

PROMPT #1: Write about a god desperately trying to get their chosen hero to follow the path they set out for them.

I Never Wake Up Anymore

by **Hadley Blankenship**

I had no idea I was sick before I met Asher, or that my disease only spared me a couple of years for me to spend time with my husband. We'd gotten married in the fall as he requested, because he told me he wanted the leaves to be bright yellow and warm, just like the color of my eyes. And to him I said I wanted to be wed in fall because the autumn sunsets reminded me of the light I once saw inside of him: the light to my fortress through the gate to his beautiful mind. Our wedding was beautiful, unlike any other. He was mine, and I was his. Two beautiful people bonded purely by our existence. Forever.

That was how it was supposed to be. I was supposed to come home to Asher after a long day at work, and lay with him on the couch and watch shitty movies. I was supposed to hold him close to me, and kiss him on the cheek, and lay on his lap while looking up into his beautiful, beady eyes. I was supposed to do dishes with him, and bitch about my co-workers to him. I was supposed to raise a beautiful, young child to be as kind as their father. I was supposed to cry happy tears, and only happy tears. Yet, I was diagnosed the day right after my wedding.

It was a good call, really. I had saved a majority of my love for after our marriage, because in my head I always thought my body should be a payoff. Yet, finding out that I had no chance to love Asher led to my indescribable heartbreak. I questioned every kiss I stole, and every time we held hands. I questioned if I had done something to deserve the illness I'd gotten, or even worse if I'd given it to Asher. I questioned if maybe I should leave Asher, and let him be with a man who could give him the world in a way that I never could. And suddenly my existence and dreams seemed so small.

Suddenly, watching movies with Asher felt too time-consuming. Every day we spent having fun or dancing, I was left a shell of a man I once was, knowing that there were so many things we had to do, and we couldn't do a single one of them. Asher was right in front of me, longing to be uncovered, and I couldn't uncover him. I couldn't offer him the touch of my skin, or kiss him, or give him the love he needed. I left him with nothing – only a future dead husband and a childless home. Yet, things worsened as time continued.

As soon as my family found out I would die soon, their lives revolved around me and Asher's sins. It was all about how we had blasphemed the lord: how my illness was a punishment from God. It was all about how disappointed my mother was – how she raised a better son, and how if I had only married my girl best friend from high school, then maybe I could've been healthy.

I could've held her while she cried, and stroked her hair with my hands. I could've cuddled with her when I was lonely and kissed her goodnight. I could've patted her back when she was sick. I could've danced with her under the cold, starry sky. I could've been happy if only I fell in love with a girl. But she didn't know my love for my beautiful Asher, and how I'd done all of those things with him, and how each night I wanted to hold him tighter and longer for fear I might slip away.

Despite everything, my mother didn't know that I loved him. Sometimes, she'd have fits where she'd say Asher brainwashed me into believing he was a gorgeous temptress. Those were fits where I'd have to put her in her place or kick her out of our home. Unfortunately, despite my words, her hatred for Asher continued to grow. She'd always yap at him and tell him he's disrespecting his catholic heritage, and that he shouldn't have taken me away from the good things I had in life. I told her to shut up as many times as I could, but each time, she'd try to hurt Asher. I never understood why.

I don't quite remember why this happened, or who convinced me that Asher was okay. Maybe it was my mind being unable to focus. Maybe it was this slight idea in the back of my mind that Asher longed for my body as much as I longed for his and neither of us could have them, but for a long time, we stopped sitting and cuddling him on the couch at night.

We stopped kissing before bed. Even when I would go to hold Asher's hand, he'd pull away and ignore me. I stopped cuddling him while we slept, and for a while I stopped holding him as tightly as I used to. Maybe in that time, we were both afraid of my illness: afraid the other wouldn't make it through death. But I recall on one of those nights while we shared a bed, Asher turned to me and asked if we would make it to Heaven.

I would've told him yes, but I don't know if gay men make it to Heaven.

I bet Asher suffered on those nights. I bet his heart ripped to shreds when I lay there in our bed, reminding him that his originally perfect world was invaded by a dying man. Somewhat, I feared he'd realize one day how good his old life was, and leave me to pursue the past. I feared the fact he had a future that he knew I couldn't be a part of. He was an architect. He liked building lego sets with me. He liked hiking and writing stories about people he'd see at parks. He liked watching the moon and making jokes about things nobody would ever consider funny. He liked singing and playing guitar, and drawing horses, and when he smiled it felt as though the room lit up. On a surface level he seemed like a person of such joy, but I was the only man who knew him in his sorrow. And I knew my illness brought him sorrow, for his future wouldn't be mine to share.

