do was grasp at the bedsheets until his knuckles turned white and he sobbed her name to the rafters and the ceiling and any god that might be listening.

And then he'd twisted his hand into her hair, tugged her up to his face and kissed her hard and long before flipping her onto her back as his fingers found the slickness between her legs. And she'd pouted playfully and told him he wasn't being fair while he nuzzled her neck and licked her earlobe.

He told her it ain't about being fair.

And it hadn't taken long before thoughts of fairness were the furthest from her mind and she was gasping and pleading and clawing at him and her thighs were trembling as he slid inside her and lost himself in her flesh.

She makes him weak in her own way. Weak because of how much he loves her and how little everything else seems to matter because of it. But she also makes him strong and it's that juxtaposition that floors him every time. And he knows they're a contradiction and he knows they all the right kinds of wrong and he knows he'll never love anyone as much as he loves her.

Come what may, my girl, come what may.

He kisses her shoulder again, tongue dipping into the hollow of her neck to taste the salt of her skin and the sweetness beneath it.

She shivers.

"I'm with you to the end," she whispers to him as the fire burns low and he buries his face in her hair because he knows it may well be sooner than either of them think.

She could always read his thoughts.

"You're going to break my heart one day girl, you know that?" he says.

"This old heart?" she asks turning over and putting a hand to his chest where he knows she can feel it beating like a drum beneath his skin.

He covers her fingers with his own.

“Yeah, this old heart,” he tells her.

“Thought this old heart was tough,” she whispers. “Thought it didn’t need anyone.”

“Needs you,” he says lifting her hand to his mouth and kissing her palm. Because it does need her. Needs her like air and water

And she moulds herself into his body, and puts her lips to his chest. And the firelight flickers on the walls and he doesn’t think of his Ma because he won’t.

"We’re strong," she says.

And he nods and rests his chin on her head, breathing her in.

“It’s ok,” she whispers, "It's all going to be ok."

My love, my sweet salvation, it has to be.

It just *has* to be.

And he doesn’t think of how to protect his old heart. Because he knows that ain’t how hearts work.

End Notes

*Cormac McCarthy, The Road

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