

## A Toast to Lasts

This is a toast to 'Lasts'. From heaven to earth, cradle to grave, there is a last time for everything. Even a giant star, something seemingly perpetual, can cease to exist, exploding into the universe within moments of its fuel running out. So, we take time to pause before each chapter is lost forever. As for then, all that is left is a glimmer of stardust memory that serves as a reminder of the experiences, places and time gone by.

A toast to the last seed, the last embryo. In a world where battle scars lay siege on an oven of life, a final seed is planted, a seed of hope. A struggle occurs, a race for successful contact and complete domination by millions of eager swimmers keen to meet the prize. From afar, a woman cheers them on, crossing her fingers with faith and waiting patiently for news of successful fertilisation. Then, unseen, a brave and battered racer discovers the seed lying innocently amongst the debris and shrapnel. Victory!

Here's to the last remanence of youth. Upon returning home, a woman with tussled, unkept hair and unironed clothes marches into the kitchen, grabbing forgotten Ben-Ten and Peppa-Pig-printed lunchboxes before heading back towards the front door, nearly tripping over loose Lego scattered on the floor. For a moment, she pauses and gazes at herself in the mirror hanging above the mantelpiece, noticing fine lines she has not remembered being there before. Sighing, the woman's frown fades into a smile as she picks up a framed family photograph and gently chuckles at the child's drawing displayed adjacent, depicting a house with a pig's tail of smoke arising from a misshapen chimney and mummy and daddy stick figures standing proudly to one side. She knows that whilst her youth may be gone, she would trade nothing for the family she has now.

A celebration of the last cigarette. On his ritual morning walk, the stoic stature of a husband takes a seat on a park bench where fingers touch his lips. He inhales a long, strained breath, allowing smoke to pour into his lungs steadily. Like every morning, the man closes his eyes, longing for a moment of bliss and immediate relaxation. But today is different. Rather than nostalgic, cloudy memories of puffing trains or marshmallows roasting by open campfires, his trance is grey and consumed by a thick layer of smog. The man's head is bombarded by beeping machinery and the sickening smell of human demise under layers of artificial antiseptic and bleach. His mind immediately races to his wife and the baby on the way. Sudden stabs of guilt. Thoughts of children never knowing their father. Who he truly is lost behind a puff of smoke. Awakened from his daze, the man abruptly stands and, without hesitation, trudges to the nearest dustbin, where he drops his brand-new package of cigarettes.

A toast to the last day from a distant past. A crowded cluster of figures cautiously cascades onto a rickety boat under the black of the night. A silent chill hangs in the air as parents hurriedly herd anxious children onto the swaying vessel, which cries an agonising groan of pain with every crashing wave. Pain and loss. The groan of lost fathers and sons. Lost homes, friends, grandparents, mothers, and daughters haunt the crowd with their dead shadows. As the metal door clicks shut, the crowd, huddled together like rats on the warped floor, wait anxiously for one blinding flashlight, one piercing whistle. That's all it would take. And then, like cattle, they would be rounded up by men in green, starry uniforms with the backs of their deadly rifles. Yet somehow, the group departs into the unknown, the moon illuminating their path as if to guide them to hope and freedom.

Finally, a toast to the last breath. A man stoops over the bathroom sink, his weight resting unstably on his forearms. He glances at his reflection, the dishevelled way his body hangs and how his clothes seem to fall off him like a child playing dress-up in their father's wardrobe. How had he gotten to this point? When did the cancer begin consuming him, leaving him unrecognisable, a skeleton of who he once was? Nearly on the verge of collapsing into a heap on the cold tiles, a phone bursts frantically into life, the word "Mum" flashing desperately onto the screen. After a few seconds of ignorance, the man finally faces reality, and tears welling, he answers the call. "I am ready," he uses the last of his might to whisper, "and I love you." And with that, an accumulated burden of pain evaporates from his frame as a heavenly force embraces him and brings him out of his suffering to eternal rest.

As the minute hand completes its destined journey and peeling chimes echo down the corridors, the present moment is over and, with a final 'ting', disappears forever. But not all is lost. The last child completes the family. Youth's unblemished appearance and carefree demeanour give way to lines of responsibility and nurturing. The last addiction opens the way for a realisation and future bigger than the sum of oneself. As one place is lost, so another is found, and finally, after the last breath, there is no more suffering, maybe even another journey ahead. Because with every 'Last', a bounty of opportunities arises, and a path is paved for a new First. The colossal explosion of a star becomes the supernova whose stardust infiltrates and creates the elements of our world from the external environment to the internal substances of our bodies.

Let's embrace the growth that comes with saying goodbye. I invite you to join me as we raise our glasses and give a hearty toast to all Lasts. Because with every Ending comes a new Beginning. And so, the cycle continues.