

Blessed Eternity

Thomas Monroe

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*Night closes in, the way is long.
My feet have stumbled on life's road.*
—BAI JIYU

PROLOGUE

In the faint distance I can see it, what could be. I want it to be my future, but I doubt I am brave enough. But that's not the only thing. There is something more. Do I keep on sabotaging myself? Am I truly longing for it? Of course, I am, who am I kidding? Who wouldn't want this? But what is stopping me? What is holding me back from pursuing what I want?

I think ... I think I am afraid. Partially my fear comes from the obvious. I am afraid of what it would mean for me and my life. But there is more. How ... how can you love when so many eyes are on you? How can you express what is so intimate and personal when your every single word and deed is being broadcast to the world? Every step I take, people are watching, every move I make, people want to know why. I don't hate what I've become, but we all know I am socially awkward. I don't want to be

alone for the rest of my life. I want to be loved, I want to be taken
and swept away.

CHAPTER ONE

Some Things Never Change

*Everything warps,
The flow dances around me,
Let there be light.*

It feels like it's been ages since I last put something down on paper. The last time I wanted to out my feelings like this, I was in a bad place, but getting better. You might be happy to know that I was able to get rid of all that filth. It wasn't easy, though. While the alcohol might not really have been a problem, having kicked it the moment I secluded myself, the cocaine was something else. The pain and suffering I had gone

through as I had secluded myself in that shrine, it damn near killed me. There were moments where I wanted to die, I wanted to give up and waste away. But the Miko standing by my side gave me strength. I was able to get past these issues. But I knew I couldn't rush back to the real world. It would only drag me back into the darkness in no time. I had to strengthen myself. I think I did. I found a certain measure of strength in the rituals and customs I learned at the shrine. I always keep a few charms with me from there, the one hanging from my guitar is one of those. While I still don't believe in God, that doesn't mean I can't believe in something.

By the time I returned to the real world, things had died down somewhat. There was still a lot of interest in me, the actual me, Himeko, not Grace. The lion-share of the pressure was gone, though. It gave me a chance to start up my career once again at a pace that was a little more bearable.

Everything that happened next is well known. I returned to society with care and gave some simple interviews, hinting at some music I was working on. Not much work was being done in those early months, honestly. I was simply looking for a good place to record my music. At that point I had enough music to call my own, I could spend a while recording in peace.

My parents knew I was acting differently, I wasn't the same girl I had been, they knew my little vacation had changed me. They weren't sure though, whether I had changed for the better or the worse. The truth is, I had grown a little bit more mature once again. I think they felt they couldn't recognize me anymore after a year of massive changes. I think they were a bit lost.

They weren't sure what to do with me, not to mention the questions they had for themselves. Had they been good parents over the past year, not to mention before that. I wonder, what would they think if they knew what I had gone through over that year? Would they be disappointed in me? Disgusted by me? Or would they rather be ashamed of their own failures as parents? I don't believe they are, though. They just did as they believed was best.

After Eight months of work, my first Album was done. All that was left was think of a name, make some cover-art and somehow get it out there. While the usual affair was to get a contract with some big record company, after my experience with Aria, I was in no hurry to strike some sort of deal with a massive corporation. The alternative was rather harsh and painful, though. I would have to pay for it all myself. While I had saved up quite a bit of money from my time with Aria, it was nowhere near enough for a big release. I didn't second guess myself though, I knew this was the best choice for someone like me. When all was said and done, I had nothing left in my bank account. That was before actually bringing it to the people. I had all these copies of my first album, which I had lovingly called Blessed Duality, which featured a cover with an image of me, face to face with the Grace-Mask. And in the recordings, it's all me. Every single voice, whether lead or backup, whether drums or shamisen. I had done it all. This made me want to do this last little stretch by myself too. But how was I to go about it? I used what I had, and others wanted, me. I simply gave interviews like no others before. I gathered some bravery and strength and went on to talk about myself in some embarrassing interviews. Honestly, I don't know what to think about them. While I never lied, nor

sold myself in an embarrassing way, I feel like I still did something wrong in those interviews. It doesn't matter now though. I was able to sell that first run of my album, every last one of them. When the last one had been sold, I had a butt-load of new ones ready, this time however, many music shops were craving to sell it.

