Give It Time

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The grass was soft under her feet as they walked up the pasture right behind the farm. Grace took in the familiar drystone wall to their right, the gentle dip of the valley in the distance. Her husband John's arm was slung through hers. He needed the support with how he was still dragging his left side, his movements there weaker and less coordinated.

Things had been very different since that fateful day of what they publicly called "the riot" but what was supposed to be a peaceful protest. John had come out there and seen her with Bill Gibby, had stared at them like a bird before the snake, too dumbstruck to see the butt of the gun being slammed at his head.

The weeks since had been difficult, to say the least. The constant fear and trepidation with him on death's door. First the unconsciousness, brain swelling, daily violent fits. Then the wound infection and the fever that almost killed him. It was a miracle that he was here—alive and on his own feet.

Of course the road that led to here hadn't been easy either. His recovery was long and slow, with the underlying uncertainty where and if it would stagnate. There were good days and bad days, elation and frustration, their lives now eternally governed by ups and downs.

Grace could hear John breathing more heavily next to her, could feel him slowing down, so she came to a halt. She pointed at a patch of grass by the wall next to them. "Come on, let's rest for a minute."

He didn't even protest and she helped lower him to the ground before she sat down next to him. He looked tired, like you'd expect of someone who'd been through the ordeal he'd endured. The scar on the side of his head also told the gruesome tale.

He leaned his back and head against the stack of stones behind him, exhaling wearily with his eyes closed. Her heart went out to him, she knew this wasn't easy for him. He had so much pride, had worked so hard for the life they were living. He'd been through so many struggles, and now this.

They sat in silence for a few moments before he spoke. His voice was bitter when he said, "Why are… you still 'ere?"

The words sounded choppy and a little clumsy. There was the lingering paralysis on the left side of his face. He was still relearning how to speak and sometimes words came out slurred and odd.

“What do you mean?”

He swallowed, fought to get the words out. “I’m useless.”

“Oh, John...”

He opened his eyes and glared at her, opening his mouth. He got caught on the first consonant that hung there silently, struggled with getting the whole word to form but faltered as his battered brain got in the way. His mouth twitched, he closed it again, tears filling his eyes.

“It’s alright,” she tried to soothe him, but it only made him angrier.

His right hand balled into a fist that he thumped against his thigh. The endless frustration, he had never been good with that.

Grace slid her hand over and cupped his fist with it. “John, be patient. The words will come. Give it time.”

His face contorted into something painful and angry, tears dislodging and sliding down. That was also new. He’d been a lot more emotional since the injury. She wondered if it was also tied to what the assault had done to his brain.

She slid her arm around his shoulder and gently drew him closer. “I love you,” she said in a low voice. “That’s why I’m still here.”

“I don’t... deserve that.”

“Oh, don’t be silly. Of course you do.”

“The farm... I will never...” His gaze went to the gently sloping hill just within their line of sight before he went on. “Be like I was.”

“We don’t know that. You’re still getting better. We just need to give it time.”

He didn’t say anything, so she stayed quiet for a moment, then said, “Look at how far you’ve come. Two months ago, you couldn’t say a single word, let alone take walks. It’s all patience and small steps.”

He pushed away from her, rubbed his forehead with one hand. “If I can’t be a farmer... what can I be?”

“You’ll be my husband. You’ll do what you’re able to. We’ll find a way. We always have.”

He stayed quiet for a long minute, then said in a low voice, “Gibby.”

She frowned, looked at him. “What about Gibby?”

“You and... him.”

“John. We talked about this, remember? It’s in the past. Whatever it may have been, it’s long over.”

His gaze flicked to her. “Why?”

“Because things changed.”

His voice was low. “No. Why him?”

She drew in a long breath, had often wondered if they would ever have this conversation. He’d been so angry at her, had harboured that wrath and resentment for weeks while he was struggling with a crippling head injury, unable to form basic words. He’d refused to even say her name for so long. But then he’d heard her impassioned speech on the market square and that’s when things had finally changed.

Back in the old days, this would have been a very different exchange. He’d have got angry, yelled at her, maybe even got physical. She didn’t like to think about it, but he’d hit her in the face more than once. He hadn’t for a very long time, but it was still there, not easily forgotten.

But this man who was now sitting next to her, he was different. She wasn’t sure if that was a good or a bad thing. Maybe a bit of both. And maybe that’s why she chose honesty when she said, “He saw something in me. Encouraged me to be something more than I was.”

John’s mouth twitched before he looked away. He definitely understood the implication.

She smiled at a memory that surfaced. “He taught me to ride a bicycle.”

When she looked at John’s face, she wished she hadn’t said that, because there was something ugly there, something that hurt him, something that reminded him of all the things he could never give her.

They’d led a life near the poverty line for so long, had feared for their existence so many times. He was an incredibly hard-working man, and even though they were getting by these days, there were always going to be things beyond his reach. Too many things. She knew it gnawed at him, and now, with his injury, more of them had been added to that list.

She gently touched his leg. “John. Look at me.”

He did. Reluctantly.

“Please don’t think you’re not enough. You’re a good man, and I love you.”

His gaze wandered into the middle distance and lingered there. “I wasn’t always.”

He had just voiced what she thought earlier. And she wouldn’t deny it. He hadn’t always been a good man, although she was sure that he wanted to be. His temper and his pride would often get in the way.

He looked away again, her silence being answer enough. But this new lease on life, she hoped it would change him for the better. In fact, it already had. She shifted her weight, then moved so that she straddled his outstretched legs and faced him.

Her hands cupped his bearded jaw and she bent down for a kiss. He returned it after a moment's hesitation, pressed his lips onto hers, but it only lasted a few seconds, then he pulled back and turned his head to the side.

She leaned back. "What is it?"

He stayed quiet, his expression grim, so she asked, "John?"

"I can't," he said in a low voice.

"You can't what?"

"I can't be what you want me to be. Not like this."

"Like what?"

He gestured vaguely at his left side. "This."

She shook her head. "This is who you are now. It doesn't mean that you're any less."

He pressed his lips together, his chin quivering ever so slightly. This was his weakness, too. He'd never been good at expressing his emotions – at least not with words. He often spoke through actions. He'd fix a gate that he knew she was annoyed with because it kept swinging shut. He'd rebuild a chair that had fallen apart under her. He'd wordlessly go out and buy a cow to save their family from starvation when his son gave him every last saved up penny.

She had told Phoebe once that she wasn't always making enough effort to pay attention to what he was trying to convey. And maybe that's why he would often become frustrated or volatile. They needed to find better ways to communicate.

"Please talk to me."

He scoffed sarcastically. "That is the one thing that I'm... failing at the... most these days."

She gave him what she hoped was an encouraging smile. "Yes, and that's why I want you to keep practicing it."

"Grace, I..." He stopped there.

"I know. I know it's hard. But you're the most stubborn, hard-working man I know. And that is why I love you."

That made his face twitch with a small, lopsided smile.

She bent down to kiss him again, and this time he responded with more fervour and less hesitation. When she pulled back, she slid down next to him, nestling against his left side. His

arm awkwardly came around her, his weakened hand still trembling a little but he tugged at her to pull her closer.

In a low voice, he mumbled into her hair, “I love you, too.”

And that was why she knew they could make it through this together. Like they always had. Like they always would, no matter what happened.