

Waiting For No Man

Mr Dufour looked at the line of people; several days worth easily, perhaps even weeks. They snaked between the weighty columns of the room and bent out of the door. He couldn't see the end of the queue outside, but he knew it was forever growing.

When he first started taking requests from his visitors, his heart said yes to almost every appeal. Dying parents that needed more time, lost children that required longer to be found, even the young at heart that weren't ready to grow old. But with every yes he gave, a hundred more of the same would journey to his door, and with every granted wish, his creation would be forced into overdrive.

When he discovered the bottling of time he made a promise that he would never take it for himself. But hundreds of thousands of requests later and he was weak and he felt old. The skin on his hands was thinning, his spine was beginning to curve, and his once coarse black hair was now an unkempt tuft of grey clinging to a line between his ears at the back of his head.

Initially he thought he had changed the world for the better. Over time he came to realise that he had just made it more arduous. The further he prolonged life the longer everyone needed to live, the more time he gave those who were failing, the more they needed to succeed. The days he granted to the dying meant the diseases became more aggressive, the hours he presented the needy made them less able to survive next time. It was this very morning that he noticed more of his hair scattered across his pillow, and he knew a dark cloud was lurking in the distance.

From his usual seat, Mr Dufour welcomed a frail old lady stood at the front of today's line. She clung to a walking stick with her left hand, and her husband clutched the rest of her body from collapse. A clear tube was taped to her upper lip, and between them they wheeled a tank that made a noise every few seconds as she inhaled. She edged towards Mr Dufour a centimetre at a time, taking a moment to steady herself with every movement. She wanted just a few more weeks to spend with her beloved. Some precious days to hold his hand as they watched their favourite film, some evenings to view the sunset from their special place, a few hours to hear him read to her at night. Their faces were paved with the maps of a life well lived: laughter lines, frown folds, traces of memories happy and sad. Mr Dufour recognised these only in others, for his face was just filled with the deep trenches left by the weight of the world. The couple gazed at him expectantly, waiting for his decision, but certain it would be what they were hoping for.

"No." Mr. Dufour's voice cut through the hollows of the room. Hurried whispers hacked at the fading reverberated refusal, whilst endless sets of confused eyes tore through his skull in a bid to see what was going on inside.

Weeks of rejections later and only the desperate continued to come to his door. But still Mr. Dufour had to say no. Patients were wheeled in on beds, hopelessly

clinging to their last hours, scientists came clutching details of impending discoveries, future leaders arrived with all the problems they didn't have time to solve. But what he was waiting for never came.

Months later and Mr. Dufour would only hear the footsteps of an impending appeal every few days. He started to grow tired, his back began to ache, his lungs were beginning to resist, and time became tedious in this chamber that was only filled with the sounds of his struggling breath between the silence.

His stores of time began to fill the space that was once overflowing with people. The golden cylinders spiralled towards the ceiling until he switched off his invention and sat frail in a room filled with potential, yet no one to help it realise its possibilities. With a life devoted to this, he had no where to go, no one to see, and nothing to do besides being a servant to those who wanted the extra hours he could create.

Mr Dufour's eyes grew heavier each day, and his heart soon followed. He started to doubt the existence of a request that was worthy, started to believe there was no reason for this mountain of time. Until he heard the comforting sound of footsteps moving along the corridor towards his chamber. When their owner came into view he recognised her face. Through his clouded eyes he could make out her familiar gaze, it was so sad when he first saw it years ago, but today it was happy, today it was filled with promise.

The woman knelt down beside Mr. Dufour and put her hands on his knee. "I know you don't usually grant a request to someone more than once, but I think you've been waiting?"

She turned around and surveyed the room, taking in the towers of glistening canisters, each one a precious gift but with no one there to accept it. Mr Dufour wheezed as he tried to gain the strength to talk. "I know you. You were the first."

"And I shall be the last" she replied. She stood up, and picked up the nearest cylinder and held it between her hands. It hypnotised her just as it did many years ago, the clear glass filled with spiralling tendrils of time, almost whispering from within. "This has been waiting for one soul. One so precious that it's the only one in the world that will ever be worthy of such a gift." She knelt down again and placed the canister into his lap. She took his hands and folded them around it. "For you." she whispered.

Mr. Dufour knew this is what he had been waiting for. He took in his blurred view of the room; it must have been filled with years. Years he had spent listening, creating and sacrificing; years he had never even left this building.

The woman bent down to pick up something she had placed on the ground before kneeling at his chair. She struggled to lift the long wooden handle weighed down by the thick metal club placed at the end. He understood when her eyes met his after looking towards his creation. Holding it high in the air above the sacred machine she looked scared. "May I?" she asked.

The corners of his mouth twitched, it felt like the first genuine smile he'd made for as long as he could remember. He nodded softly "It's time."