It's funny, the original run of my first album is now a collector's item. Ain't that funny? They talk about the first and second edition of my first album. Apparently, there are these details in it that are different. I can imagine there are, I didn't go out of my way to make them exactly alike. I don't see what it matters though, the music on it is exactly the same. It's all that matters to me. But if it keeps people excited, why not?

After that first album had truly gotten traction, things quickly got even better. People wanted more. They wanted more music from me, they were longing to see me live. So, I simply continued doing what I loved. I kept on writing music, I was still filled with ideas, I still am. So, there was no problem there. Live performances were something else. Obviously, I was more than capable enough to play my own music, anything less would be embarrassing. But what about the additional instruments? I played them all myself on the album, but what about live? I needed people who were capable enough to play my music. Finding such people was to be a mean feat. I had to find a drummer, a bassist, an additional guitarist, someone to play the banjo and someone to play the shamisen. Looking for these people was rather difficult. Many wanted to perform with me, but I wasn't looking to play with fans, I wanted professionals who were as good as me. After a long search, I was able to locate

some fitting musicians. The most important one was my shamisen player, I wanted my Miko friend to be the one. She refused though. Not sure why, but she didn't want to be part of my little band. I didn't let up, however. I wanted her with me. Not just for her skills as a shamisen player, but because I had come to appreciate her, I knew having the one person that knew about my old problems with me while touring would help me stay away from falling back into that darkness. In the end, she gave in. The rest of the spots were filled in with auditions where both me and the Miko judged the candidates. Our roster was soon filled with skilled musicians. Some of them were hesitant when they heard I wanted everyone to dress uniquely. I had my cute dress, the Miko had her ... Miko outfit, obviously. In the end they gave in, though.

So, my career as a solo live performer started, supported by some amazing musicians. After this, things became almost dreamlike. In no time, I grew beyond the mere curiosity I used to be. A year after the release of my first album, the idea that Grace was this masked guitarist had faded. I had truly become Grace.

Why did I keep the name Grace? I'm not sure. I think I hoped it would give me the strength to continue performing like Grace, even without the mask. I didn't suddenly become a natural on stage. I still get stage fright to this day when it is time to get on. I don't think I'll ever lose that part of me. I'll always be uncertain about myself. I think I'll always feel like I am not good enough to be there. That might be the reason why I am always aiming to become better. I want to earn the right to be on that stage.

And that's how it all happened. That is how the years passed and somehow ... I became super famous. I'm twenty years old now, five whole years have passed since my debut with Aria and the world is not the same anymore. Practically every time I go out on the street someone tends to recognize me. It's pretty weird to have random strangers talk to me. I had been invisible for so long, being noticed by everyday people off stage feels like I am in some kind of surreal dream-like state. I do think many people are shocked however when they talk to me. I think many people expect me to be bigger, both in height and personality. I guess I must look so much bigger on stage. I do tend to close myself off even more than usual when someone unknown talks to me.

I was sitting backstage. The last encore song of the concert had ended, and I was done for the night. The Miko and I were sitting in my dressing room, cooling down from the set we had just played. I had taken off my Kimono and had put on a simple bathrobe. The Miko was still wearing her outfit, it was hanging open to the front. I was messing around with the shamisen while she was doing some fun riffs on my guitar.

My eyes drifted to my Kimono hanging from the chair. That was a bit of a growing pain. When my old dress had become too old and worn out to continue wearing, I had to think of something new. I knew many people had really gotten attached to the old dress and saw it as an integral part of Grace. So, my first thought was to order a new one, an exact copy, but in the end, I decided to wear something new. To make it fun, I decided to switch it up. If I wanted to wear something completely new, I

could. I would never reduce myself to the cliché look, though. Wearing a T-shirt and jeans was too boring, I wanted to be beautiful, no matter how difficult it might have been. At that time, I tended to prefer my Kimono, but I do my best not to wear the same dress too much in a row, I don't want to get locked in one dress anymore, no matter how much I liked the original one.

I think we were just getting into a little bit of a groove when someone knocked on the door.

"Yeah?" the Miko called out.

