

PAMELA SARGENT

If Ever I Should Leave You



WHEN YURI walked away from the Time Station for the last time, his face was pale marble, his body only bones barely held together by skin and the weak muscles he had left. I hurried to him and grasped his arm, oblivious to the people who passed us in the street. He resisted my touch at first, embarrassed in front of the others; then he gave in and leaned against me as we began to walk home.

I knew that he was too weak to go to the Time Station again. His body, resting against mine, seemed almost weightless. I guided him through the park toward our home. Halfway there, he tugged at my arm and we rested against one of the crystalline trees surrounding the small lake in the center of the park.

Yuri had aged rapidly in the last six months, transformed from a young man into an aged creature hardly able to walk by himself. I had expected it. One cannot hold off old age indefinitely, even now. But I could not accept it. I knew that his death could be no more than days away.

You can't leave me now, not after all this time, I wanted to scream. Instead, I helped him sit on the ground next to the tree, then sat at his side.

His blue eyes, once clear and bright, now watery with age and surrounded by tiny lines, watched me. He reached inside his shirt and fumbled for something. I had always teased Yuri about his shirts: sooner or later he would tear them along

the shoulder seams while flexing the muscles of his broad back and sturdy arms. Now the shirt, like his skin, hung on his bones in wrinkles and folds. At last he pulled out a piece of paper and pressed it into my hand with trembling fingers.

“Take care of this,” he whispered to me. “Copy it down in several places so you won’t lose it. All the coordinates are there, all the places and times I went to these past months. When you’re lonely, when you need me, go to the Time Station and I’ll be waiting on the other side.” He was trying to comfort me. Because of his concern, he had gone to the Time Station every day for the past six months and had traveled to various points in the past. I could travel to any of those points and be with him at those times. It suddenly struck me as a mad idea, an insane and desperate thing.

“What happens to me?” I asked, clutching the paper. “What am I like when I see you? You’ve already seen me at all those times. What do I do, what happens to me?”

“I can’t tell you, you know that. You have to decide for yourself. Anything I say might affect what you do.”

I looked away from him and toward the lake. Two golden swans glided by, the water barely rippling in their wake. Their shapes blurred and I realized I was crying silently. Yuri’s blue-veined hand rested on my shoulder.

“Don’t cry. Please. You make it harder for me.”

At last the tears stopped. I reached over and stroked his hair, once thick and blond, now thin and white. Only a year before we had come to this same tree, our bodies shiny with lake water after a moonlight swim, and made love in the darkness. We were as young as everyone else, confident that we would live forever, forgetting that our bodies could not be rejuvenated indefinitely.

"I'm not really leaving you," Yuri said. His arms held me firmly and for a moment I thought his strength had returned. "I'll be at the other side of the Time Station, any time you need me. Think of it that way."

"All right," I said, trying to smile. "All right." I nestled against him, my head on his chest, listening to his once-strong heart as it thumped against my ear.

Yuri died that night, only a few hours after we returned home.

The relationships among our friends had been an elaborate web, always changing, couples breaking up and recombining in a new pattern. We were all eternally young and time seemed to stretch ahead of us with no end. Throughout all of this, Yuri and I stayed together, the strands of our love becoming stronger instead of more tenuous. I was a shy, frightened girl when I met Yuri and was attracted in part by his boldness; he had appeared at my door one day, introduced himself and told me a friend of his had made him promise he would meet me. I could not have looked very appealing with my slouched, bony body, the thick black hair that would not stay out of my face, my long legs marked with bruises by my clumsiness. But Yuri had loved me almost on sight and I discovered, in time, that his boldness was the protective covering of a serious and intense young man.

Our lives became intertwined so tightly that, after a while, they were one life. It was inconceivable that anything could separate us, even though our relationship may have lacked the excitement of others' lives. With almost three centuries to live at the full height of our physical and mental powers, and the freedom to live several different kinds of lives, changing

our professions and pursuits every twenty or thirty years, we know how rarely anyone chooses to stay with the same person throughout. Yet Yuri and I had, even through our changes, fallen in love with each other over and over again. We were lucky, I thought.

We were fools, I told myself when Yuri was gone. I had half a life after his death. I was a ghost myself, wandering from friend to friend seeking consolation, then isolating myself in my house for days, unwilling to see anyone.

