

Till the End of Forever

By Christopher Shiner

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“You can’t go, my love. I’m simply not ready for you to go yet,” Nicholas McCormick said, as he sat hunched in a chair beside his wife’s hospital bed. His slate blue eyes cast a steady vigil on her, while his light gray hair, usually combed to the side, lay tousled and wispy on both sides of his face. Dressed in a suit of gray tweed, his tall frame of six feet looked tiny as he bent towards his wife. The steady beat of the heart monitor chirped beside Annabelle McCormick’s left arm, as she lay tucked into the bed, sweetly returning her husband’s worried gaze. Several lavender candles placed intermittently around the room, kept the antiseptic smell of the hospital at bay. The doctors had objected to the candles at first, but stopped when they saw that there wasn’t much they could do to dissuade Nicholas.

“It can’t be helped, my bonnie boy. My time has come. I have a weak heart, and we knew it wouldn’t last forever,” Annabelle said gently. Her cotton white hair lay in thick, silky strands that cascaded down the side of her head onto the light blue pillow supporting her. As she smiled towards Nicholas, crow’s feet spread at the sides of her light green eyes. The dim lamplight from the nightstand beside her husband lent itself to the collective light of the candles. The hospital room was a single occupancy room, sparsely equipped with her bed, two lamps on the nightstands, a love seat in the right corner, and a television, which hung in the other corner silently. The usual accompaniment of hospital monitors, flashing and beeping her vitals across their screens, lay on the left side of the bed with various IV’s running to her arms. Everything was decorated in soft tones of blue and white, which aided the candles in creating a very soft, cozy atmosphere.

“My dear, I’m seventy-seven years old. I couldn’t have asked for a more blessed life with you. I don’t want to leave, and yet I’m content at what must be,” Annabelle said.

“And I’m a year older than you, little girl, and husbands should die before their wives,” Nicholas said, sighing heavily as he held her right hand a little tighter. “My beautiful Annabelle with the crimson locks and eyes of jade.”

“But the red’s all gone, my boy, it’s been gone for many years.”

“I only see the red, my sweet. I only see the red.” Nicholas’s eyes began to twinkle with tears as he felt her grip began to weaken slightly.

“Oh, my bonnie boy, I’ll be seeing you soon. I’m yours till the very end of forever. Tell the kids and the grandkids that they’re all my little angels of light, and that I love them very much.” Annabelle’s mouth curved up in a tender smile. “My sweet man, my sweet, sweet man...” Annabelle’s eyes continued to stare faintly into Nicholas’s. Her grip on his hand slowly slackened, and soon went completely limp.

Gentle sobs filled Nicholas’s bones as he felt her go. With great effort, he rose to his feet and swept his hand over her eyes, brushing them closed. As he pressed his lips to her forehead, his tears mingled in her hair and soaked into her blue, satin nightgown.

“Goodbye, my sweet lass. My beautiful Annabelle with the crimson locks and eyes of jade.”

Nicholas raised his arm to the hospital staff as they opened the door to come in, having heard the tell-tell signs of her heart monitor. Respectfully withdrawing from the room, the door clicked shut behind them. Nicholas lingered for long moments gazing at Annabelle, then, after a time, he reached for his silver tipped black cane that rested against the nightstand, and shuffled out of the room.

Duncan McCormick drove his Granddad Nicholas home from Jewish Hospital by way of Baxter Avenue. The night sky over Louisville, Kentucky, was mild and clear, letting the stars twinkle brightly on their canvas of black. Duncan soon pulled up to Nicholas and Annabelle's three-story brick home off of Bardstown Road. The house was well kept and tidy, with a clear stone path leading up to the steps, which in turn led up to a wide, ranch style porch that stretched across the front of the house and was covered by a black tiled roof of its own.

Nicholas remained silent as he leaned on his cane, putting all of his weight on the silver handle as he creaked up the steps and into the house. Following behind him, Duncan was definitely his Grandfather's boy. Tall, just like his Granddad was, Duncan had dark brown hair, cropped short, and light green eyes he inherited from his Grandmother. He reached for the light switch on the wall to the right of the door entrance, and helped Nicholas to the couch. Duncan settled into the couch beside his Granddad, and took in the sweet smell of jasmine that permeated the house.

