

The Test of Time

Among the soot and smoke of Grand Central Station, beyond the hustle and bustle of hundreds of people each pushing past one another in different directions, a woman sat nervously waiting, her hands fidgeting with a small golden ring on her finger. She sat on an old wooden bench with the letters K+L etched into the armrest, a flood of memories crashing into her mind.

It had been November 1955, an unusually warm day in Chicago. Katherine had longed to get off of work to savor the last drops of sunshine before winter. From her shoe-box-sized window 45 stories high, Katherine ceased her daydreaming as her boss, a large bald man with a curled mustache shouted, "Katherine, I need you to type up these reports pronto. And there's a client coming by today: a Mr. Lawrence Smith. If I don't arrive in time to meet with him, entertain'em for a bit." Katherine nodded her head curtly, refilling the ink on her typewriter. She worked so intently that time had gotten the best of her.

"Excuse me, Miss," the voice of a man said. Katherine looked up immediately, frightened by the disturbance. The fear quickly left her face as she looked at the man. He was young, perhaps in his twenties, and tall with dark brown hair framing his strong jawline. His green eyes gazed upon Katherine in a calm, yet intriguing way, quite contrary to most of the men who prowled among the office. Her eyes scanned his left hand: no ring.

She cleared her throat, "You must be Mr. Smith," she said, fluffing her auburn hair, "Mr. Gibbins is out of the office at the moment. He won't be back until two o'clock. Would you like some coffee while you wait?"

"That would be mighty swell," the man said, removing his hat. Katherine noticed a twinge of Southern charm in his voice, "And you can call me Lawrence. What should I call you?"

Katherine was surprised that he had taken any interest in her. Most workers in the office barely knew her name, and suddenly this stranger was interested in the meek secretary. She was young, only nineteen, but intelligent and daring. After graduating at the top of her class, Katherine took a job as a secretary and had been at the firm ever since. Once she had enough money saved up, she wanted to travel the world, especially Ireland, where her roots ran deep. Yet, from the outside, she thought of herself dull, like a butterfly trapped in a cocoon, waiting until the perfect moment to break away, beautiful and free.

"My name is Katherine," she replied, feeling her pulse quicken, "Katherine Byrne."

"It's mighty nice to meet you, Kate," Lawrence said, and for the first time in her life, Katherine knew he meant it. Maybe it was the way he looked at her with those enchanting green eyes, or how he flashed her a crookedly irresistible smile. No one had ever called her Kate before, but

somehow, it felt right. Katherine poured Lawrence a cup of steaming coffee, carefully giving him the mug.

"So where are you from, if I may ask?" She asked.

"Born and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee," Lawrence replied proudly, "You ever been there?"

"No, I'm more interested in traveling the world. What's so special about Tennessee?" She asked, twisting a lock of her hair.

"Well, for one thing, there's good people and good food," Lawrence said, his eyes glazed over as if he was somewhere else, "The sweet tea, the fried chicken... If ya ever had my mama's apple dumplings, you'd be on the next train."

"Is that so?" Katherine smiled, her heart leaping, "There's a restaurant around the corner that's supposed to have good comfort food, Ma's Kitchen, if you're hungry later."

Lawrence laced his fingers together, "Well, I'll need someone to accompany me, maybe a beautiful lady such as yourself."

"You have quite a dilemma Lawrence," Katherine's said, feeling the heat radiate off of her cheeks, "My shift ends at six. Perhaps I could show you the way then." By the way Lawrence grinned when she accepted the invitation, Katherine knew that he was just as nervous as she was.

"I'll pick you up at six then," he said, "It was mighty nice to meet you, Kate."

Little did Katherine know that her life would be forever changed. The evening had been more than she ever could have imagined, serendipity lingering in the air. She remembered everything: the fried chicken dripping down her chin, the tang of peach tea, the sweet sound of Lawrence chortling when she tried to imitate his Southern accent, and his eyes, like shimmering emeralds, staring deeply into her own. She remembered how her heart had skipped a beat when Lawrence reached for her hand as he escorted her home, the smell of his cologne, and the way his lips fit perfectly into hers.