But Yuri had not really left me. I had only to walk down to the Time Station, give them the coordinates he had given me, and I would be with him again, at least for a little while. Yet during those first days alone I could not bring myself to go there. He's gone, I told myself angrily; you must learn to live without him. And then I would whisper, *Why? You have no life alone, you are an empty shell. Go to him.*

I began to wander past the Time Station, testing my resolve. I would walk almost to the door, within sight of the technicians, then retreat, racing home, my hands shaking. *Yuri.*

I would make the time and trouble he took useless. He had wanted to be with me when I needed him, but he had also wanted to see my future self, what I would become after his death. The Time Station could not penetrate the future, that unformed mass of possibilities. I would be denying Yuri the chance to see it through my eyes, and the chance to see what became of me.

At last I walked to the Time Station and through its glassy door into the empty hall. Time Portals surrounded me on all sides, silvery cubicles into which people would step, then

disappear. A technician approached me, silently offering assistance. I motioned her away and went over to one of the unoccupied cubicles. I fumbled for the piece of paper in my pocket, then pulled it out and stared at the first set of coordinates. I stepped inside the cubicle, reciting the coordinates aloud—time, place, duration of my stay.

Suddenly I felt as though my body were being thrown through space, that my limbs were being torn from my torso. The walls around me had vanished. The feeling lasted only an instant. I was now standing next to a small, clear pool of water shadowed by palm trees.

I turned from the pool. In front of me stretched a desolate waste, a rocky desert bleached almost white by the sun. I retreated farther into the shade of the oasis, and knelt by the pool.

“Yuri,” I whispered as I dipped my hand into the coolness of the water. A pebble suddenly danced across the silvery surface before me, and the ripples it made mingled with those my hand had created.

I looked around. Yuri stood only a few feet away. He had barely begun to age. His face was still young, his skin drawn tightly across high cheekbones, and his hair was only lightly speckled with silver.

“Yuri,” I whispered again, and then I was running to him.

After we swam, we sat next to each other by the small pool with our feet in the water. I was intoxicated, my mind whirling from one thing to another with nothing needing to be said. Yuri smiled at me and skipped pebbles across the pool. Some of my thoughts seemed to skip with them, while another part

of me whispered, He's alive, he's here with me, and he'll be with me at a hundred other places in a hundred other times.

Yuri started to whistle a simple tune, one that I had heard for as long as I knew him. I pursed my lips and tried to whistle along but failed, as I always had.

"You'll never learn to whistle now," he said. "You've had two and a half centuries to learn and you still haven't figured it out."

"I will," I replied. "I've done everything else I ever wanted to do and I can't believe that a simple thing like whistling is going to defeat me."

"You'll never learn."

"I will."

"You won't."

I raised my feet, then lowered them forcefully, splashing us both. Yuri let out a yell, and I scrambled to my feet, stumbled and tried to run. He grabbed me by the arm.

"You *still* won't learn how," he said again, laughing.

I looked into his eyes, level with my own.

I pursed my lips again, and Yuri disappeared. My time was up and I was being thrown and torn at again. I was in the cubicle once more. I left the Time Station and walked home alone.

I became a spendthrift, visiting the Time Station several times a week, seeing Yuri as often as I wanted. We met on the steps of a deserted Mayan pyramid and argued about the mathematical theories of his friend Alney, while jungle birds shrieked around us. I packed a few of his favorite foods and wines and found him in Hawaii, still awaiting the arrival of its first inhabitants. We sat together on a high rocky cliff in

Africa, while far below us apelike creatures with primitive weapons hunted for food.

I became busy again, and began work with a group who was designing dwelling places inside the huge trees that surrounded the city. The biologists who had created the trees hundreds of years before had left the trunks hollow. I would hurry to the Time Station with my sketches of various designs, anxious to ask Yuri for advice or suggestions.

Yet during this time I had to watch Yuri grow old again. Each time I saw him he was a little older, a little weaker. I began to realize that I was watching him die all over again, and our visits took on a tone of panic and desperation. He grew more cautious in his choice of times and sites, and I was soon meeting him on deserted island beaches or inside empty summer homes in the twentieth century. Our talks with each other grew more muted, as I was afraid of arguing too vigorously with him and thus wasting the little time we had left. Yuri noticed this and understood what it meant.