"Smell that?" Nicholas said, closing his eyes in concentration. "She fills this old house with life even now. She always smelled of jasmine. I don't think she wore perfume a day in her life. Just naturally smelled that way. Like a damn drug it was. That was the first thing that caught my attention fifty-six years ago when I met her. She hooked my soul with that smell. There was nothing I could do. I was a goner, and smiled about it all the way."

"Yeah, Grandma was one of a kind, that's for sure," Duncan said, trying not to cry again. "Look, Granddad, I'm going to take care of everything involving the funeral,

so you're not to worry yourself. The viewing and the burial will take place about four days from now. That way it will give all the family time to drive in. Uncle Henry's coming all the way from Dublin, and mom and dad need to square everything away in Pennsylvania, and then they'll be down."

"I'm sorry you have to deal with this, Duncan, what with the news about you and Molly," said Nicholas.

"Oh, it's all right, Granddad. Molly and I wanted to have kids, but I guess the big guy up there didn't think it should be in the cards. It will take us awhile to come to terms with that. She still can't stop crying."

"It's not fair, a beautiful woman like that not being able to bare children. Well, again, I'm very sorry, Duncan."

"Thanks, Granddad. Are you going to be okay alone here tonight? I can always call Molly and tell her that I'm going to spend the night here with you."

"No, go to your wife. I need to be alone with my own thoughts. I'll be fine. Give my love to Molly."

"All right, but I'm going to come by first thing in the morning to see how you're coming along," Duncan said, as he got up to go.

"Ah, Duncan, Annabelle and I were blessed to have such a fine Grandson."

"No more blessed than I with my Grandparents. First thing in the morning, I'll be here. Goodnight." Duncan slid out the front door and made sure to check that it was firmly closed and locked.

Several minutes went by before Nicholas made any movements; then, with a heavy rap of his cane onto the hard wood floor, he leaned his head back and stared up at

the ceiling. “Okay, Old Man, I’ve prayed to you through all my years, and there have been a few bumps, but for the most part I’ve had a pretty great life. And I owe it all to her. I’ll thank you again for arranging our little meeting, but now I’ve got a bone to pick. I should have died first. It’s not fair. I know you have your reasons, it was her time and all that bunk. Well, fine, I accept that. But now it’s my turn, do you hear?”

Nicholas stretched his legs out and let his head fall down, looking ahead at nothing in particular. “I’ve got nothing left for me now. My soul was wrapped up in that lass. Do you hear me, Old Man? It’s my time to go. I don’t care to hang around without her, so it’s time to get us back together. I expect you to take me tonight, all right? All right, enough said. Do this for me, and everything is squared. Goodnight, you Old Fart.” And with that, Nicholas laid his body side ways on the couch, and, after a short while, fell into a deep sleep.

The light of the morning seeped around the corners of the shutters that hung from two large windows at the front of the house in the living room. The effect the shutters had by stopping the light from coming directly in, was that the light seemed to fill the room from everywhere at once. Huge oaken bookcases lined the white walls of the living room like sentinels, standing guard over the room in stalwart silence. The bindings of the books they contained had so many different colors, they seemed like one enormous abstract painting, cloaking the wall in literature.

Nicholas slumbered away on the green cloth couch that lay against the middle of the wall opposite the two front windows. A steady knock fell against the front door, which stood to the left of the windows.

Nicholas drew back from the depths of dreaming, the lids of his eyes feeling like paperweights as he opened them. “All right,” his grouchy baritone called out, “I’m coming, just a moment.” He hoisted himself upright on the couch and stretched his arms into the air.

“So, I’m still here I see,” he said, as he rolled his eyes towards the ceiling. “Well, that won’t do at all. Are you even listening up there?” Nicholas stood up and made for the front door. “I’ll be talking to you again soon enough. We’re not done here. You Old Coot!”