Maybe that's why he changed so quickly.

One day, I woke up and saw Asher laying next to me. He seemed disfigured, with curvier hips than I remembered him having. His once broad and pretty shoulders had become petite and boney as if they held up mountains. His once-short, blonde hair had turned to ribbon, flowing down his back like a waterfall as if it'd never been cut. The silky hair on his arms were reduced to peach fuzz, and when I sat up in bed and saw his body, I realized he wasn't my Asher. My husband had taken the body of a woman.

I walked to the end of my bed and stared at my husband's new body. He had no shirt on, but his chest showed no signs of incisions or alterations, as if his body had always been that of a female's. I desired to wake him, but decided against my judgment to let him sleep while I figured things out. But before I could leave the room, he arose, and it finally hit me that Asher was not in the same body I'd wanted to touch and hold. He was different. He wasn't my husband. Yet, his eyes looked like the sunlight of Fall: full of brightness and warmth. It just wasn't my Asher.

When he awoke, Asher stood himself up from our bed and smiled, asking me how I slept. I said nothing. I wasn't sure what to say. He wasn't my husband. I watched as he walked toward me, his body bare except for the boxers he slept in. Suddenly, I could feel him lean onto my shoulder, and wrap his hand around mine. I pulled away and I'm not sure why. I knew it was Asher, but it wasn't the Asher I knew. This was a stranger in a stranger's body. Yet, I kept telling myself it was my husband.

So, for a while, I watched Asher be a woman. I watched him wear dresses and use makeup. I watched him put tights on over his hairless legs, and braid his hair in the same way he used to braid mine. I watched him don lingerie, and boots that went up to his thighs. I watched him cry for me every night, asking why I didn't want to touch him. I watched him watch movies on an empty couch while I cooked our dinners alone. I watched him cuddle in his own blanket, swaddled in his own body heat and not mine. And as time went on, he became

less like my Asher. The only time he felt like my Asher was when we were in bed and he'd reach out to hold my hand. Though, that night I hesitated to take it. Heck, I could hardly stand being in bed with him. He wasn't my love, and he would never be. And slowly, I started hating him. I hated seeing him on our couch each night. I hated how he never closed the toilet seat when he was done peeing. I hated how he left his hair on the walls of our shower. I hated how he pretended like nothing about him changed, and that he'd always been like this – that my husband was always a girl: that he was always perfect.

But one day, my mother came to visit. The entire ordeal caught me by surprise, and I hadn't prepared for her arrival. But while Asher was at work, I was stuck talking to them all about Asher's career, and how he was so good at his job, and how he loved me more than I could've ever needed. Yet my mother was adamant about destroying that thought, saying that if I repented now and left my home with her then all of this illness would go away. I could finally be happy. I could make it to heaven. Though, I told my mother Heaven seemed stupider the more she acted like I couldn't get in. That statement really pissed her off. As she readied herself to lecture me, Asher entered the room.

He was wearing a slim suit, alongside a silk blouse and a necklace I'd gifted him on our first anniversary. Though, he wasn't Asher. It was the girl named Asher who pretended to be my lover, and pretended to care that my mother was here. When my mother saw him, she smiled a brighter smile than I'd ever seen her smile before. She hugged Asher for the first time in her life, and told me she was delighted that I finally gave up my sinful ways. I said nothing, only watching as my mom and Asher interacted. For the rest of the night, I had to watch the two of them sit and talk together, telling all of these embarrassing stories about me. But every time they laughed, Asher would look at me. But deep down, I think it broke both of our hearts how my mom behaved that night. Asher deserved her love from the moment he met my mom. However, it was wishful thinking.

That night, my mom left my house smiling, seeming to have forgotten my disease or anger. When she left, I sat myself on our couch and threw my head into my hands. I needed a break. I needed to be alone. Then suddenly, Asher sat next to me. A part of me longed to look at him, and see his true body again, but I knew this was impossible. Still, I looked at his face. A smile as wide as his eyes formed in his lips. I could see his eyes light up with ecstasy as he became filled with life, but it was not the fall-colored warmth I remembered from our wedding. No. This light was blue and cold, as if imitating sparkles of life. Yet, he scooted next to me and lay on my shoulder, saying we could finally be happy together. Just the two of us.

