

Sisyphus.

His crime: disobedience and trickery against the gods.

His punishment: an eternity in Tartarus, toiling day after day, pushing a huge boulder up a mountain. Once he reaches the top, he is finished with his task. However, he never reaches the top or his freedom. The boulder always rolls down to the bottom, far away from freedom, and it continues day after day.

To almost get what you want, only to see it go, day after day, is torture.

That is Sisyphus' punishment, as well as my own.

Let it begin once again.

My eyes opened. I looked up and saw darkness all around. The only sound in the room was my own breathing, deep and heavy.

I came to this room again. I remembered seeing it before and also that I hated it.

I sat up, and realized that I was on a simple bed, made up only of a thin mattress and a wire frame. Despite the darkness, I could see this, because it contrasted greatly, like white crayon on black paper. I could also see a door, about ten yards away, creating another juxtaposition. The door scared me, and I didn't want to go through it to the other side. For some reason, though, I felt compelled to stand, walk right to it, and open it. Then I went through, into more darkness and an ever-growing sense of fear.

It was darker than the first room, but I could make out a faint outline of a man sitting in an extravagantly large throne. It was like there was a light behind him, creating a halo around his body and seat but keeping his face in the dark. There was also a large, white hourglass seeming to float in front of him, but it was completely still, as if there was an invisible table holding it up. All of the white sand was at the bottom, time having run out.

Once again, my breathing was the only sound in the room, but I couldn't control it. I was frightened of this place and the man in front of me. But there was a feeling of loathing toward him as well.

I could feel him smiling in amusement. "Hello, Michael," he said, in a smooth, deep voice, sounding like a hospitable host. I froze when he said my name, and I couldn't say anything back.

He chuckled. "You're the same as usual, as I expected. I suppose I'll have to go into a monologue. Welcome back, Michael." He paused, and then continued. "I must say, I enjoyed this one the most. Perhaps I should pick romantic situations for you more often. It was amusing seeing your actions, thoughts, and pain. I never knew you could feel so deeply about someone that way. Your perspective may be changing. Then again, probably not. I can't imagine a man like you to have a heart." He laughed coldly.

My hatred for him deepened, but I couldn't do anything. I was powerless.

His laughter stopped abruptly, and he continued speaking, this time in a softer, gentler voice. "It's unfortunate, though, isn't it, that time has to run out? That time even exists? After all, without time, you might have been able to save her. Save them all." From out of the darkness came an impossibly white hand. It reached out to the hourglass and took hold of it, bringing it farther away from me, until they both disappeared into the darkness. "Of course, without time, your punishment wouldn't be sufficient. You wouldn't be learning anything."

I wanted to ask him "How long?" How long would this go on? I didn't, though, because I knew he wouldn't answer anyway, and it would just annoy him, which meant more pain for me. Also, I already knew the answer.

Forever. Eternity. However it was said, it meant the same. There would never be an end to this.

The hand appeared again from out of the darkness, holding the hourglass. He set it down on its side. The sand was evenly spread out in both ends.

"I imagine that you'll want a little break, like you always do, so time has stopped. It will begin again soon. You're welcome." The tone of his voice had changed, becoming short and crude.

My breathing, which had still been deep and heavy, paused for a second when he told me "You're welcome". Was I supposed to be thankful? Maybe I was, but I didn't feel like it. However, I knew being bitter wouldn't help, so I tried not to show it.

Unfortunately, I underestimated his skill of observation, because he noticed the short pause.

"Are you ungrateful, Michael? Do you resent me, Michael? Do you hate what you do,

Michael? Do you hate me for having you do this, Michael?" Now he sounded slightly offended and annoyed. My heart beat faster, anticipating what he would do in his anger.

Luckily, nothing came out of it yet. He lowered his voice near to a whisper. "I don't want to remind you again, Michael. You brought this on yourself. If you had been good in life, you would never have had to come here. You would never have met me. You would never have had to experience what I can do. You would never have had to compare your cruelty to my own." Then he lowered his voice to the quietest of whispers, and made it seem almost kind and gentle. "All of this is your fault, Michael. Your death, your misery, everybody else's death...you caused it. It's all your fault."