"Maybe I was wrong," he said to me after I showed him the final plans for the tree dwellings. I had been overly animated, trying to be cheerful, ignoring the signs of age that reminded me of his death. I couldn't fool him. "I wanted to make it easier for you to live without me, but I might have made things worse. If I hadn't planned these visits, maybe you would have recovered by now, maybe—"

"Don't," I whispered. We were sitting near a sunny stretch of beach in southern France, hiding ourselves behind a large rock from the family picnicking below us. "Don't worry about me, please."

"You've got to face it. I can't make too many more of these journeys. I'm growing weaker."

I tried to say something but my vocal cords were locked, frozen inside my throat. The voices of the family on the beach were piercing. I wondered, idly, how many of them would die in their coming world war.

Yuri held my hand, opened his lips to say something else, then vanished. I clutched at the empty air in desperation. “No!” I screamed. “Not yet! Come back!”

I found myself, once again, at the Time Station.

I had been a spendthrift. Now I became a miser, going to the Time Station only two or three times a month, trying not to waste the few remaining visits I had with Yuri. I was no longer working on the tree dwellings. We had finished our designs and now those who enjoyed working with their hands had begun construction.

A paralysis seized me. I spent days alone in my house, unable even to clothe myself, wandering from room to room. I would sleep fitfully, then rise and, after sitting for a few hours alone, would sleep again.

Once, I forced myself to walk to the Slumber House and asked them to put me to sleep for a month. I felt the same after awakening, but at least I had been able to pass that lonely month in unconsciousness. I went to the Time Station, visited Yuri, and went back to the Slumber House to ask for another month of oblivion. When I awoke the second time, two men were standing over me, shaking their heads. They told me I would have to see a Counselor before they would put me to sleep again.

I had been a Counselor once myself, and I knew all their tricks. Instead, I went home and waited out the time between my visits to the Time Station.

This could not go on indefinitely. The list of remaining coordinates grew shorter until there was only one set left, and I knew I would see Yuri for the last time.

We met by a large wooden summer home that overlooked a small lake. It was autumn there and Yuri began to shiver in the cool air. I managed to open the back door of the house and we went inside, careful not to disturb anything.

Yuri lay on one of the couches, his head on my lap. Outside, the thick wooded area that surrounded the house was bright with colors, orange, red, yellow. A half-grown fawn with white spots on its back peered in the window at the other end of the room, then disappeared among the trees.

“Do you regret anything?” Yuri suddenly asked. I stroked his white hair and managed a smile.

“No, nothing.”

“You’re sure.”

“Yes,” I said, trying to keep my voice from quavering.

“I have one regret, that I didn’t meet you sooner. But I wouldn’t have met you at all, except for that promise I made.”

“I know,” I said. We had talked about our meeting at least a thousand times. The conversation had become a ritual, yet I wanted to go over it again. “You were so blatant, Yuri, coming to my door like that, out of nowhere. I thought you were a little crazy.”

He smiled up at me and repeated what he had said then. “Hello, I’m Yuri Malenkov. I know this is a little strange, but I promised a friend of mine I met today I’d see you. Do you mind if I come in for a little while?”

“And I was so surprised I let you in.”

“And I never left.”

"I know, and you're still around." Tears stung my eyes.

"You were the only person aside from that friend that I could talk to honestly right away."

By then tears were running down my cheeks. "You never told me anything about your friend," I said abruptly, breaking the ritual.

"An acquaintance, really. I never saw that person again after that."

"Oh, Yuri, what will I do now? You can't leave me. I can't let you die again."

"Don't," he murmured. "You don't have much longer. Can't you see what's happening to you?"

"No."

"Get up and look in the mirror over the fireplace."

I rose, wandered over to the mirror, and looked. The signs were unmistakable. My once jet-black hair was lightly sprinkled with silver and tiny lines were etched into the skin around my eyes.

"I'm dying," I said. "My body isn't rejuvenating itself anymore." I felt a sudden rush of panic; then the fear vanished as quickly as it came, replaced by calm. I hurried back to Yuri's side.

"It won't be long," he said. "Try to do something meaningful with those last months. We'll be together again soon, just keep thinking of that."

"All right, Yuri," I whispered. Then I kissed him for the last time.

I did not fear death and do not fear it now. I became calmer, consoled by the fact that I would not be alone much longer.

