

HERE'S TO YOU AND THE STARS ABOVE

He looked harder than she remembered. The softness in his stomach and face were gone. His skin was golden, his hair shorter and lighter. Even his green eyes had changed. Before she asked him why he did it, she sighed and gave him one of her looks. He knew the look well because he had seen it every time he closed his eyes, her standing there inside his head, ready to talk, ready to remind him of all of the things he wanted to forget. He tried to remember a time when he was alone in his head, when it was his voice that narrated his thoughts, when he didn't have to explain everything to the imaginary version of her that haunted him like a blister on the roof of his mouth.

She looked stunning, vivid, reality seemed displaced around her. She was older, but age worked as a blessing, not a curse. She was still worth starting a war over, still worth risking everything for immortality if it meant forever waking to her face. If you say "I love you" to a face like hers, you knew instantly how weak the words were. Terms of endearment did not apply to her. She was the kind of woman who inspired new religions to prosper without the need of commandments.

Finally, she asked him where he'd been. He told her about Europe. How he walked through France,

through Germany, through Poland, and then I kept on walking. He found himself in countries he never knew existed until he found Russia. Like Texas, Russia never wanted to end.

When he found nowhere, he'd stay until it became somewhere, and then he'd keep going. Then there was the ocean and the islands, where he declined a thousand invitations to live with the sun for the rest of his life.

"What then?" she asked.

He pointed a finger to the sky.

He told her about the rocket, the way gravity does everything in its power never to let go, and when it finally does, you wonder why you ever needed it. He aimed that nose to the first star he saw and let the darkness swallow him. He enjoyed the view, but mostly he slept. He thought that maybe his memories would get pulled back with gravity and he'd finally be free, but instead he dreamed of the past. Maybe in all that darkness, all that silence, he'd finally find some peace. It might happen in his final moment before death, it might never happen at all. He wouldn't know until he got there. Just the thought of the possibility kept him moving. He said, "The thought of escaping the memory of you."

It was years, decades, he didn't know for sure. The star he chose grew bigger, until finally it was inescapably blue.

"And I was back *here*," he said, his voice breaking with the final word. He wondered if the

universe was like a hall of mirrors, distorting, elongating, shrinking, twisting, until you were right back where you started. He felt the muscles in his body contracting, the bones threatening to shatter, his eyes aching, his head throbbing. She reached out and touched his cheek gently. He flinched as if she had slapped him. He stepped back and closed his eyes. He rocked his head to the left and his neck snapped. He turned his head upward and opened his eyes slowly as if looking into a bright light.

She told him about the time machine. How she went back in time starting with the day before they met and fell in love with him again. When it was evening, she went back to the day before that, falling in love over and over again, one day older for her, one day younger for him. As she explained, new memories overwhelmed him. The echoing of a thousand perfect loves with the same woman made his heart beat faster. All the pain and tension in his body dissipated.

The stars looked down at him. He had seen infinity, the way it spreads out in all directions, backwards and forwards, and then deep down inside you. Back on the rocket a lifetime ago, he suited up and went out drifting. Space was cold and smelled of burnt toast. At one point, he held out the things he had to forgive to the universe and the universe responded with silence. He should have known, bringing a grain of salt to a desert and expecting water.

He turned to her, their noses now inches apart. This close, he knew it was already over. He looked into

those blue eyes and saw oceans and universes. He had been here before. There was no point in fighting it any longer.

He kissed her then, a kiss as inevitable as autumn and as hard as winter. He pulled her body into his and pressed his lips against hers like a near-drown victim fighting for air. He could feel the gravity of their past and the weight of the universe around them. His eyes were open at first, staring into her eyes, and when he closed them, he took the blue with him. Their lips moved, their teeth crashed, and their tongues came together like hurricanes. This was the kind of kiss that could wake the dead, the kind that could create whole new worlds, the kind heard around the world. Time and space stopped like it did and would every moment they touched. They were the beginning and ending of every love story ever told.

A crowd of people walked by, some were annoyed they had to walk around the oblivious couple, some bothered by the display of affection.

You were one of them, just trying to get home after a long evening out, knowing tomorrow was another day of repetition, and wondering what the deal was with those two drunks kissing.

“Here’s to You and the Stars Above” was originally published in [COVER STORIES](#), a euphictional anthology of short stories inspired by songs.

