

HEARTBEAT



It was a Condition

A condition where one day, the heart just stops. Yet the person continues to live. If one could consider such a thing as living. The affected individual would continue to go through life, day and night, without feeling. It's still the same person as before, but they're different now. They don't act the same as they used to. Don't laugh the same as they once did. Don't cry the same as before. Many no longer cry at all.

Celeste couldn't remember the last time her heart beat. But she could remember the last time she was told it did.

Celeste was the kind of person that gave her everything for others, and never expected anything in return. When anyone needed help or guidance, they always came to her. When they did, she would never turn them away. She felt honored that others trusted her enough to confide in her. And she wanted to be there for them in any way she could. But at times, even she needed someone to pour into her as much as she poured into others, and that person for her was Nate.

She had been dating Nate for nearly three years, he was her everything. It was his charisma and charm that drew her to him her freshman year. Then once she actually got a chance to talk to him, his humor sealed the deal.

From early on, Nate talked about their future together. Getting married after they graduated, moving to the city. He'd get a corporate job while she wrote poetry. Everything he said sounded like a dream come true.

When he'd make decisions without her, when he'd berate her friends because he didn't like them, when he'd force himself upon her, he'd always remind her of their future. Tell her that everything he did was for them, for their dream. Throughout it all, she clung to that dream.

"We need to break up,"

Nate's words rang in her ears like a gong. Reverberating through her whole body.

"I've been thinking about this for a while," he continued. "And I just don't think it's working out."

Celeste's mouth felt dry, her throat sore.

"W-why?" she asked.

"There's a lot of reasons. We keep trying to make things work and they never do. It's an endless cycle. But most of all..."

He took a deep breath, his eyes never leaving hers. ***"I don't want to marry you anymore."***

Those seven words hit her harder than any other had ever before. For the past three years, Nate had told her constantly that she was who he wanted to marry. That he couldn't wait until they were out of college and they could start their life together. Only a few months earlier he said he was planning to propose during their last semester.

"It's not you, it's me. And I still want to be friends. You're an amazing girl, I just don't think we're right for each other." Celeste could no longer hear the words he spoke over the ringing in her ears.

The next few minutes came and went in a blur. He continued to speak, she said words herself that she couldn't remember, they hugged one last time and went their separate ways.

A friend of hers named Belle found her outside, staring off into nothing. She asked what was wrong and Celeste told her what had happened. Belle pulled her into an empathetic embrace. Celeste's arms hung limply at her sides.

"Oh, honey..." Belle said, her voice full of pity. "Your heart's beating so fast."

The next morning, and all the mornings thereafter, Celeste woke up in a daze. She went to class, did homework, went to work, did more homework, then went to bed. And the next morning the cycle would start over. In the midst of it all, she found herself going through all five stages of grief about twice a day but always composed herself in the presence of others.

After a while, this cycle became the new normal for her, and she saw no problem with it. It was easier this way, to focus on academics and only academics. Get in and get out, and make her own future, with no one else involved. Some of her friends didn't see this new routine of hers quite as normal and healthy as she did, and the two closest to her, Brooklyn and Will, were determined to put a stop to it.

It wasn't easy, Celeste was so set in her ways they had to wait outside her classroom until she came out from it sometimes. Finally, they convinced her to let them work on assignments alongside her, and after several weeks the two were able to get her to do things other than eating, sleeping, and working. She began to seem like herself again, more open, and expressive. At last, things were getting better. Then one day, Brooklyn gave Celeste a hug. **"That's so odd," Brooklyn said, "I can't hear your heartbeat."**

Will tried, he pulled her in close and pressed his ear against her chest. There was nothing.

"Guess I'm just heartless," Celeste said sarcastically. It became a running joke between the three. One they all knew was untrue. Celeste had one of the biggest hearts of them all. Yet no matter how tightly Brooklyn or Will would embrace her, neither could ever hear the rhythmic beating of her heart.

As the months progressed, Celeste became ill, and her symptoms worsened as time went on. She was eventually diagnosed with chronic inflammation in the liver. The doctors said they needed to examine her more closely in order to figure out the cause of the problem and proceed accordingly. Brooklyn and Will were nearly paralyzed with fear for their friend, but Celeste herself couldn't seem to be bothered.

"It is what it is," she said to them.

She went into surgery a week later. She laid on the operating table, staring blankly at the ceiling above her as doctors and nurses prepared her for sedation.

"Everything's going to be okay," one nurse said to her. "There's nothing to be afraid of." Celeste wasn't afraid, not at all. And as the world around her faded to black she felt nothing.

Just like always.

The surgery was a success. The doctors figured out what was wrong and put her on some medication to fix it. After a couple of days recuperating at home, Celeste returned to school and everything once again went back to her normal. But this time, it was she that wasn't happy with this form of normal.

Later that week, she sat alone in a library study room, lost in thought. It wasn't until going under sedation that she realized how hollow she had become.

The door to the study room opened, and Will walked in.

"Mind if I join you?"

Celeste motioned to the seat next to her, and Will made his way over and sat down. She expected him to pull out some homework to work on, but he didn't. Instead, he rested his head on his fist and looked over at her. "What's on your mind?"

"Just homework," she said.

"Celeste, I know you better than that." He said, "Is it that new upcoming actor? Your 'fake future husband' as you call him?"

This brought a hearty laugh up to Celeste's lips. When was the last time she had laughed?

"No, no. It's just..." Celeste sighed and hugged her arms tightly.

"***I miss the old me***, before Nate, before all this pain." Her gaze lowered to the table "But things are hard to fix once they're broken."

"You are not broken," Will said.

"You've been hurt, but you're healing. And healing takes time." He put his hand on her shoulder. "No matter how long it takes, Brooklyn and I, we're going to be there by your side every step of the way."

Celeste looked at him and with tears in her eyes, she stood up and pulled him into an embrace.

"Thank you, Will."

As Will's ear pressed against her chest during the embrace, his eyes widened and a smile erupted across his face.

*"Celeste...
I can hear your heartbeat."*