He opened the door to reveal the concerned faces of his Grandson Duncan and Duncan’s wife Molly, a beautiful girl of twenty-six whom Duncan had married two years ago last October. Of average height, her chestnut hair hung around her shoulders and her brown eyes were rimmed in red, probably from a crying bout over Annabelle’s death, Molly’s inability to bear a child, or both. Probably both. Nicholas could remember how quickly Annabelle had taken to Molly the moment Duncan had brought her to see the family. Practically adopted her into the family that very moment.

Ah, Annabelle, my beauty, don’t get too comfortable up there alone now. This place will be so pale and lifeless without you.

As soon as Duncan and Molly laid eyes on Nicholas, they’re expression changed from concern to astonishment. Duncan simply stared, mouth agape.

“My God, Granddad, you...I’m mean...you...what have you been doing?”

“Sleeping, waiting for the good Lord to come to his senses, until you came banging on the door, you little rascal,” Nicholas said, chiding Duncan with a confused chuckle. “Why on earth do you ask? What’s that face for?”

“Have you looked in the mirror? Granddad, you look ten years younger. I mean literally, ten years younger. That must have been one hell of a nap.” Duncan prodded Nicholas over to the huge ornate mirror, which stretched above the length of the couch.

“I...well, look at that,” Nicholas said, looking at his amazed expression in the mirror. Although his hair was still gray, it was a much darker shade, but his face...the skin on his cheekbones was much firmer, the lines of his forehead visibly less pronounced. His overall features were firmer, making him look as he hadn't since his early sixties.

“Granddad, where's your cane?” said Duncan.

“Well, it's right here beside the couch,” said Nicholas, going over to pick it up.

“But, you answered the door without it. I haven't seen you able to walk without that cane since I was in High School.”

“I don't know, my legs weren't hurting, so I didn't think to pick it up. Actually, my legs feel great, I could probably go for a jog,” said Nicholas, tapping both legs against the wood floor, feeling the strength in them.

“We need to get you to a doctor-”

“For what? Because I'm feeling better than I've felt in years? Nonsense. Doctors! You can throw the whole lot of them into a ditch and pave it over for all I care,” Nicholas said, walking back over to the door and opening it. “Now, you both came by to make sure I was doing all right, well, as you can see, I'm doing just fine. I love you both, now get going. I've got lots of things to attend to today.”

“But, Granddad-”

“But nothing. Off with you. I’ll call you tonight,” Nicholas said, as he saw the both of them out. He shut the door with a snap, and went over to face the mirror again. He wasn’t sure, but he could swear that he had even less wrinkles than the last time he looked.

“So, you think you can bribe me with a little youthful vigor, is that so, you old Trickster? Well, I’m not having it, do you hear? Nice try, but it won’t work. I’m still ready for you to take me anytime. I do wish you would get on with it, instead of toying with me. Fine, *you* think about it. I’m going to go for a walk with my new legs. And no, that doesn’t mean I want to keep them. But, I might as well enjoy them while I’ve got them.”

Nicholas took a small comb out of his gray tweed pants. His suit was quite wrinkled, but he didn’t much care. After he combed his hair into place, he made for the door and walked out onto the porch, shutting the door behind him.

The morning smelled fresh and clean, and he could hear the birds chattering all around him. The sky was drenched in aqua blue as Nicholas proceeded down Bardstown Road, his legs feeling stronger and stronger as the minutes ticked by. He checked his watch. Ten ‘o clock. The little shops and restaurants, which lined both sides of Bardstown Road from end to end, were already open and attracting customers. Bardstown Road always reminded him of a street transplanted from Paris or some other culturally diverse city. Unlike any other street in Louisville, it was the focal point of artists and poets, college students and businessmen alike, all blending together seamlessly into the coffee shops and local pubs, their generational and cultural differences of no consequence.

