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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

Moments

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Moments

One moment is 90 seconds; so in one lifetime the average person would have had 25,915 days to make 414,640 moments. While some moments are more important than others, they all count. You could dance to your favourite song in 90 seconds. Lay the table. Make a bed. You could win an Olympic medal. Land in an unknown place. 90 seconds for a conversation, a reassurance, a hand to hold.

One complete moment.

As I slam the front door behind me, my feet fall in rhythm with what I call my walking track. Thump. Thump. Thump. It's like an invisible drum pulsing to my feet. I turn my head and look curiously at the row of houses on the other side of the street. It feels as if someone is watching me, but the only person there is an old man, about 80 or so, sitting on a dark green fold out camping chair. He's reading a battered old newspaper and sliding his glasses back up his nose. Shaking my head a little, I walk on, turning out of my cobbled street and onto the main road.

Arriving at school I take my place at homeroom. Adalise waves at me. We've been really close friends ever since, in year one, someone broke the crayon she was using and so I gave her mine. After yelling at the meanie who did it of course. We sit down in our seats, not in the back like amateurs; we knew the exact formula to avoid questions we don't know. Not in the middle, because that is just straight in view of the teachers. Not in the back because then, you're automatically marked as a slacker and all the hard questions fly right to you. Not at the very side, as it's easier to spot daydreaming. But to the left a bit, in the third row, perfect! It's not like Ada and I don't like

answering questions, but really, Ms Newton makes that Professor Binns person from Hogwarts look like the most exciting teacher ever. And he was a ghost!

As Ms Newton is talking I feel a warm rush creep up my face, my hands start shaking and the world spins. “Oh No, not now, not, now.” One moment is all it takes. All my senses are heightened. The sound of someone knocking their pencil against their notes echoes inside my head and the classroom smells horribly of vomit. My breathing quickens to the point where I am choking on thin air.

“Ms Newton, can I go to the bathroom?” I cry

“Not now, Merida, Kelly’s just gone.”

“PLEASE!” I am smothered by the stress and visibly crying now. I barely hear her stammered “yes” as I run out of class, flinging the door behind me. 5 minutes later I’m slumped down in the bathroom. Why does this happen to me? What even is this? I can’t control it! My mind races like a bunch of mice scurrying away from a large cat. Am I going crazy? They jump. How can I ever be enough for anyone if I’m like this! They dart even faster across the floor. I don’t know if I can still do this alone. Their legs are so tired. But if I tell someone they might think I just want attention!

Dad would never understand and my teachers □ My streaming eyes close and my head rolls. The last thing I see is black, as the galloping cat pounces.

“Wake up! Wake up! Oh my gosh, Merida, you’re really scaring me!”

I open my eyes as Ada’s blurred face comes into focus.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong? I can’t handle another episode of this! You could have really hurt yourself and...” She is rambling, her voice high pitched and squeaky, a danger sign. “I’m really scared, Mer. Why won’t you let me in?” She finished and I realised she’d taken my hand, pleading.

“I thought I was strong enough to stop it, that, that I could do it alone...”

“Mer, everybody needs someone.” Ada said, cutting me off. “You know I’ll always be here for you!” There it was. The thing I had been hoping for and dreading. Help. My moments of pretending I have no one to talk to were gone. “I want you to have this.” She pulls from the necklace she always wears, a charm that looks like two wings of an eagle, with a heart in the middle.

“Do you know what it is?”

“No.” I stammer, wiping my wet face.

“It’s the mark of the Sufi order.”

“Oh.” I exclaim. Ada was a member of the Sufi Order or Tasawwuf, a mystic branch of Islam. Sufis believe in one God and that there are spiritual beings called Angels. Tasawwuf members strive to find the truth of love and knowledge through God in everyday life. Like Sunni and Shiite Muslims, they too perform prayers everyday and Ada was always running late. Once I joined a Dhikr session with her (where people repeat scripture as an act of devotion inside their head). I admire her for her dedication. It is something that she puts all her effort into, something that she can focus on. She is always trying to be calmer, more humble, and always thirsty to learn more. I like how something that started with a few people can spread, worldwide, into a community that is aiming to better the world, under one belief. Ada says that she wishes she had paid more attention to her faith earlier. She told me that, when she was younger, her mother would pick her up from school in a hijab, and that she would pretend it was stupid to all the other kids who asked about it. “What’s that lady

wearing?” “Ha! She put a scarf on her head!” She would laugh with them and point too because the one thing she hated most, was feeling alone. I guess I understood that. Only my loneliness was self inflicted.

“What does the charm mean?”

Beep beep, beep beep. A noise echoed through the empty bathroom.

“OH SHOOT! I HAVE TO GET READY FOR PRAYER RIGHT NOW! You’re okay? I really don’t want to leave you but...”

“Go! I’ll be fine!” I smile, reassuring my okay-ness. She nods, her brown eyes widen in defeat.

“At least go get some lunch” she says as she hurries out of the bathroom.

I walk across the hallways, still wondering about the charm. My fingers play with it inside my pocket, feeling the grooves ingrained into the sleek metal. I realise that everyone is whispering as I come by, then suddenly looking away as I see them. News here spreads like wildfire and everyone likes to gossip; apparently I am now the entertainment. Great. I look down, my dark curly hair obscuring my vision and **SMACK**, walk straight into an opening door. Mr Ambrose peers around the door in alarm. “OH! I’m so sorry Merida, you okay?” He has a sophisticated British accent that most people here in the more rundown part of England will laugh at, but I like it. It reminds me of Giles from Buffy the Vampire Slayer. “I’m all good” I reply, “being so clumsy all the time makes me immune to bruises.” He still looks worried, but shakes it off. “Well, I was looking for you anyway. How about we come in here to talk?” He gestures to the bunch of sniggering kids that has stopped to look at me face planting the door. “Alright.”

