

Dorothy

by Saige Harlowe

The television in the window of the electronics store emitted a soft glow. The face of the young woman on the screen moved as if she were speaking but, for the people passing by, there was no voice attached to the moving picture. Most of them no doubt knew what her voice sounded like; hell, some of them were probably listening to her through their headphones, singing soft tunes about love and how beautiful it is to be known.

Nora had given up on true love the day Dorothy had left her, and she hadn't considered believing in it again since. When Dorothy had made her big break and started singing, Nora had found it ironic that she sang about love and being known when she had only gotten there by breaking up love and leaving the person that knew her best. Maybe that observation made Nora bitter, but at least it didn't make her a hypocrite.

The bus pulled up, blocking the electronics store from view, and a rush of warmth swallowed Nora as she stepped inside. She paid her fare, sinking into a seat toward the back of the bus with her bags beside her. She fished out her headphones and plugged them into her phone before hitting shuffle.

And of course, Dorothy's voice was the one to come rushing into her ears.

Nora pulled her headphones out of her ears, shoving them and her phone back into her bag. She didn't know why she had ever downloaded any of Dorothy's songs in the first place. Curiosity, maybe? But at this point, it felt like they were just there to hurt her. Maybe they were just there to hurt her because anything that reminded her of Dorothy tended to hurt. Why would her songs be any different?

As the bus wove its way through the city the rain from the morning picked up again, water splashing from beneath the tyres of the bus. Nora tried to focus on nothing but the rain as she stared out the window, but emptying her

mind proved a difficult task. Even without her sensitive hearing the bus was loud; a baby down the front was crying, two old ladies were chatting across from her, and the group of teenagers behind her yelled at one another. She contemplated pulling her headphones back out of her bag but recoiled at the wave that rushed through her chest at even the chance of hearing Dorothy's voice again.

Dorothy stayed on Nora's mind as she got off the bus and walked half a block to her apartment building. Dorothy stayed on Nora's mind as she climbed the four flights of stairs to get up to her apartment. Dorothy stayed on Nora's mind as she fished her keys out of her jacket pocket while water dripped down the back of her neck. If she had still been human, she would have shivered at the sensation, but it was nothing more than an uncomfortable feeling.

Though she had only listened to it for mere seconds, Dorothy's singing would not leave her mind. She was unable to drag her thoughts away from the very first years that she and Dorothy had been together, all the way back in the 1920s. Back when no choice had been necessary, when they could be together while Dorothy chased her dream of singing. Back before constant camera flashes and the desire to be in front of them had made her feel as if she had to choose between Nora and putting her songs out into the world. Those songs had just been for Nora once. Now, Dorothy sang them to the whole world.

* * *

Dorothy's hands were feather-light in Nora's hair, brushing the strands back from her head in slow, repetitive movements. Nora had had her eyes shut as she lie in her lover's lap, but she opened them now, looking up at Dorothy. Noticing her, Dorothy smiled, her cheeks flushing pink when Nora winked.

"I thought you were sleeping." Dorothy moved her hand to Nora's cheek, brushing away a lock of hair that had come to rest there.

"While you're singing?" Nora smiled. "Not a chance."

Dorothy's cheeks turned from pink to burning red. Nora reached up with one hand to push a curl of Dorothy's blonde hair behind her ear. She kept her hand raised, placing it gently on the side of Dorothy's neck. Dorothy

reached for Nora's hand with the one she didn't have tangled in her hair and, lifting it off her neck, kissed it just above the knuckles.

* * *

That decade was the happiest Nora had ever been, but it was tainted now with the realisation that, for Dorothy, it had been less significant. Because if it had really mattered, she wouldn't have left Nora behind to chase a life in front of the flashing cameras, would she? Back then, the eyes of the world had only been on Dorothy when she had been performing. The rest of the time, she had been Nora's and no-one else's and, though Dorothy had grown to dislike this, these private moments had been Nora's favourites.

Did that make Nora selfish? She didn't think so but, as she packed away her shopping, the thought hovered in her mind like a fly around rotten food. She didn't think that wanting to be loved by someone—and wanting that person to be there to love her in return—made her selfish. But Dorothy must have, mustn't she? Wouldn't she have been here otherwise?

Throwing her coat over her arm, Nora picked up the empty bags off the counter and stowed them in the cupboard. She left the kitchen, the only noises the humming of electricity and the click of her boots on the thin carpet. Passing the living room, she glanced in through the doorway, eyes glossing over the turned-off television set and the couch across from it, empty aside from the cushions she had collected over the years.

Except the couch wasn't empty. She froze mid-step, turning her body toward the living room.

At first she thought she was dreaming, or perhaps hallucinating, because there was no way that Dorothy would really be in her apartment. But had her thoughts been getting to her that much? Had she really been thinking about Dorothy to the point that her mind would trick her into thinking she was here? Nora blinked. When she opened her eyes, Dorothy was still there.