Nicholas began walking at a rather brisk pace, marveling at the strength that flowed through his frame. Ahead, he saw he was nearing O'Shea's, a darn good Irish Pub he and Annabelle enjoyed frequenting over the years. He was rather thirsty. A good pint or two would suit him just fine around now. The sun glanced off the huge tinted windows of the pub, concealing its contents. Nicholas reached for the door, and stepped inside. Immediately, the smell of ale and cooked meats wafted back to him, and for once he allowed himself to feel at ease. Roast beef and stewed pork he could smell distinctly, and he decided he might even go for a good Reuben sandwich.

Stepping up to the bar, the pretty blonde bartender bouncing back and forth between customers came over to him with a big smile.

"What can I get for you?" she smiled, leaning a bit on the counter towards him.

"Guinness, please, on tap if you have it, lass," said Nicholas.

"Well, sure thing, cutie. Not much I wouldn't do for a good-looking man who can call a girl lass, and make it sound endearing and not corny," she said as she pulled him a tall glass and set it down before him.

My God, was she flirting with him? He was old enough to be her father's father. Well, he had to admit, it felt good. Annabelle would be his only love till the day he stopped breathing, but it was nice to have a girl notice him. Must be that old world charm he put off. Like, Sean Connery or something. The ladies still fancied *him*, so why not Nicholas?

Grabbing the Guinness before him, Nicholas lifted the pilsner styled glass to his lips and to a huge drink. As he did so, his eyes flashed to his reflection in the mirror

behind the bar. Holy shit! With a shocked gasp, beer spewed out of his mouth and onto the wood countertop. The lady bartender came over immediately to attend to him.

“Everything okay, sweetheart?” she asked.

He barely heard her. He couldn't come to terms with what he saw in the mirror. In it, the young figure of a man in his forties stared back at him. Nicholas's hair was completely brown now, his stature lean and sturdy. His tweed suit looked completely different on him in his new form. It used to bag a little bit around the arms and waist, but no longer. It fit tightly to his youthful muscle.

“Jesus,” he whispered under his breath, as the bartender attempted to dry the beer off his shirt. “Jesus, Old Man, what the hell are you pulling here?” *You're not just shaving off a couple of years, you're shaving a whole life off in reverse.*

“I'm sorry, what?” asked the bar maid.

Nicholas stared in disbelief for a couple more seconds, then turned his attention to her. “Nothing, dear, I'm sorry. Something has come up and I must leave. Thank you very much,” he said, fishing a ten out of his wallet and placing it on the counter. As quickly as he could, he made his way around the chairs, and through the bodies beginning to fill the smoky pub for lunch time. Back on the street, he took large gulps of breath, and tried to clear his head. *What are you doing this for? Why couldn't you have just taken me last night? What, did you get bored up there, and thought that performing bizarre miracles on hapless widowers would be great fun?*

Nicholas shook his head and started to head home, which was now about eight blocks away. He stopped again to look at his reflection in a Japanese restaurant's windows. God, he was even younger now, mid-thirties at least. He picked up his pace,

and soon, feeling the healthy push of his body, Nicholas broke out in a dead run. It was completely exhilarating: the rush of the wind, the pumping of his blood through his veins, the fibers of his muscles strong and responsive. For the first time since Annabelle died, he felt truly alive. In only four minutes, he had nearly covered the eight blocks back to his home. As he approached the house, he found Duncan and Molly knocking at his door again. Duncan's knocking was getting a little frantic as Nicholas approached them from behind.

"Duncan, Molly, what are you two doing back?" asked Nicholas, only slightly winded from his sprint.

"To see if--" Duncan whirled around. "Oh, I'm sorry, can we help you? Mr. McCormick probably isn't going to be interested in anything you're selling."

"Duncan, open your eyes, boy. Remember, I looked sixty when you left, and now I look thirty. It's Granddad. Remember, the guy in the tweed suit?"

Both of them looked at Nicholas with utter confusion. Then Duncan, with an audible gasp stumbled towards Nicholas.

"Granddad? Holy mother of...what...you...how-" sputtered Duncan.

