

# *Last I Heard You Say*

Finlay Wright

*Droplets* by Daniel Cheung



“Diane! It’s about ten-thirty A.M., February 23rd. I’ve just woken up. Right now, I can see from my window...trees. Lotta trees. Don’t think there’s any more than yesterday.”

A jingling laugh, the kind she always had when something was endlessly amusing to her, though no one else would probably find it funny. And that just made it funnier to her.

“Wouldn’t that be something, though? Imagine waking up and looking outside, and there’s just...like those things from, uh...oh, God, what are they called? From *Lord of the Rings*. You know what I’m talking about, the, uh...Ents! Those things! One of those just sitting outside your window. Can you imagine? That’d be a hell of a ‘good morning’. Probably send you into cardiac arrest.”

A long sigh.

“Sorry, Diane, I don’t know what I’m talking about. I just woke up, man. I’m delirious. You know, I had the wildest dream last night...”

Click. Diane’s knuckles went white around the old tape recorder before she forced herself to put it back in the box. She never liked that part, anyway.

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“Diiii-aaaaane. Dee-yahn. Lady Di. Oh, that one wasn’t so good.”

Diane couldn’t help her smile at the crackly pffft noise that followed. That was her favourite bit of the whole thing. The one sound she never got tired of.

“It’s four twenty-nine P.M., May 6th, and, uh...I’ll be honest, I can’t remember why I

picked this up just now. I swear I had something to say. Part of me wants to just let it record the silence while I try to remember, but I don't want to waste any of the thingy...ugh. Damn."

Diane pressed the tape recorder against her cheek.

"Mm. Yeah, I think it's gone. I'll just hop back on here if it comes back to me. Mwah!"

A brief silence followed that scratchy kiss. Diane cradled the tape recorder in both hands and held it to her ear, letting her eyes drift closed. Only a few more seconds now...and there it was: the softest clearing of the throat she'd ever heard, just before the tape clicked off. Diane took a deep breath. Her eyes stung, even in the dark.

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"Diane, it's just hit two fifty-seven A.M., August 18th—oh, no, 19th I guess, technically. And I'm going a bit stir crazy, if I'm honest."

A dry huff of a laugh. Diane's stomach clenched.

"Could be worse, at least I didn't wake up feeling like my throat had been dried out like a fish. Although, when I do wake up randomly, I usually think 'oh, at least I got some sleep'. Grass is always greener, I guess."

A quiet hum. Diane clung to that sound. It was more like her than the rest, more familiar. Diane could pretend she was still there in that sound.

"Anyway, I picked this up because I'm not sure what else to do with myself. Wish you could talk back to me. I'd tell you to just drone on about...optimization theory, or whatever it is

you do. I legitimately have no idea what your job is, all I know is it'd probably help me fall back asleep."

Diane huffed a weak laugh that harmonized with the one that faded through the tape recorder.

"All jokes. Mostly. I find you very interesting, you know that. Okay, I'm actually going to try to sleep now. I can feel myself getting more awake, and that's not good for anyone, as you well know. G'night, I hope."

Click. Diane felt hollow. What she wouldn't give for her to never sleep again.

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"Hi, Diane. I don't know if you'll get to hear this one, but I thought I might as well make it just in case."

Even now, Diane still wasn't sure whether she was thankful for that.

"Um...it's apparently twelve forty-five P.M., even though it really doesn't feel like it. December 2nd, I think. They've only been giving me yogurt so far, for some reason. At least I'm not Nil by Mouth anymore."

Diane had to bite down on her lip, hard, to squash the cry bubbling in her throat at the wheezy laugh from the tape recorder.

"I'm glad they let me keep this so I can sort of talk to you, but I still hope they'll let me have visitors soon. It's pretty bleak here. There's a tiny window right across from me, but I can't see much. I think it's just the parking lot, anyway. Sometimes I can hear dogs barking, so there might be a park or something nearby? I dunno."

If Diane listened closely, she could hear the electric humming of fluorescents beneath the tape's soft default whirring. Diane didn't usually listen closely.

"Hoping this is all wrapped up and over with sooner rather than later. I'd be bouncing off the walls if I was allowed to get out of bed."

A long silence. Diane could feel the beat of each second, like twenty-one stones filling the hourglass of her rib cage. Her heart knew the rhythm too well by this point.

"Miss you. Love you. All the things. I don't want to switch off, but I'll kick myself if there's nothing left after this. Bye, Diane. And...I'm sorry."

Click.

Diane laid the tape recorder back in its box and slotted its lid into place. She tucked the box into her bag and drew out a bundle of pine needles from the hidden inside pocket. With the gentlest of movements, Diane tugged at the snippet of twine around the bundle's middle—just a loose touch, to allow the needles to splay slightly outwards. She let herself smile as they bounced into a flowering formation.

The wildflowers nestled in the little dip atop the headstone were bone-dry; they crumbled at Diane's touch. She swept them off carefully, watching the dusty particles waft away in the brumal breeze. With the divot cleared, Diane arranged the pine bouquet in the old flowers' place. A few pebbles here and there at the base to keep it steady against the wind, and it was done. Diane shuffled forward on her knees to press her mouth to the headstone, biting cold as it was.

"Alfie, it's twelve fifty-two P.M., December 2nd," Diane murmured against the stone, her breath warm and damp. "And, just in case you forgot from last year...it's okay."

*Abandoned* by Daniel Cheung