I hated him. I didn't want to listen to anything he said. I didn't want him to get into my head. He was right, though. It was all my fault. I brought this misfortune on myself and on everybody else. It was my fault.

He sighed in what seemed to be boredom. "As much as I enjoy your pain and company, Michael, there are other punishments I must attend to. So leave now."

My body seemed to move of its own accord as I turned around, walked back to the door, and entered the room I woke up in. The bed was still in there, so I walked to it and sat down.

I knew that this "break" wasn't for my benefit; it was for his. He wanted to give me time to wallow in my pain, so that he could watch it and enjoy. I didn't want to give him what he wanted, but I couldn't stop it.

This was the time I hated the most, because I always tried to forget whatever I did, but this "break" just gave me time to remember the punishment. I remembered the last moments always, where I was so close to them. A few more strides and I would have reached them. But even though I was so close, I was never close enough. I was always too far from saving them when I could have done it so easily.

However, the real pain didn't come from that. There was a tremendous amount of guilt because I couldn't stop something that was preventable. They trusted me and cared about me, and I cared about them. And I couldn't save them.

But that wasn't the worst pain.

I remembered being at a crowded intersection. I remembered seeing them on the other

side of the road, and how their face lit up when they saw me. I remembered waving to them to hurry and come, and so they did. I also remembered the roar of the engine and the light from the headlights getting brighter. I also remembered the horror I felt as I watched the car hit them.

The only thing I couldn't remember, though, the most important thing, was who that person was.

I couldn't remember what they did for a living or what their hobbies were. I couldn't remember the color of their hair or their eyes, or what their face looked like. I couldn't remember if they were tall or short, young or old, male or female. I couldn't even remember their name.

Out of frustration I grabbed my head, pulling at my hair. It didn't help anything, because I still couldn't remember. No matter how hard I tried, not even a faint flicker of their image crossed my mind. Nothing at all came to me about them. With my frustration mounted to a new high, I screamed.

Just then, I heard a dark, ghostly chuckle, and I froze immediately. I looked up and around me, but as I expected, there was no one else that I could see in the room. It had to be him, using whatever he had to see into my room and watch my every action and laugh at it like it was a comedy show. After all, my pain was just for his entertainment, so what else could I expect him to do?

I answered my own rhetorical question with nothing, except to cause me more.

I did desperately want to keep him from getting what he wanted, but I couldn't find a way from escaping this agony. I tried to forget the fact that I couldn't remember, but that didn't work, and thinking that just added more guilt to my already heavy conscience. That wasn't the worst guilt, though, and neither was the guilt from indirectly causing their death and not being able to save them. The worst was being unable to remember them.

When people died, or when anything died, there was always a depressing air about, because obviously whatever died wasn't around anymore and would never come back. But usually, when something died, there was something else or someone else to remember them. They would never really be gone, because they would live on in people's memories. It

sounded corny, but it was true. Nobody would really and truly die as long as there was somebody to know that they existed.

The really sad deaths, the real and true deaths, only occurred when people in isolation who had nobody died. When there was nobody who knew who they were, when nobody came to their funeral, or when there was no one to put on a funeral for them, they would be gone forever from this world.

And since they were gone from my mind completely, they were dead in my mind. There probably were people left who remembered them, so they weren't completely gone, but in my mind, they were. I couldn't remember anything I did with them. There were no memories left over of them at all. It was like they never existed before, like they had never been in my life.

They were supposed to have been, though. I knew that. We were supposed to have been close, close enough to trust each other and care about each other. We were supposed to have known each other for a while. We were supposed to have had a bond that couldn't be broken.

But it was broken, and so easily. There were so many things that were supposed to have happened, but they didn't.

I killed them two times over. I was the worst person to ever live.

