

Name: Katerina Sutton

Work title: The End of Today

Category: Short Story

Award: Gold Key

---

Mona falls into a queen-sized bed, eyelids heavy as she pulls the covers to her elbows. She clicks off the lamp and is surrounded by darkness. She began the day alone, and will end it alone.

She lies back on her pillow and relaxes into the comforter, its familiar musty odor distantly comforting. Soon, she feels herself being pulled into the arms of unconsciousness.

Mona barely registers the turning of a doorknob and the creaking of the bedroom door before realizing it has been opened. She sits up quickly, squinting as she shields her eyes with her hand. She is surrounded by a blinding white fog.

A figure emerges from the haze—a man, about six feet tall. He drifts closer, hovering over the floor, until he is standing mere feet from her. The man radiates kindness, and she is not afraid. When she meets his gaze, his smile is warm.

“What is today for you?” he asks. His voice is low and deep, and Mona hears it echoing inside her head, as if coming from within her.

“Wednesday,” Mona replies slowly, after a moment. “Today is Wednesday.”

“I am fully cognizant of the *day*, thank you,” he says, an air of humor to his voice. “That’s not what I am asking. One year ago today, marks the death of your wife.”

Mona gazes at him, bewildered. The man simply smiles back at her, watching her with interest.

“You handled the day well,” he says.

“Well? Thank you for lying,” she replies wryly. “I cried for hours and didn’t speak to a soul.”

“You cried, yes. And then you went to work and stared at a bright computer screen for a few hours, like your colleagues. After that, you took yourself home, ate dinner, and went to sleep. You feigned normalcy, and that’s all anyone could have asked of you today.”

Mona cannot help the smile that crosses her features.

“After all, deep grief comes from a place of profound love, and you still love her deeply.”

“How do you know anything about Elara and me?” she asks softly.

The man pauses.

“It is difficult to explain, but I simply came here to see if you needed any assistance from me.”

She is silent for a moment, attempting to gather her thoughts, yet finds herself wholly unable to come up with original words.

“Your assistance?”

“I want to know if there’s anything I can do to help you. Anything at all.”

Mona looks down at her lap.

“I haven’t talked about her to anyone in weeks,” she admits quietly. “I *wanted* to, of course, but everyone seems to think it’ll be easier for me, better for me, if we talk about something else.”

“But it’s all you’re ever thinking about, isn’t it?”

Mona nods.

“I just wish I could have one more hour,” she starts softly, bringing her eyes up to meet his. “I try to hang onto my life with Elara, but my memory has grown foggier as time passes; I find myself unsure of the feeling of her hands in mine, the sound of her laughter, the expression she made when she was excited.”

“She was a wonderful woman,” Mona continues, tears filling her eyes. “If I could see her one last time, even just for a little while, everything I’ve forgotten about her would come back, like it was the most natural thing in the world. I know it would. Even just an hour would be enough.”

In the man’s expression, Mona sees none of the wretched pity others have afforded her. His eyes offer compassionate understanding.

“I can do this for you.”

Mona laughs, the remark comically simple.

“What exactly can you *do*? Revive the dead?”

“I can bring you back to her,” the man says, his voice serious. “Only for a day, but she’d be completely *real* to you. It would feel as if your relationship had merely been on pause.”

Mona stops smiling.

“Don’t joke with me,” she says, voice breaking. “A stronger person would be able to handle it, but I cannot. I have just been trying to move forward, as best as I can.”

“And your resilience is commendable,” he says. “But if you want, as you say you do, for the happy past to be restored, I can create this temporarily.”

Mona lets her tears filling her eyes spill onto the comforter, and the man seems to shrink into her surroundings as she cries. The logical part of her mind reminds her that Elara is permanently and irreversibly *dead*, but the man speaks with such confidence that she wants to believe it could be so, that she could be returned to Mona.

“I do,” she says. “Please, bring her back to me.”

“You must be certain. I do not doubt your sincerity, but take a moment, where your eyes are not blurred by tears, to truly consider what this decision means.”

“I need to see her again,” Mona says, her voice rising with urgency. “Haven’t you been hearing me? Please, bring her back.”

The man smiles softly, seemingly unfazed.

“Of course. I just wanted to make sure you understood.”

Mona looks down at the comforter, then begins to gather the thick material in her hand.

It had taken on a terrible stench over the past year, but still, she could not bear to wash it.

Mona and Elara chose their home together, obsessing over furnishing and decorating it; everything was a mutual decision, down to the most minute details. Each evening, they retired to *this* bed with *this* comforter, and in that lifetime, Mona washed it frequently. But once Elara died, she felt that washing the comforter was akin to scrubbing away their sacred memories, those she was so terrified to forget – and a pristine, odorless grief comforter would remain.

It was one more potential loss. And so, she let the smell fester.

“Bring her back to me,” Mona says at once.

“All right,” he says. “I will exit this room. You will fall asleep, and tomorrow, your wife will be waiting outside your door.”