"There are some people here from a small website, they wonder if they could do a quick interview." The man on the other side of the door sounded muffled.

The Miko looked over at me. I shrugged at first but soon gave her a clear nod. So, we both sat up straight, closed our respective outfits a bit more and pulled the Shamisen closer to me on my lap.

"We'll accept the interview," she eventually answered.

The door of my dressing room opened, and two young men were brought in. Though "young men" might not have been the best term for them, they were barely more than boys. I'm pretty sure they were younger than me. But that didn't make me doubt the validity of their claims. In this modern world, with everything made so easy and everyone able to have a voice, young guys like this having a decent following on their website, I can easily imagine it.

The shorter of the two guys came in filming right away. Seeing this made me freeze up instantly. To my surprise, he was actually using a camera, not one of those bloody phones. I could

see their faces tense up when they noticed me. In return, I tensed up too.

"Miss Grace, it is an honor to meet you," the young man who served as the interviewer said.

I forced a smile on my face and gave them a little bow.

"It's a pleasure." My Miko friend smiled and gave them a deeper bow.

The questions started out nervously, but the interviewer gained more confidence when he realized I was genuinely the quiet type. By the end of the interview ... I think he was trying to flirt with me. Not that strange, we were about the same age after all. If I hadn't been famous, it would have been completely normal.

Miko, that's what I'll call her from now on, plain Miko, you all know who I am talking about. Miko noticed I wasn't in great form that evening, so she supported me by answering many of the questions I wasn't sure what to answer to. I know some people aren't the biggest fan of her, and while I get that, I must stress how important her presence is by my side on that stage. Without her I would have failed to continue. She is my compass.

"So, final question, Miss Grace. I think everyone of our age-group wants an answer to this question."

I sat up straight again and suddenly became very nervous.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

I could feel my jaw tense up and my cheeks must have been as red as a tomato.

"Hime, you okay?" Miko asked me.

I lowered my head slightly and nodded.

"There is no one in my life." I mumbled.

"Really? What about the lead singer and bassist of ..."

He was asking about Yukiya.

"There was this rumor a few years ago, before you took off your mask ..."

"No, there is nothing between us, never been. We're just old friends."

I wanted to, though. I wanted to be with someone, have someone to love. I feel so weak and lonely. Being famous didn't exactly help. How could I ever know whether someone liked me for me, or the famous person I was? If I ever were to be together with someone, what if they were just ... These thoughts keep haunting me. What if I never find someone? I'm twenty years old and never been touched by a man anywhere close to ... well you know.

I wanted to have a drink, but Miko decided to go straight home after the concert, Yukiya was off on a tour at the time, and I couldn't get a hold of Kiyoshi. When I say drink, I do indeed mean alcoholic, but there is no need to worry, I only drink when I am with someone else. As I said before, alcohol was never really the problem.

I returned home to my apartment by myself and kept busy for a little while before going to sleep.

I was eighteen years old when I finally left home. Honestly, before this whole thing started, I was certain I would never leave home, but by the time I was eighteen I was so famous it felt a bit silly to stay at home any longer. Look, the big badass hard rocker lives with her mommy and daddy. It wasn't easy for me, but it was worse for my mother, she wanted me to stay home for a while longer. I didn't though, I felt obliged to do this. In the

first few months I simply lived in a crummy little apartment to save up on money, but I quickly had enough saved up to buy my own place. Sure, I had to loan money from the banks, but that was soon paid back in full. So now I live in this modern fancy apartment. It's pretty cool. It can be rather lonely though, such a large apartment for just me. Sometimes when I come home late at night and my place is cold, I ... I hide under the covers of my bed and cry just a little. Under those neon-covered sheets, I feel that eternal coldness. I just hope that I don't become like Aria. I don't want to be alone at age forty, crying myself to sleep under these very same covers. The thought is scary.

I woke up the next day with a slight headache and a thumping feeling in the back of my head. I was unsure as to what was wrong with me, maybe I was simply tired. It had been a busy couple of weeks. But, as they say, no rest for the wicked. I had an important meeting I had to get to that day. I'm not sure, I think it was about planning a new tour, gathering some ideas and putting some initial ideas down on paper concerning the timing of the tour.