How ironic it would be if my many recent uses of the Time

Station had caused my sudden aging, if Yuri's gift to me had condemned me instead. Yet I knew this was not so. We all imagine that we'll have our full three centuries; most of us do, after all. But not everyone, and not I. The irony is part of life itself. It was the work not of any Time Station, but of the final timekeeper, Death, who had decided to come for me a few decades early.

What was I to do with the time left to me? I had trained as a Counselor many years ago and had worked as one before choosing a new profession. I decided to use my old experience in helping those who, like me, had to face death.

The dying began to come to me, unable to accept their fate. They were used to their youthfulness and their full lives, feeling invulnerable to anything except an accident. The suddenness with which old age had descended on them drove some to hysteria, and they would concoct wild schemes to bring about the return of their youth. One man, a biologist, spoke to me and then decided to spend his last months involved in the elusive search for immortality. Another man, who had recently fallen in love with a young girl, cried on my shoulder and I didn't know whether to weep for him or for the young woman he was leaving behind. A woman came to me, only seventy and already aging, deprived of what should have been her normal life span.

I began to forget about myself in talking with these people. Occasionally I would walk through the city and visit old friends. My mind was aging too, and on these walks I found myself lost in memories of the past, clearer to me than more recent events. As I passed the Time Station, I would contemplate a visit to my past and then shake my head, knowing that was impossible.

I might have gone on that way if I had not passed the Time Station one warm evening while sorting through my thoughts. As I walked by, I saw Onel Lialla, dressed as a technician, looking almost exactly the same as when I had known him.

An idea occurred to me. Within seconds it had formed itself in my mind and become an obsession. I can do it, I thought. Onel will help me.

Onel had been a mathematician. He had left the city some time before and I had heard nothing about him. I hurried over to his side.

“Onel,” I said, and waited. His large black eyes watched me uncertainly and anxiety crossed his classically handsome face. Then he recognized me.

He clasped my arms. He said nothing at first, perhaps embarrassed by the overt signs of my approaching death. “Your eyes haven’t changed,” he said finally.

We walked toward the park, talking of old times. I was surprised at how little he had changed. He was still courtly, still fancied himself the young knight in shining armor. His dark eyes still paid me homage, in spite of my being an old gray-haired woman. Blinded perhaps by his innate romanticism, Onel saw only what he wished to see.

Years before, while barely more than a boy, Onel had fallen in love with me. It had not taken me long to realize that Onel, being a romantic, did not really wish to obtain the object of his affections and had unconsciously settled on me because I was so deeply involved with Yuri. He would follow me almost everywhere, pouring out his heart. I tried to be kind, not wanting to make him bitter, and spent as much time as I

could in conversation with him about his feelings. Onel had finally left the city, and I let him go, knowing he would forget and realizing that this, too, was part of his romantic game.

Onel remembered all this. We sat in the park under one of the crystalline willows and he paid court again. "I never forgot your kindness," he said to me. "I swore I would repay it someday. If there's anything I can do for you now, I will." He sighed dramatically at this point.

"There is," I replied.

"What is it?"

The opportunity had fallen into my lap with no effort. "I want you," I went on, "to come to the Time Station with me and send me back to this park two hundred and forty years in the past. I want to see the scenes of my youth one last time."

Onel seemed stunned. "You know I can't," he said. "The Portal can't send you to any time you've already lived through. We'd have people bumping into themselves, or going back to give their earlier selves advice. It's impossible."

"The Portal can be overridden for emergencies," I said. "You can override it, you know how. Send me through."

"I can't."

"Onel, I don't want to change anything. I don't even want to talk to anybody."

"If you changed the past—"

"I won't. It would already have happened then, wouldn't it? Besides, why should I? I had a happy life, Onel. I'll go back to a day when I wasn't in the park. It would just give me a little pleasure before I die to see things as they were. Is that asking too much?"

"I can't," he said. "Don't ask this of me."

In the end he gave in, as I knew he would. We went to the Station. Onel, his hands shaking, adjusted a Portal for me and sent me through.

Onel had given me four hours. I appeared in the park behind a large refreshment tent. Inside the tent, people sat at small round tables enjoying delicacies and occasionally rising to sample the pink wine that flowed from a fountain in the center. As a girl I had worked as a cook in that tent, removing raw foodstuffs from the transformer in the back and spending hours in the small kitchen making desserts, which were my specialty. I had almost forgotten the tents, which had been replaced later on by more elaborate structures.