"Duncan, get a hold of yourself. I'm okay, I'm just getting what I asked for in reverse is all, Lord knows why," Nicholas said, as he led them into the house. "Sit down, boy, you're making me nervous." He approached the mirror above the couch again, sliding his hand along his jawline.

"Would you look at that," he whispered in awe.

His reflection now held the figure of a man in his mid-twenties. His body was fully toned and youthful. In fact, he was now physically younger than Duncan and Molly.

Nicholas began flexing his arm muscles, feeling the bulge of his bicep form underneath the jacket. Looking back into the mirror, he flashed a roguish smile. After all these years, he had forgotten how fit and handsome he used to be so long ago in Dublin. Indeed, more than fifty years ago. Now he remembered what had attracted Annabelle to him then, along with his beguiling charm, razor wit, and disarming smile, of course. The only thing that hadn't changed today were his eyes. They were still the color of slate, but they too seemed a little clearer, had more of a twinkle to them.

Duncan and Molly simply lay dumbfounded on the couch, sunk into the green cloth, too overwhelmed to speak. They just stared at Nicholas while he examined himself. But, even in the short time he had been looking in the mirror, he could see another transition. He now looked more like a man in his late teens to early twenties. The changes seemed to be speeding up as he got younger. *So that's it eh? Taking me all the way back to the beginning, and then poof! No more Nicholas! Can my soul survive my body ceasing to exist, or does it cease to exist too?!* "Well, answer me!" Nicholas shouted into the air.

Duncan and Molly startled, but remained silent, taking the whole bizarre scene in like helpless children.

"You must be getting bored up there, or did I do something to piss you off, you Old Fart?!" said Nicholas, his baritone pitch now strong and clear. "Great! You twist my brain with this born again body, and now, when I actually have the slightest feeling that I might want to explore this life all over again, *now*, now you're going to just speed up the process and erase me as quickly as you can." Even as Nicholas ranted, he could feel the changes taking further hold of him. His muscles were beginning to lose mass, and his voice started to crack a bit. The stubble he had begun to form that day, and which had

browned with his increasing youth, now was completely gone. His face shown smooth and clear as a baby's.

“Great, as if puberty wasn't enough the first time around, now I get to live all of it backwards. Ridiculous, now *I* might want to hang around, and *you're* determined to take me out in the whacko way only a deity with a depraved sense of humor could think up.”

Nicholas was now a third as tall as he was just moments ago. He was now a boy of eight, his chili bowl haircut falling into his eyes, and his gray tweed suit engulfing all of his body, save his head. Crossing his little arms together within the fold of the suit, he continued to talk out loud. His voice now rang with the tenor pitch of childhood, as he scowled his little brow in defiance and then resignation.

“Fine, if this is the way you take me, then take me. As long as I get to be with her again I don't care. Just do me that favor,” Nicholas's boyhood voice of five began to plead. “As long as I'm with my beautiful Annabelle with the crimson locks and eyes of jade, I'm content. So, have your fun, I hope I have entertained you.”

Nicholas talked a little further, up until his vocal chords failed him. Now about a year old, he lay swaddled in his old suit like a blanket tucked around his head.

Duncan and Molly wanted to pick him up, but the whole experience had turned their brains into goo. The baby before them continued to shrink a little, as it cooed and gummed its lips.

I'm still here, Old Man. I may not be able to speak, but my mind is still clear as a bell...ah, damn it! I just pissed myself! Great! I started to not be able to control some of my bodily functions at seventy-eight, and now I get to experience the joy of pissing myself all over again, huh? Couldn't even escape that could I? Oh, you must be having great

fun. Had to get one last joke in on old Nicholas McCormick, didn't you, Big Guy. Well, I haven't disappeared yet, what are you waiting for? Not much you can do...to...me now...um, what...was I saying? I...oh...hey, what is this place? Look at all the bookshelves, I want to touch them! What, what is this? Hey, I've got fingers! Yeah, look fingers! That's amazing! Bet I've got toes too. Boy, I sure am hungry. Who are those two people on the couch? Oh, wait! Those must be my parents. Hey, hey mom. Hey, dad. Yeah, come on guys I want some food. Why are they just looking at me? All right, you asked for it. This will get their attention.