He sits down on top of his desk, hands entwined, a concerned look across his chocolate face.

“Merida,” he says “I heard what happened in Helen’s class.”

Just as I’m wondering who Helen is, he says “Oh, I’m sorry, Ms Newton.” Mr Ambrose can do that, know people's thoughts and emotions easily. It’s one of the reasons I like him so much, it is hard to keep anything from him.

“Yes, I didn’t feel well.”

“Merida, I want to know if you get these feelings often.”

“Well...” And I stop. I was about to say no. About to say, I never have these moments. But it isn’t true. Maybe, if I explain, he’d understand. I put my hand inside my pocket to stop it trembling and feel something warm at the bottom of it. “Well, yeah, actually.”

“I see. Could you- recount it to me?” I take a sharp intake of breath. “I don’t want to make you do anything you don’t want to do.” He adds quickly.

“No, no,” I sigh “Ur, I think the best way to describe it, is-is like being put into a box and the box is so small it makes everything dizzy. You can’t breathe, you can’t think. Panic and terror eats at you. Until you see that there’s a hole in the box and you know you have to climb out but you’re stuck.”

“How long does it take to climb out?”

“It depends.”

“Merida, I think you’re having panic attacks,” he said. Panic attacks. A name. It had a name.

“I’m no doctor, but... I mean it sounds like...”

“Does it stop?” It was a voice I didn't recognise that spoke. A trembling, whispering, afraid voice. A voice that came from me.

He waits a moment before looking me straight in the eyes.” Maybe, I really don't know.” I feel the cat becoming a tiger... He may as well have said that I will always get these feelings, these moments and that there was nothing anyone could ever do, it would have had the same effect. I run out the door. “Merida! Wait!” But I can't.

Thump. Thump. Thump. The world dizzyingly slow. Thump. Thump. Thump. This is not the last time this is going to happen. Thump. Thump. Thump. My sweatshirt pockets droop, flung carelessly inside out from my haste. My feet across the pavement, carrying me ever closer to... whatever it is. The Future? My fate? A life I'll continue to be afraid to live? Thump. Thump. Thump. He didn't know. Thump. Thump. Thump. Echoing voices wrap my head in fog, so enfeebling I feel my knees give way and suddenly, I am on the ground, giving into the struggle and anxiety that came with the sea of tears that follows.

I feel a hand on my shoulder. Jumping and turning around, I see the hand belongs to a man. The man. He is old, stooped and looks very much like Albert Einstein, with his ageing candyfloss hair. He has twinkling eyes that crinkle at the sides, as if he has once felt much joy, but now he's just tired. In his hand he holds a brass walking stick. “I... I'm...”

“It's okay. Can I sit here?”

I nod my head cautiously, rubbing my red eyes, as he hobbles closer to the pavements' curb and sits down beside me.

“I saw you this morning”.

“Yes”.

“Were you watching me?”

“Yes, you are very interesting to watch”.

“What! Why?”

“You have an interesting story”.

“How do you know that?”

“When you watch people for as long as I have, you can tell”.

“And what do you see?”

“I see you surrounded by friends and family that love you, but when you are on your own, you have the weight of the world on your shoulders, like there is something heavy that you have to carry all on your own. Maybe if you asked, they could help bare that weight”.

“I'm not very good at asking for help”.

He considers me for a moment before taking a bag of little sweets out of his pocket.

“Hold your hands out in a fist”.

I put my hands out palm up, looking curiously at him and balled them as he said, “Good, now watch”. He scooped up a handful of sweets from the paper bag and dropped them over my hands. I watched as they tumbled to the ground, scattering across the pavement. Even more confused I looked up at him.

“Now open your hands”. Again he dug out some more sweets and let them fall over my open hands. This time I caught several, grabbing as many as I could.

“You have to have your hands open to accept help. Leave your hands closed, and no matter how much help someone offers, you will never be able to catch it. ”

I was silent for a while. Pondering what he had said. He reached his hand into his pocket for the second time and pulled out a tiny trinket. There in the middle of his wrinkled old palm sat the Sufi order charm I dropped, smooth and glinting in the orange and pink sunset.

I strode into school, my backpack slung over one shoulder, nestled there in a familiar way. Geography was first period, a travesty in my opinion. Who in their right mind would choose Geography to be the first subject in morning? Normally, school was a distraction for me, a place where I could busy myself with numbers or words. Today however it was a way to get support.

Mr Ambrose is packing up his marking when I enter his little room. “Mr Ambrose” I said “I’m sorry for barging out on you yesterday”.

“That’s quite alright”.

“I think I need your help”.

He smiles at me and gestures to a seat.

For me, the Sufi order charm didn’t represent faith in a religion. It meant faith in myself. Dedication and time and hard work. But also that help was there if I could only open to accept it. It wasn’t an easy thing to ask for. 5 months later I was still struggling with my anxiety and panic attacks. But help from Ada, Mr Ambrose and Abe, for that was the old man’s name, made it easier. Step by step. Moment by moment. I’d realised how really important moments were. 90 seconds of an experience made a lifetime of memories. And I was using those to my advantage. Their aid and friendship came in the form of love. And that I could accept. My life wasn’t perfect. But we were definitely getting there. The mice had stood tall and faced the cat. And my moments ticked on.