I walked past the red tent toward the lake. It too was as I remembered it, surrounded by oaks and a few weeping willows. Biologists had not yet developed the silvery vines and glittering crystal trees that would be planted later. A peacock strutted past me as I headed for a nearby bench. I wanted only to sit for a while near the lake, then perhaps visit one of the tents before I had to return to my own time.

I watched my feet as I walked, being careful not to stumble. Most of those in the park ignored me rather pointedly, perhaps annoyed by an old woman who reminded them of their eventual fate. I had been the same, I thought, avoiding those who would so obviously be dead soon, uncomfortable around those who were dying when I had everything ahead of me.

Suddenly a blurred face was in front of me and I collided with a muscular young body. Unable to retain my balance, I fell.

A hand was held out to me and I grasped it as I struggled to my feet. "I'm terribly sorry," said a voice, a voice I had come

to know so well, and I looked up at the face with its wide cheekbones and clear blue eyes.

"Yuri," I said.

He was startled. "Yuri Malenkov," I said, trying to recover.

"Do I know you?" he asked.

"I attended one of your lectures," I said quickly, "on holographic art."

He seemed to relax a bit. "I've only given one," he said. "Last week. I'm surprised you remember my name."

"Do you think," I said, anxious now to hang on to him for at least a few minutes, "you could help me over to that bench?"

"Certainly."

I hobbled over to it, clinging to his arm. By the time we sat down, he was already expanding on points he had covered in the lecture. He was apparently unconcerned about my obvious aging and seemed happy to talk to me.

A thought struck me forcefully. I suddenly realized that Yuri had not yet met my past self. I had never attended that first lecture, having met him just before he was to do his second. Desperately, I tried to recall the date I had given Onel, what day it was in the past.

I had not counted on this. I was jumpy, worried that I *would* change something, that by meeting Yuri in the park like this I might somehow prevent his meeting me. I shuddered. I knew little of the circumstances that had brought him to my door. I could somehow be interfering with them.

Yuri finished what he had to say and waited for my reaction. "You certainly have some interesting insights," I said. "I'm looking forward to your next lecture." I smiled and nodded, hoping that he would now leave and go about his business.

Instead he looked at me thoughtfully. "I don't know if I'll give any more lectures."

My stomach turned over. I knew he had given ten more. "Why not?" I asked as calmly as I could.

He shrugged. "A lot of reasons."

"Maybe," I said in desperation, "you should talk about it with somebody, it might help." Hurriedly I dredged up all the techniques I had learned as a Counselor, carefully questioning him, until at last he opened up and flooded me with his sorrows and worries.

He became the Yuri I remembered, an intense person who concealed his emotions under a cold, business-like exterior. He had grown tired of the city's superficiality, uncomfortable with those who grew annoyed at his seriousness and penetration. He was unsuited to the gaiety and playfulness that surrounded him, wanting to pursue whatever he did with single-minded devotion.

He looked embarrassed after telling me all this and began once more to withdraw behind his shield. "I have some tentative plans," he said calmly, regaining control. "I may be leaving here in a couple of days with one of the scientific expeditions for Mars. I prefer the company of serious people and have been offered a place on the ship."

My hands trembled. Neither of us had gone with an expedition until five years after our meeting. "I'm sorry for bothering you with my problems," he went on. "I don't usually do that to strangers, or anyone else for that matter. I'd better be on my way."

"You're not bothering me."

"Anyway, I have a lot of things to do. I appreciate the time you took to listen to me."

He stood up and prepared to walk away. No, I thought, you can't, I can't lose you like this. But then I realized something and was shocked that I hadn't thought of it before. I knew what I had to do.

"Wait!" I said. "Wait a minute. Do you think you could humor an old lady, maybe take some advice? It'll only be an hour or so of your time."

"It depends," he said stiffly.

"Before you go on that expedition, do you think you could visit a person I think might enjoy talking to you?"

He smiled. "I suppose," he said. "But I don't see what difference it makes."

"She's a lot like you. I think you'd find her sympathetic." And I told him where I lived and gave him my name. "But don't tell her an old woman sent you, she'll think I'm meddling. Just tell her it was a friend."

"I promise." He turned to leave. "Thank you, friend." I watched him as he ambled down the pebbled path that would lead him to my home.

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