But it wasn't the two of us. It was me and a woman I'd never met. It wasn't my Asher. But I sat there and let her hold my arm, because I believe I somewhat missed Asher, and this was the closest thing I would get to having him. This wasn't the life I wanted to die for, or the husband I wanted to hold in my arms. This was pure terror.

However, this time of me being away from my husband made me think of him. I never quite forgot how he proposed to me. He'd written a song about how beautiful I was, and how he wished to be mine so that we could cuddle and kiss for eternity. He wanted us to watch our worlds die alongside one another. He wanted to die holding my hand while sitting in rocking chairs on our front porch. But with him becoming a girl, it was as if I had lost Asher somewhere in the midst of my existence, like he faded into a dream instead of my reality. Yet, even when he was a man, he acted as if he was my burden.

Five nights after our wedding, when he was a man, we were laying together. He lay with his head on my legs, staring at the ceiling in total darkness. At this time, he'd learned of my disease. In the darkness, he turned to face me, and asked me why we hadn't done anything yet: why our bodies were never bare. I told him I didn't want him to die. Though, the answer I gave seemed so subliminal, as if it were missing half of it. Asher crawled to me and rubbed my head, then said he knows that, but he wanted to be happy with me for at least one night.

I watched him lean in to kiss me, but I told him no. I wanted him alive. Yet, he didn't care. He stood up, and said that he knows the real reason I never slept with him: because I never cared about him, and maybe if he was some pretty girl like my best friend, maybe we would've had a life together. A life with a kid. A life in a beautiful mansion. If he was a woman, we could've had everything. But he wasn't a woman. He was a man, and I was okay with him being mine.

Maybe he didn't get it, but I always loved him. Always. That was the point of our wedding. Our souls were bound for eternity. Yet, he became a woman to please me, and to please my mother. And for months, all I thought of was how this body wasn't him, and how each day my satisfaction grew more diluted. This is what I told him a couple of nights after my mother's visit.

I just wanted my Asher back.

I watched as his feminine body sank in front of me. He fell to the floor, curled into a ball and cried tiny tears. I sat there unsure of what to say. For so long, it felt as though the Asher in my life had dissolved: forever engulfed by the inner-imaginings of my mind. But in that moment of his weakness, I saw him crumble at my feet. And in that moment I couldn't forgive myself for the way I'd treated Asher. Despite his body, he was my husband, and I told him I loved him.

I crouched in front of him and stroked his hair. And for the first time in a while, I told him how I felt. I told him I was scared. I was scared to ruin him, and I didn't touch him for so long because I thought I couldn't. I thought maybe his life would be so much better without me in it, that maybe we wouldn't go to Hell. I thought he was meant to live forever without me and fall in love with another man. But this was not true.

He told me what he thought. He said he thought I was upset about what my mother said, and that he thought if he was a girl that maybe we could be fixed, and that I'd finally hold him again like I used to, but it wasn't true. I'd avoided him this entire time.

For that, I apologized. I just wanted my Asher back.

And to him, he wanted his husband back.

I looked into his tearful eyes. I could see his body become his again – the same, hairy, dented body I loved to feel. He stood up and turned to me, coated in beautiful features. I could feel his arms as he held me tight. Just like me he knew what he had to lose, and he knew he couldn't lose it. And somehow, I realized that all we had was each other. And maybe that was all we needed. Just me and Asher in our home, waiting for our world to crumble, but enjoying what was left of it. And I wrapped my arms around him, and held him because it was as if I'd been holding my breath for so long, and have only recently learned to exhale.

That night, we didn't care how sick I was, or how little time we had left together. That entire night, we held one another and danced in darkness. We laughed and we cried. We kissed a million times. And for the first time in a while, I saw the light inside of Asher brighten. That night, we returned to our wedding, surrounded by different colors and sounds, but most importantly one another. That was all I noticed at our wedding: Asher's beautiful face. It was never the leaves or the people who came to support. It was always him. My Asher. And he meant everything. I loved him.

But when I woke up the next morning, I was gone. Maybe my disease had gotten to me, or I'd been so lost in my mind that I forgot to wake up. The last thing I saw, however, was Asher sleeping next to me, his hand gripping mine. If only I was strong enough to last longer: to kiss him after he woke up. But it was true that maybe we were no longer bonded by our existence, but the idea that we were nothing without each other. And it scared me to see his body fade from my view. Yet, the warmth beckoning to me from the clouds was enough to ease my pain, and I wanted nothing more than to reach down to Asher, and tell him that I've made it through, and that he'd be alright.