As they looked, Duncan and Molly didn't see any change in the baby for several minutes. He seemed to have stopped reverting, but still they couldn't move. Then, strong and desperate, the baby form of Nicholas began to scream and wail. Molly, instinctually unable to bear the poor baby's crying, sprang up and took him in her arms.

"Shh, it's all right Nicholas, I'm here. I'm here for you. Duncan and I are never going to leave you, ever. Okay?" she said, looking towards Duncan.

Duncan popped up out of the chair, trying to get a hold of himself. Coming over to Molly and baby Nicholas, he smiled warmly.

"That's right, Granddad, you're safe with us," said Duncan, placing his hand on the top of Nicholas's head.

Eighteen years later

"Nicholas? Honey, you're going to be late for work. Nicholaaaaas? Get up, sweetie," Molly called from downstairs.

Nicholas McCormick rose lazily out of bed and stumbled around for his socks. At least it was Saturday, and he didn't have to worry about going to school today. Slowly getting dressed, he grabbed for his Walkman, and pocketed a couple of disks to listen to. He had the usual alternative and hypno-funk artists, but he also grabbed some Count Basie and Johnny Coletrain. His friends always rode him about listening to crap that was a hundred years old, but he had always felt connected and familiar with these oldies. But that was just par for the course. He had always been strange that way, feeling deja-vu twenty-four/seven and knowing much more than his age should allow. His mom and dad always gave him a knowing look when he'd talk about it, but they never said anything. Just told him he was exceptionally bright for his age. Oh, well, whatever.

Rushing downstairs, Nicholas hopped into his 2020 black Ford Annihilator, a sooped up rocket car his dad had bought him last month as an early graduation present.

Cutting down Bardstown road, Nicholas pulled into the parking space of Starbuck's/Universal café. He digi-carded his time card in the back and put his apron on. Saying hey to his friends Jack and Isabelle, who also worked there, Nicholas started to attend to customers.

"Nicholas," his supervisor Tom said, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Yeah, Tom?" Nicholas said, turning around.

"Nicholas, we have a new hire I need you to train today. This is Annabelle O'Leary, whom I've hired to replace Adam. Please, see she learns everything she needs to know, Adam leaves next week and I'll need her to complete the schedule," said Tom, who turned to go into the back office.

Nicholas stared at Annabelle for a few heart-stopping moments, and discovered that he wasn't breathing. She was amazing! Tall, with deep red hair down to her shoulders, which framed a porcelain face to make the angels jealous. Light green eyes the color of jade were deep set into her face, creating an effect almost too much for him to bear.

"Hi, my name's Annabelle, and you're...Nicholas, was it?" she said, reaching out her hand.

Nicholas took it, and was immediately immersed in the sweet smell of jasmine. It seemed to emanate from her like a beguiling toxin. As the smell swam over Nicholas, he had the most incredible feeling of déjà-vu he had ever experienced. His mind swirled in strange memories, which seemed worlds away yet totally real and immediate. A phrase flittered around his head, and fell out of his mouth before he could think about it.

"Ah, my beautiful Annabelle with the crimson hair and eyes of jade," he said, completely absorbed in this moment with her.

With that, Annabelle seemed to get light on her feet, and a dazzling smile overcame her.

"That's the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me. And yet," she paused, seemingly caught up in her own thoughts, "I feel like I've heard that before. Out of a dream maybe. Nicholas? Have you ever had déjà-vu?"

"It's been know to happen now and then," he said, flashing his most roguishly winning smile. Unconsciously, he took her hand in his, which she willingly gave, almost as if it were the most natural thing for her to do with a complete stranger.

“Annabelle O’Leary...sweet Annabelle O’Leary, my bonnie lass...have you ever felt as if you’ve known someone your entire life, even though you’ve never seen them before?”

“Almost as if you’ve always known them,” she said, her head swimming in the memories and moments like ethereal threads glimmering in her mind. “And will know them, know them till the very end of forever.”