I was sitting in the waiting room, my legs pulled on the sofa, letting my head rest on the back rest. I had earbuds in and was in half a slumber as I tried suppressing the thumping in my head.

I think I was in that little slumber for about ten minutes when someone tapped my knee. Upon opening one of my eyes, I stared straight in the face of the cutest young woman you can imagine. She had these beautiful dark eyes. The skirt she was wearing was short and looked very delicate and was in this smooth purple color. The blouse she was wearing was so delicate and light,

I thought it would evaporate from around her shoulders. The pale yellow, almost white, color made it contrast beautiful with that cute as hell skirt.

To my surprise she was blushing intensely as she stared at me. For a moment I thought she would start crying.

"Yeah?" I mumbled as I forced my second eye open.

"I ... I am so sorry to bother you but ... do I know you?" she asked in a delicate voice.

Her voice was soft and sweet. The only thing I could think was that she must have been the perfect dream woman for practically every single person out there. Hell, I even felt something flutter in my chest and I don't even like women like that.

"Uh, I ... I don't know you, so I don't think so."

Okay, not the nicest answer, but I was in no mood to deal with someone at the time. And if she didn't recognize me, she wasn't a fan of mine, so I didn't really bother telling her. She sat down on the sofa across from me and kept on staring at me with a confused frown. I must admit, I stared at her for a while longer. I couldn't help myself; she was just THAT beautiful. So much so that I didn't even feel bad about myself. While she wasn't older than me, her beauty and build made her seem far more adult than I was. As I turned my head away, I noticed in the corner of my eye her taking out her cellphone and pointing it at me. I could hear the faint sound of the fake shutter, not sure whether she thought she was being sneaky or not, but it was clear she had just taken a picture of me. I didn't care of course; I was used to it by that point. After a few moments I fake stretched my neck so I could take a glance at her again. She was staring with wide eyes of fascination at her little screen. After a few moments, her

head bounced up as she looked back at me. Her eyes went back down to her phone, before bouncing back up at me. Our eyes locked.

"What?" I frowned.

"I ... I am so sorry, I didn't realize."

One of my eyebrows rose and I couldn't keep my smile back anymore.

"You're Grace, right?"

I smiled and nodded.

"That's so cool! You are so cool!"

People have called me that before, I don't get it.

"I don't listen much to your genre, but that doesn't make me appreciate you any less."

Your genre. That rang a little strangely in my ears. There was something there.

"That's okay, Hard rock and Metal is not for everyone. I don't see it as an insult if you listen to some other genre."

She smiled and blushed.

"I know not everyone thinks like that, but I do."

I pulled my legs from the sofa and placed my feet back on the floor.

"What IS your genre, if I may be so bold to ask?"

"I ... like pop."

I figured as much, based on her attitude beforehand. A quick flash of Aria went through my mind. I leaned back on the sofa and crossed my legs.

"Nothing wrong with that."

The girl stood up and walked up to me, sitting down next to me.

"Can I just ask ... how do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"That guitar thing!"

I sniggered at that. Guitar thing. Why not?

"I don't know, just practice."

She let out a sigh as she cocked her head.

"What's your name?" I eventually had the guts to ask.

"Airina"

I smiled and gave her a little bow.

"I'm Himeko."

She looked at me with slight suspicion.

"My real name," I clarified.

"Ah okay, can I call you that?"

"You can call me Himeko, Hime or Grace." I shrugged, "Or something else than that even. I'm not that picky."

We talked a little. It turned out she was eighteen years old. It made me feel a little weird, being the older one. We were in the middle of the conversation, hell, Airina was in the middle of a sentence when something big popped into my head.

"Aah! Of course! Now I get it!" I cried out, threw my hands to my face and fell backward on the sofa.

"Is something the matter?" Airina frowned.

"AIRINA!"

"Yes?"

"No, I mean, AIRINA! You are Airina, THE Airina."

"Not much 'THE' about me."

Yeah, it had taken me a while to realize who I was talking to.

"Of course, you are the young pop sensation Airina."

She buried her head between her shoulders, she was blushing.

"I'm sorry!" she said.

"For what? I was the one who forgot who you were."