She really was here. Obviously she had broken in because Nora hadn't let her inside. Nora should have been angry at that, but her temper didn't rise and no anger flushed through her body. Which was probably good, because feeling angry meant feeling hungry and she didn't want to have to go through the process of trying to appease her appetite when she had the bigger issue of her famous ex-girlfriend sitting, uninvited, on her couch.

Why was her famous ex-girlfriend sitting, uninvited, on her couch?

“Nora.” Dorothy spoke first, in that soft tone that almost made Nora melt on the spot, even now. She had missed that voice more than she would ever admit, either out loud or to herself.

Nora straightened her back and cleared her throat. “Dorothy. What are you doing here?” She crossed her arms and immediately regretted it as the water from her coat soaked her sleeve, the cotton clinging to her skin. She scrunched up her nose.

“I missed you,” Dorothy replied and then, after a brief pause, added “should I not have come?”

“No, it’s fine. Though you should knock next time.” Nora uncrossed her arms, but the damp feeling did not subside.

“Would you like there to be a next time, then?” Dorothy’s red lips lifted into a smile. Nora had to avert her eyes to stop herself from involuntarily smiling back.

“I need to change.” Without waiting for a response, Nora hurried down the hall, stepped into her bedroom and pushed the door closed with a thud.

She sighed, a second thud ringing out as she fell against the wall. She let the coat drop to the floor, the water collected on it soaking into the carpet. If she had been alone in her apartment, she would have cursed out loud. Though if she had been alone in her apartment, she probably wouldn’t have wanted to curse in the first place.

Why is Dorothy here? For a moment, she worried that Dorothy had somehow read her mind, that she had known Nora had been thinking about her and showed up for that very reason. That thought was quickly dismissed as irrational. Nora thinking about Dorothy the same day she showed up was a mere coincidence. But why, then, was Dorothy here?

Nora sighed again. Pushing herself off the wall, she pulled off her shirt, letting it drop to the floor. Opening her wardrobe, she stared at her clothes—*what are you supposed to wear when your ex from decades ago shows up in your apartment unannounced*—before deciding on a blue sweater. She pulled it off the hanger and over her head, stepping in front of the mirror.

She didn’t just look like she had walked through the rain. She looked like she had almost drowned in it. She groaned, covering her face with her hands. Stepping away from the mirror, she grabbed a scrunchie off her bedside table and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. Looking in the mirror again, her

eyes were drawn to her jeans, covered in splashes of water. After kicking off her boots, she changed into a pair of shorts. Finding no more water on her clothes in her third self-inspection, she pushed out a breath and dug her toes into the carpet before leaving her room. Her footsteps were silent as she made her way up the hall. Stopping at the entrance to the living room, she looked inside to find it empty.

“Herbal tea is still your favourite, isn’t it?” Dorothy’s voice chimed. Nora padded further up the hall, stopping when she reached the kitchen. She leaned against the doorframe with one shoulder, crossing her arms. Dorothy was facing away from her, one hand on the pantry door as the other sifted through the blood bags stacked inside. Sure, blood bags weren’t as fresh as getting it straight from the source when you needed it, but they were far less likely to draw attention. Plus, Nora had a friend that gave her a discount if she brought in bulk.

“Uh—yeah, it is,” she choked out, those words the only ones she could manage. Dorothy was in her kitchen, navigating it as if it were hers too, and that was something that she had thought would never happen again. Dorothy pulled out a bag with ‘herbal tea’ scrawled across the front.

Nora wanted to speak, to ask the questions that had been milling about in her mind since she had stepped into her bedroom. But now that she was here, with Dorothy standing right in front of her, she was finding it difficult to get any words out at all, let alone ones that felt so heavy. So, for a while, she permitted herself to say nothing at all.

But the blood had soon been put into two mugs (an emulation of real tea that almost made her smile) and she knew she had to speak now or she might never speak again, and that certainly wasn’t an option. She crossed the kitchen and picked up the mug Dorothy had left for her, cradling it in her hands as she sank onto one of the stools.

She cleared her throat. “What are you doing here?”

Dorothy’s shoulders drooped and she put her mug down, leaning against the counter with both hands. “You don’t want me here, do you?” Dorothy lifted one hand and ran it through her blonde hair, ruining her perfect hairstyle. “Of course you don’t. I walked out on you. Why the hell did I think you’d want to see me again?”

“It isn’t that.” The words came out of Nora’s mouth before she had realised she was considering saying them. “I just don’t know why you’re here. It has been thirty years after all.”

Dorothy nodded, but her posture stayed the same. “I’ve been thinking a lot lately about me and my life, which led to thinking about you and us.” She walked around the side of the counter, sitting on the stool beside Nora. “I decided that...I don’t want to be known because of who I am, or the people that I know. I don’t want to be known for my voice, or my songs, or the things I sell in advertisements on TV. I—” She looked down at her hands. “I want to be known for me. For who I am, the things I love and the things I just can’t stand. And the only person that knows me like that is you, Nora.”

Nora’s hands began to shake and she put down her mug, the ceramic clattering against the bench. She was starting to think Dorothy really *had* read her mind, or at the very least her diary, because she had been thinking the same things on and off for years. Minus the being famous and recognised by everyone she met, of course.