Mona struggles through a few meager hours of sleep that night, and awakens to a cheerful, sunny day. The encounter feels like something she could have easily contrived – when Elara first died, Mona had countless dreams about her. The man with piercing green eyes could have very easily been another fabrication.

And yet, she moves quickly out of bed, her heartbeat quickening as she approaches the front door.

On Mona’s doorstep stands a breathtaking woman, with blonde hair parted at the side and deep brown eyes gazing up at her. She wears a flattering shade of crimson lipstick, and smiles shyly at Mona as her hands toy with her rings.

“Well, are you going to let me in?”

Mona stares at the woman sitting on the loveseat across from her, sipping from the mug of Earl Grey in her hands. She wears a maroon tank top and loose black pants with a cardigan, not unlike her usual attire, but she looks like a dream to Mona.

“You don’t remember dying?” Mona says.

Elara shrugs.

“I remember the accident, and everything that happened leading up to it. We were having such a nice lunch at that outdoor café. *The Addison*, remember?”

Mona laughs softly, remembering pleasant conversation and unbelievably strong cocktails. She’d forgotten how nice everything before the accident had been.

“They still do.”

“We should go there, then,” Elara says, smiling. “Unless you have work today? You were always so busy.”

Mona could laugh at the idea of treating this day like any other.

“Absolutely not.”

“Then why don’t we go get lunch? I’m famished.”

Mona smiles, her eyes panning over fair skin, slender arms, sleek collarbones. Her eyes begin to fill with tears, and Elara smiles softly as she stands up and walks toward the other woman, kissing her softly and circling her in an embrace. She's warm and smells like cinnamon from the shampoo she'd always used. *Of course*, Mona remembers with delight. *It was this way all along.*

Before long, they are seated at an intimate table for two at the café's sunny outdoor pavilion, surrounded by other couples engrossed in conversation. Mona takes Elara's hand in hers, gazing fondly at her over Bloody Marys.

"Is it nice where you are?" Mona asks quietly. Elara smiles.

"You mean, in the afterlife?"

Mona nods. They laugh softly—almost breathily—at the impossibility of their situation, and then Elara leans in closer.

"It's difficult to say," she starts, as if racking her brain for memories. "I can only remember the moment the semi hit our car, and then everything went black. Was there no hospital stay, nothing else before my death?"

Mona's heart falls, thinking back to the accident she's tried so hard to push away since she began trying to *move forward*.

"You died upon impact. I was in the hospital for two weeks – my injuries were less severe."

"I wonder why that was."

"I did, too. Since I lived and you didn't, I spent the first months certain that I had to do something remarkable with my life." She looks down at her hands, incapable of meeting Elara's gaze. "I still often feel that I'm not honoring you properly."

Elara frowns, running her hands through her hair.

"I'm sorry about that."

"No, no, please," Mona says softly. "Don't apologize. I shouldn't be talking about this, anyway, not now that you're here."

"That's okay." Elara smiles, her brown eyes bright and hopeful. "I'm happy just to be with you."

“What do you think our life would have been like, had I survived?” Elara asks softly, knees touching her chest. She picks at blades of grass from the ground beneath, shredding them between her fingers. From the café, they wandered to a nearby park.

“I think about it all the time,” Mona says. “For starters, we’d still be living at home, provided that we hadn’t grown completely sick of each other yet.”

Elara’s eyes sparkle with amusement. *I remember this look about her now*, Mona realizes with delight. Mona smiles and leans in to kiss her cheek.

“What else?” Elara asks.

“I would quit my job,” Mona says. “I was always working too much—you just wanted to explore the world with me. We were barely thirty; it was stupid for me to tie myself down to a corporate job.”

Elara smiles and lays on the grass, spreading out her arms and legs.

“I never resented you for it. You were the breadwinner; how else could I sustain my little art hobby otherwise?”

“You’re a wonderful painter,” Mona says, smiling down at her. “It wasn’t a *little hobby*.”

“Come, join me.” Elara hooks her hand around Mona’s arm—she laughs and lies down, shielding her eyes from the sun.

“I feel like if I question this thing that’s happened, you being here with me now, that you’ll just vanish completely.”

Elara turns her head to gaze at the other woman.

“I understand.”

“I’m so glad, though,” Mona says, beginning to cry. “I just want to hold you until the end of today, to feel that you’re truly here with me.”

Elara’s smile spreads to her eyes, and she reaches a hand out to tuck Mona’s hair behind her ear.

“You can.”

Mona reaches to take the woman in her arms, to feel her skin on hers. She cries as she feels the slow rise and fall of Elara’s chest, the heat on her skin from the sun.

After some moments, Mona releases her and falls back on the grass.

“What do you want to do next?” Elara asks, renewed vigor in her voice. In life, she was always pleading Mona to accompany her to parties, pulling her from introverted comfort. Mona liked to think that, in turn, she’d brought Elara in touch with her introverted side – she began long painting sessions, completely immersed for hours without pause.