Technically, though, I currently wasn't alive, but if I was, then I'd be the worst person to ever live. Right now, I was the worst person to ever exist.

Again, I heard the ghostly chuckle, and knew that he particularly enjoyed it when I came to that sad fact. I wanted to be rebellious and keep him from getting what he wanted, but I couldn't lie to myself. Besides, even if I did, he'd know I was lying, and he would just laugh harder.

I just wanted to stop thinking. I wanted to be blank, numb, neutral, and emotionless. Anything to stop this guilt, regret, and pain.

I buried my face in my hands, pressing my fingers hard against my face. Since I couldn't control my thoughts, I'd try and control my breathing, which was still deep and heavy. It probably wouldn't help much, but at least it would calm me down somewhat, and it wouldn't sound as haunting as it did now, being the only sound in this lonely room. Pure silence was

probably creepy, too, but it was better than hearing my own fear.

Of course, to calm my breathing, I would have to calm myself down emotionally, which was impossible. So, I would be stuck here for however long he planned on keeping me here, reliving memories that I wanted to forget and forgetting the person I wanted to remember, all while I listened to my own breathing.

He was cruel for making this happen to me, but he was only supposed to do it to people who deserved it. And I deserved it.

And this would never, ever end.

For a long time, I sat there, on my bed, head in my hands, my mind doing everything I didn't want it to do. Then, suddenly, the compelling feeling to go to the door came over me again, so I stood up, walked to the door, and went back into the pitch-black room. He still sat there, the light outlining his form. The hourglass was still in front of him, on its side.

Even though I couldn't see his face, I knew he was smiling, still amused by my pain. "Hello again, Michael. Enjoy your break?"

I didn't reply, but unfortunately my heavy breathing paused for a second, and apparently he took that as an answer. He laughed.

"I must say, I enjoyed it. But unfortunately, it cannot continue, as time cannot be stopped forever." His white hand reached out to the hourglass, and like before they both disappeared into the darkness. "This time it's less romantic and less personal, but you're in a position of much responsibility; it will be interesting to see how you deal with it."

The rate of my breathing increased as my fear intensified. Soon, my punishment would begin again.

A sudden wave of panic and desperation came over me as I made that revelation, so sudden that I lost control of myself. I fell down to my knees, the palms of my hands on the ground. I looked up at his form pleadingly. "Please, sir, please. I've learned my lesson. I've had enough punishment. I now know what pain is, and guilt, and love. I've learned it. But please, I can't take anymore..."

There was a slight pause, and a little hope grew in me. Maybe he was actually considering it.

“You don’t want to do this anymore, Michael?” he asked in a slightly surprised tone.

I paused, and then nodded slowly. I looked up at him, and my heart fell.

Although the lack of light prevented me from seeing him, I could tell that he was smiling. Smiling was supposed to be a good thing, but when he did it, it never led to anything good.

“Well, I’m sorry, Michael,” he said, very softly. “But that’s the guideline for your punishment. It must continue forever. Your crime was equal to that of Sisyphus’, so your punishment must be equal to his. And so it repeats, on and on. And it starts now, once again.” His hand appeared again out of the darkness, holding the hourglass sideways. Once it was on the table, with the sand on the top half, it would start again.

My panic intensified. “Please!” I screamed, tears running down my face. “Stop! Please! I’m begging you!”

He laughed. “I’m sorry, Michael. No matter how much you beg, that won’t take away your punishment.” His hand, which was slowly coming out, stopped.

“Stop,” I whispered. By now, I knew he wasn’t going to listen to me, but my continued to come out of its own accord.

It was in vain, though, as expected. He turned the hourglass upside down and set it down gently. Then, suddenly, his form and the hourglass were engulfed in darkness. Everything was in darkness, including myself, and I couldn’t even hear my own breathing anymore. It was as if I had disappeared completely. The only thing that did exist in this nothingness was the sound of his laughter, cold and cruel.