She smiled and pushed a strand of her hair behind her ear, revealing a sparkling diamond earring, it made her whole face even prettier.

"I have to say, you are far nicer than certain other popstars I know."

"Thank you." She smiled.

We talked for a while longer after that. It started to become clear to me this girl had been chosen by the company for her looks. She didn't write her own music and had only started to learn how to sing properly less than a year ago. On paper, she seemed like the type of popstar I couldn't care in the least about, but this girl was just so sweet. She was eighteen, maybe the prettiest girl I had ever seen and was on the verge of being a massive popstar. Yet there she was, sweet and humble. Maybe if I had met her a year later, she would have been far more arrogant, but at that time she wasn't. I kind of liked her because of all this.

"Hey, if you ever want to experience a REAL concert, let me know," I said with a smile.

"If you ever want to experience a fake concert, let me know." She returned me my joke with a smile.

"I might just take you up on that offer."

We kept on talking for nearly fifteen minutes before we were interrupted, and I had to go to my meeting. But we made sure to exchange numbers before parting ways.

Honestly, I really like Airina. There was this instant feeling of love between us. In an instant I knew I would have loved to have her as a friend. I was afraid, though. There definitely were a lot of people who wanted to get close to her, it was the same for me. She was naturally very sociable, unlike me. So, she probably already had a lot of friends. But I figured I would give it a try.

That evening I sat in an old café at the bar, with a cup of sake in front of me and Kiyoshi next to me. We sat there, both with our backs arched, our heads hanging over our drinks.

"Long day?" he asked in a somber tone.

"Yep, only one meeting but it was a boring stuffy one. I don't even remember what it was about."

Still don't.

"You?"

"You don't want to know. Too much insanity."

He didn't want me to ask, so I didn't. We sat there next to each other for a while in silence.

My gaze kept on shifting to my cellphone. I couldn't help but think of Airina. I wondered what she was up to. I wanted to send her something, but was it okay? Was it the right moment? I was afraid to scare her away, I know, some things never change.

But then, almost as if it were fate, or some kind of cosmic joke, I received a message. This was so strange an occurrence that even Kiyoshi looked up. Yeah, I had separated work from free time by giving my e-mail to whomever needed me professionally, only handing someone my number if I had some sort of personal relationship with them.

I flipped open my old phone and opened the message. I couldn't believe it, it was her. Airina had been the first one to

send me a message. I had no clue what to think. Was this a good or a bad thing? Once again, I was overthinking things.

"Hey, Himeko, how was your day? I had fun talking with you, I hope we can see each other again soon."

I immediately started typing a message back. After some back and forth between her and me, we concluded that we both had some free time coming up and that she would come to my place in a few days. With a happy smile I placed my phone back down next to my cup of sake. But from the moment I let go of it, I realized something that made me drop my head down on the bar. I did it with enough force for half of my sake to jump out of its cup and splash over my phone.

"Something wrong?" Kiyoshi asked.

"Is it normal for a twenty-year-old to have ... what is basically ... a playdate?"

"Excuse me?"

"God I'm such a loser."

I quietly handed him my phone. After wiping it clean with his sleeve, he started reading the conversation between Airina and myself. The silence broken only by the occasional beep from my phone as he jumped between the messages, was killing me. Eventually, he burst into laughter.

"Hime, you are a genius, that's why I love you. You succeeded in organizing ... what is basically a playdate, with a beautiful young and coming popstar!"

I was blushing so badly I thought blood would spout from my cheeks.

"See, that's why I love you, Himeko, you're so sweet and innocent."

I slapped my own cheeks several times, drank the remainder of my sake and asked for another one.

"See, that's why I hate these things, I hate being able to say something without thinking. There is no filter because of these stupid things!" I moped and flicked my cellphone.

Kiyoshi petted me on the head.

"I'll be alone till the day I die."

CHAPTER TWO

Get-Together

*Feeling it deep inside,
The faint echoes within me whisper,
It's the truth.*

You can't believe how much I was worrying the following few days. What were we going to do? What did I do when with Megumi? For the life of me I can't remember. I just hoped I could make her day off more than fun enough.

I was sitting on the tip of my chair in the kitchen, waiting impatiently for Airina to arrive. There was literally nothing else I