Mona certainly hadn’t been pushed like that since her death, and doubted she would be again.

“Do you have any ideas?” Mona asks.

Mona hasn’t had the desire to use her pool for months, but when Elara asks if they can go swimming, she is grateful that she continued to pay for its maintenance.

They jump in together, wearing only their bras and panties. They race each other, competing in breaststroke, butterfly, and sidestroke categories. Swimming in the evening, with only the underwater lights to illuminate their view, Mona feels like a little girl again.

Elara’s loud laughter reverberates off the sides of the pool, and Mona loves the sound. She remembers how devastated she’d been when, seven months after her death, Mona realized she could no longer recall that laugh. It felt distant, faraway, a voice she could not place. Recalling it now feels like the simplest thing in the world.

They run inside when mosquitos begin to bite, trailing water droplets to their room. They shower together, and Mona rediscovers intimacy she’d shunned for months. It feels delightfully natural to be with the woman who knows her so well, who knows what she likes and is confident in her ability to please.

They crawl into bed together; after a year, the world is righted again. Gluing herself to the left side of their king-sized bed for the past year was a miserable attempt at quelling her loneliness.

“God! When was the last time you washed this comforter?” Elara asks, wrinkling her nose with displeasure as she pulls it to their elbows. “It smells horrible.”

Mona smiles but does not reply. After a moment, she shifts to lay her head on Elara’s stomach and Elara obliges, playing with the other woman’s freshly washed hair.

“That feels so nice,” Mona says softly, Elara’s tender fingers grazing her scalp. She feels exhaustion setting into her bones, relaxation sweeping through her as Elara continues, and allows her eyes to close.

Mona awakens to a cheerful, sunny day. She turns to the left, and her heart drops in her chest with the realization that she is alone.

“Elara?” she says hoarsely, her throat dry. She stands quickly and moves over to the bathroom. *I’m sure she’s here somewhere*, she tells herself, calling the woman’s name with increasing panic.

“Elara?” she says louder, walking into the living room. “Hello?” she turns into the kitchen, but she is not there, either.

Mona even opens the front door, but no one is standing there.

She closes it softly and begins to sob, bracing her hands on her knees to keep from collapsing. She repeats her beloved’s name, over and over, but she is gone.

“Elara,” she says, “Please.”

The woman was so real, so true in her arms. The man with piercing green eyes had said she’d only have one day with her, yet it felt like she was back for good.

A dull ache forms in her temples, but she cannot stop crying as she drops onto the cold marble floor. In an instant, Mona feels the air change around her; she freezes, sensing his presence.

She hears a few dull knocks and whirls around to see the man lounging in her loveseat, rapping a fist on its armrest. A faint white glow surrounds him.

“I’m sorry it had to be like this,” he says. “You said all you wanted was to see her one last time.”

“Yes,” she says breathlessly. “Yes, but I—”

*hadn’t understood the consequences.*

Upon returning to the world mere weeks after Elara’s initial death, Mona proceeded through the motions of her daily routine, feigning normalcy—but her heart lay in that wrecked car. With her, she carried tremendous sorrow. Over the months it had grown duller, but now, braced against the cool marble floor, Mona feels she has become a woman of early grief again. It is as if Elara has died a second time.

After a few moments, the man inhales.

“But you remember so many things now,” he says, “don’t you?”

“I do,” she says softly. “It all came back to me.”

A bittersweet smile spreads across her face, and she meets his gaze. He is smiling, too, and listening.



“And not just things about Elara,” she says, “but memories we shared, places we went together, jokes only she would understand. All the things I’d lost with her absence.”

In this moment, though her wife is gone, she is wholly remembered.

“I cannot lose her again,” she says suddenly. “I will not lose these things a second time.”

“Then write,” the man says, his voice delicate.

Mona looks up, meeting the man’s gaze.

“Write?”

“You say you do not want to forget? Then write. Set your precious memories in stone. She will remain alive in your mind, if you retain her on paper.”

Mona calls in sick to work for a second day and runs a bath. She pours in a bottle of dish soap and swirls the mixture with her hand until it’s cloudy and bubbling, then strips the bed of its comforter and drops it in. She spends hours soaking and wringing it out, draining murky brown water and refilling the tub anew. In between, she opens a new notebook and begins to write.

Mona writes about Elara’s careless laugh, about her collection of cardigans, about her warm cinnamon shampoo. She remembers everything perfectly now, but her picture of the woman she loves will inevitably begin to blur again—so she will read from her private list, and Elara will live once more.

Later, Mona pulls the comforter from the dryer and holds it close, reveling in how wonderfully fresh it smells, how clean and soft it feels. She brings it back to their bedroom and, under its weight, reads through pages upon pages of fond remembrances. An expression of feeling finds its way down her cheek, and she smiles softly: out of grief, out of love.

She is grateful she could see Elara again, for the woman she truly was.