"Come with me, back home to Tennessee," Lawrence had whispered, "My train leaves tomorrow morning."

Katherine sat quietly for a moment, frozen with surprise. How could she ever trust a man that she met mere hours ago? Lawrence was a stranger and yet she felt she had known him all her life. She wanted to scream, "Yes!," but he would want to get married if she went with him. She closed her eyes, imagining the hills of Ireland, her hair blowing in the wind.

"I can't." She whispered, "I've never felt this way for anyone, but I have dreams."

Lawrence's eyes fell, "I have traveled to nearly every state in this country, and never have I found a girl like you. I can wait for you. Go follow your dreams and when you're ready, be mine, please."

"I can't do that to you, Lawrence. I want to travel for a few years, maybe more than that," Katherine said, tears welling up in her eyes, "Would you really want to wait for seven, maybe eight years, for a girl you met just a few hours ago?"

"Yes," Lawrence said the word immediately, without hesitation. "I know a good one when I see it, and I'm not giving her up this time. I'll wait however long you need, and if it's eight years, then I'll meet you at the train station in eight years and we can pick up things where we left off."

Morning arrived quicker than ever. Katherine and Lawrence sat on a freshly painted bench in Grand Central Station. Katherine brushed away the tears dripping down her cheeks, "I love you," she whispered, embracing Lawrence, "I'll tell you all about Ireland."

"And I'll save you some apple dumplings. I, uh, got you this ring to remember me" Lawrence smiled, placing a small gold band on her finger. For a moment, they sat in silence. Lawrence grabbed his pocket knife and etched K+L into the armrest. "Now we'll have a place to meet. Right here, on our bench. Eight years. I love you, Kate!"

Before Katherine could even thank him, he was whisked onto a train, chugging south towards Knoxville.

Eight years can do a lot to a bench. Katherine noticed how the paint curled and cracked, the wood imprinted by thousands of sitters. Yet no matter who had sat on it, she knew that it was her bench, or at least partially hers. Televisions surrounded her, all showing the same footage of President Kennedy's assassination only a day ago. She looked away, unable to watch. Katherine examined the golden band on her finger, wondering if it still meant anything to Lawrence. *Is he on the train to Chicago or is he sitting at home with his wife, holding his new baby?*

The sound of a heavy locomotive pulling into the station ignited a tingling sensation in her hands. "Tennessee!" A conductor yelled across the station, "Chicago to Tennessee!"

This was the train. This was the moment that would change Katherine's life forever. Waiting, waiting, waiting. *How could Lawrence wait for eight years?*, she wondered, *I can barely wait one hour.* Dozens of people fled from each car, yet none were Lawrence. Half an hour passed by and the train screamed to life, chugging back to Tennessee.

Katherine's heart fell, and she couldn't help but put her head in her hands and sob. Why had she let Lawrence go? She loved him so much, but he must have been impatient and moved on, stealing her heart along the way.

"Excuse me, Miss." The voice was angelic, the most divine sound Katherine had ever heard. She knew it must be a dream. It had to be a dream. Slowly, she swept the tears from her cheeks, lifting her troubled head.

He was still just as beautiful as the day she met him, just more defined. His dark locks of hair, his toned muscular shoulders enveloped in a gray flannel suit, his emerald forest of eyes, his strong crooked grin all brought a flood of emotion to Katherine.

"Lawrence!" Katherine gasped, weeping and laughing at the same time, "I missed you so much!" She stood up and embraced him, "I didn't know if you would come."

"Not come?" Lawrence said, smiling wider than life itself, "How could I not come for the love of my life? I love you Kate and I never stopped loving you. I, um, have a question I've been waiting eight years to ask you."

Katherine's stomach filled with butterflies as he crouched down on one knee pulling a ring out of his pocket— a diamond ring.

"Kate, will you marry me?"

"Yes!" Katherine shouted through sobs of joy, "And this time, I won't make you wait eight years!"

As if they were magnets, the two kissed, a crowd of people clapping and cheering for the couple.

"Take me home, Lawrence," Katherine smiled, "To Knoxville, Tennessee."

In a moment they boarded a train and disappeared down the tracks, leaving behind the hustle and bustle of Grand Central Station.