

the stays (a children's story)

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there once was a bird woman named beth stay. beth sang in a band she called adoration, and when the kids made fun of them for only playing slow songs she would say, "they're not slow. just patient."

one night, adoration shared a bill with a band called the novellas, whose songs never lasted longer than a minute or two.

"why do they play so fast?" beth's drummer joked. "it's not a race."

"they're not fast," beth told her, "just urgent."

her drummer had more words for her, but beth was already long gone. she was transfixed by the novellas' singer, a bird woman named funeral.

"funeral?" beth asked when she finally mustered the courage to introduce herself.

"yeah. funeral."

beth was in love.

beth and funeral spent eight years together during which time they did not age, so that they would not lose any time if they decided later that they regretted one another.

at the beginning of the first year, beth carved "beth + fune" into a bathroom stall at sister cities high school.

"I hate it," said a voice behind her. beth turned to find funeral holding a screwdriver in one hand and a smoke detector in the other, a cigarette hanging from the edge of her beak. "it's funeral. not funey. not fune."

"i'll do our initials next time," beth replied flirtatiously, trying to save the moment.

"i don't have a last name. it's just funeral."

"like sting?"

"like cher."

the second year, beth and funeral graduated from sister cities, quit their bands, and enrolled at westerberg university in heartland. as they moved into their dorm room, beth asked funeral why she had called her band the novellas.

“it was an inside joke,” she said. “our songs were so short they felt like they were over before they ever started.”

the third year, on funeral’s birthday, beth mentioned that it was her birthday, too. they had been born the same day, across the hall from one another at sister cities hospital.

“don’t you ever get tired of turning eighteen?”

sometime during the fourth year, as they laid together on the floor of their apartment after a long day of repainting, beth turned to funeral and said, “i used to think you didn’t love me back. isn’t that silly?”

to which funeral replied, “parents always tell their kids who are in unrequited love, you know, ‘she’ll come around.’ even if it’s in a# or something.”

“did you write the book of love?” beth asked. “what key is it in?”

for their birthday the fifth year, beth bought them a session with a couple’s counselor named madelyn, a bald eagle she had seen once in an infomercial. madelyn had them reenact their worst fight, speaking as each other. beth did an uncanny impression of funeral, who laughed even though it hurt her. as they left, they agreed that it had been a waste of money. beth left a scathing yelp review and funeral took a shit on madelyn’s blue jalopy.

the sixth year, beth and funeral returned to madelyn’s office separately. beth stormed out at the mention of her twin sister miriam. funeral still goes every thursday afternoon.

the seventh year, madelyn told funeral how much her impression of beth had improved. the day she perfected it, beth stopped speaking with a sister cities accent.

on their eighth anniversary, beth packed her life into a u-haul and moved someplace new. funeral tried to rearrange beth's old things into the shape of her, but the plumage was all wrong.

beth often thought she saw funeral flying overhead during the ninth year's migration season. it was never her. funeral had stayed in heartland, just up the street from westerberg. she left her birthday party early that year, thinking that she had seen beth walk in. funeral would later joke with a friend that in the year they had been apart, beth looked like she had aged nearly ten. she and miriam hadn't been introduced.

during the tenth year (though beth and funeral had only aged two), they started a band called the stays. they would each swear that it wasn't their idea. beth performed under her full name and funeral, a lifelong spice girls fan, performed under the name funeral stay. it never occurred to them that they could have kept those names forever if it were legal for birds to marry.

the stays only ever played one show, during which they sang duets that revealed intimate details about one another: how funeral never cleaned her feathers out of the shower, how beth definitely used to have a sister cities accent, how funeral had facebook accounts for both of her dogs, how beth had left her library card behind when she moved and funeral had checked out thousands of books in her name. when one of them sang a line that was particularly biting, you could see it in the other's face. but no matter how much they hurt each other in the verses, they always sang the chorus in perfect harmony:

so before it gets too late
before you find another
let's sit by the ocean
and be each other

when the house lights came on, madelyn was nowhere to be found. she had told funeral that it was hard to find a sitter on short notice, but truthfully, she thought the whole thing sounded a little unhealthy.

“so what now?” asked funeral. “do you wanna get a coffee?”

“i’m sorry,” beth replied as she held out her hand, “but i no longer find you attractive.

beth and funeral stay shared a gentleman’s handshake and then drove as far as they could in opposite directions.