But could she do this again? Could she be happy with Dorothy? Did she even *want* to do this, to try and be happy with Dorothy again? No, those weren’t the questions she needed to ask herself; she had known for years that she wanted back what she had had with Dorothy. She had gone through the waves of denying and accepting it over and over again until the act of doing it was more routine than anything else.

But was wanting it enough for it to work?

“Dorothy—”

“I know what you’re going to say, Nora. I grasped the weight of the words I was about to say to you the second you walked in the door. I know you don’t know if you can trust me after the way I left last time. I know it’s my fault you’re not sure if you can trust me, and I know that makes me look like the most selfish and ignorant person in the world for coming back like this.” Dorothy pushed out a laugh that sounded more like a breath than an exclamation of amusement. “You can tell me to fuck off if you want to. I’ll understand.”

“I don’t want to tell you to fuck off, Dorothy, I—” Nora sighed. “I don’t know what I want to say. I don’t know when I’ll know either.” She felt a pang of guilt saying those words, but they were true. She didn’t know when she would be ready to try again or even if she would be ready at all.

“Of course. I don’t expect you to know straight away. You might never know, and that’s okay too. I just...I think I should go.” Dorothy stood up.

“No!” Nora stood up too. Dorothy turned to look at her, eyes wide and eyebrows high. “You don’t have to go. I mean, you haven’t even finished your drink.”

“It’s okay,” Dorothy replied, “it was quite presumptuous of me to pour myself a drink at all. I’ll just get my coat and go. I’m sorry for barging in like this.” Dorothy gave a weak smile before turning and moving toward the hall.

“I don’t want you to go,” Nora said. Dorothy stopped in the kitchen doorway, turning to look at her. “I want you to stay and drink tea with me.”

Dorothy’s lips lifted into a faint smile. “Are you sure?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t.”

Dorothy’s smile widened. “Okay then, I’ll stay.”

Nora sat down at the counter again, wearing a smile of her own as she picked up her mug. Dorothy sat down beside her.

“This is a nice place,” Dorothy said between sips of her drink, which stained her lips a new shade of red, “when did you move here?”

“Almost six years ago.” Nora shifted on her stool, facing Dorothy. “Normally I’d be looking to move by now, but the landlord seems to be happy someone’s renting the place without making her tear up all the carpet, so I don’t think she’s noticed anything unusual. Even if she had, I don’t think she’d say anything.”

“Still,” Dorothy cautioned, “be careful. You know what happens when a vampire stays in the same place for too long.”

“Says the one on every television screen around the country.” Nora nudged Dorothy with an elbow. “And probably a lot more outside the country too.”

“If you know I’m on screens everywhere, then you also know I’m much better at faking aging than you.” Dorothy smirked and Nora faux-gasped, elbowing her again. “But I think I’m going to give that up soon.”

Nora’s smile dropped, eyebrows furrowing low. “So what, you’re just giving up on your dream? This is what you wanted more than anything, Dor.”

Trust me, she had to bite her tongue to stop herself from adding, I would know.

“I know. And it is what I wanted, and I’m glad I got it. But did you seriously forget my whole speech about wanting to be known?” Dorothy raised an eyebrow, which made Nora laugh. “It’s been nice while I’ve had it, sure, but I’ve discovered there are things in life more important than being on every screen in the country.”

“Oh really?” Nora sipped her drink. “And what might those things be?”

Dorothy laughed. “You weren’t listening to anything I said, were you?”

“Oh no, I was,” Nora replied, “I just want to hear you say it again. Hearing you admit you made a couple of mistakes is a big moment for me.”

When Dorothy laughed again, Nora joined her. “Being known and loved by one person,” Dorothy said once their laughter had died down, “that’s what’s more important than being known by the whole world.”

Nora smiled, lifting her mug to rest against her chin. Dorothy smiled back at her, before turning away as she put her mug down. Nora was still looking at her when she lifted her head again. Realising she had been staring, Nora cleared her throat. Looking down at Dorothy’s mug, she found it empty, nothing left but the red stain of blood around the rim.

“Would you like another drink?” Nora asked, using the counter to pull herself to her feet.

“Oh no, that’s okay. I should probably leave you be anyway. I’ve intruded long enough.” Dorothy got to her feet.

“If you want to go, that’s fine, but I’d like you to stay.” Nora placed her hands on the counter, fingers lacing themselves together as she watched Dorothy.

She had seen Dorothy on television enough times to know what she looked like when she felt confident—whether it was in an interview, an advertisement, or a music video put on at 2AM when the rest of the world was sleeping. That wasn’t how she looked now. Sure, maybe it was because there were no bright lights, no stage make-up, and no fancy dresses. Maybe it had been too long since they had seen one another face to face and Nora had no idea what she was talking about. But she swore, just to herself, that Dorothy looked nervous.

“Are you sure?” Dorothy asked. “You said you needed time, and I don’t want to—”

