

The First Thing I Saw When I Woke Was Chris

Emily Henning

The first thing I saw when I woke was Chris' face. It was always the first thing I saw, ever since that night all those years ago when we met in the hallway of his dorm and shared the stories of ourselves underneath the blankets on his bed. Laying there, his hands tucked back behind his head, he would talk about his studies and the scholarships he could not afford to lose. Every now and then he'd turn to look at me, the blacks of his eyes burning bright with an eagerness that warmed me as I laid there by his side. And when he mentioned his family, the ones from whom he came, and the home he did not miss, I'd recognized the slight prick of pain in his voice as my very own. In that moment, wrapped in the comfort of the covers and each other, I'd felt my loneliness leave in waves. We'd kept on after that, talking until the sun began to show itself through the cracks in the window blinds, deciding then and there to never again face the world apart.

Chris came to my apartment on the other side of campus in the days that followed, each time bringing bits of his life packed in a box or a bag, and when eventually he found everything he needed was there among my things it became our place, together. Each and every morning we'd wake entwined, my eyelids fluttering his boyish smile into focus, and the sight of him there next to me in the dark blue quiet of a brand new dawn would make me come alive. He asked me to marry him three months later and unable to imagine a morning that did not begin with his eyes looking back at my own, I'd answered with a tearful nod.

That first morning as husband and wife I saw his face anew, the boy I'd met not long before now the man who'd promised me himself. For better or for worse he'd said and in time his word proved true. Our contentment was peppered with cold shoulders and hurt feelings in those first months and years of being married, arguments both loud and silent. Still, we always found our way back to each other, meet-

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ing in the cool calm of early morning, our faces turned toward one another atop the softness of our pillows. It did not matter, the ebb and flow of life. Every day I'd wake to see him seeing me.

Time passed, we graduated, following jobs into the city, and then the babies came. One right after the other until our family grew to five. Chris' face shone brightest then, those mornings we were stirred from sleep by the sounds of tiny toddlers crawling into the space between us. Always, he'd draw them close, his grin spread wide over the tops of their heads, a smile meant just for me. I knew his joy then the same way I'd known his former pain; together we had made the family both of us had always longed to have.

And now a lifetime later, the kids grown and on their own, Chris' face is still the first thing I see. This morning I woke and there he was right next to me. Atop my bedside table, framed in gold and smiling back at me through glass. The weight of him, the warmth of him, no longer next to me under the blankets, not in all the years since his car left the road before he could take the exit home. But even so there is his face, the gaze that greets me at the start of every day, a reminder of the first and greatest love I've ever known.