

**TO THE ENDS
OF THE
EARTH**

**A Short Story
by Richard Swain**

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

*"If you love someone, let them go
If they return, they were always yours"*

Have you ever fallen in love with someone you shouldn't have fallen in love with? Have you ever wanted to be with someone so deeply, so passionately, and so perfectly, yet no matter how brightly the lovelorn fires of your heart may burn, the universe simply has other ideas?

Toby has.

He first met Sophia fifteen years ago, when the two of them were both just teenagers at school. They used to get along fine back then, with a friendship dynamic that might best be described as casual acquaintances more than anything else. They'd speak to each other in classes and they'd always enjoy each other's company when their paths crossed, but they were never what you would call truly 'close'. But, deep below the surface, Toby was harbouring a crush for Sophia that was tearing him apart emotionally from the inside out. Every time she unknowingly fluttered her eyelashes or beamed him one of her beautiful smiles, his heart would soar like a rocket to a heavenly place he never even knew existed. There was truly no greater feeling than the rush of pure happiness he felt whenever he was around her.

Toby was desperate to be something more to Sophia, but at the time, he was his own worst enemy. His lack of self-confidence and shy demeanour meant that he buried his feelings as far down into his psyche as possible. He wanted nothing more than to shout his love for her from the rooftops, but he let every single opportunity to tell her pass him by. He'd kick himself for screwing his chances every time, but the fear of rejection kept holding him back like a plague.

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Eventually their school years drew to a close and, in time, the pair naturally drifted apart and went their separate ways. Years went by with no contact between them, and Toby's undying feelings for Sophia were left unspoken.

But, sometimes, love is able to overcome even the biggest of boundaries...

*

It was a chance encounter that brought Sophia back into Toby's world. While she, a natural-born boffin, had gone on to university and a well-paid office job, Toby had not been so prosperous. His lacklustre GCSE results - not directly a result of him being distracted by Sophia at school, it ought to be said - meant that he didn't go to college and ended up following a career in mechanics. A family friend gave him some work experience in their local garage, and from there he'd worked his way up and managed to establish his own breakdown recovery business. It was a decent little money-spinner, and his services were always in demand, but it wasn't what he really wanted to get out of life.

It did occasionally have its perks though, particularly on that one fateful day when he was called out to pick up Sophia, whose gleaming company car had decided to pack up on the winding country lanes. Neither of them had realised who they were contacting until they were reunited at the scene, but as soon as Toby stepped out of his van and saw her, those old magical butterflies came rushing straight back into his heart. A decade and a half may have ticked away since their last meeting, but he didn't need any confirmation - he knew right away that it was her.

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Now in her late twenties, Sophia looked just as radiant as he remembered. Even more so than before, in fact. There was no denying he thought she used to look good in a school uniform - oh, how he used to long for the days when she'd wear that black pleated skirt and give him a flash of those legs - but this... *this* was on a whole different level. It was as if Sophia's beauty had blossomed when she reached adulthood, her long brunette hair hanging down onto a trim burgundy dress that flatteringly showed off her flawless figure. He felt way out of her league, stood there in his greasy t-shirt and uncombed crew cut hairdo. But with a lip-gloss grin and wide-eyed wonder from behind her stylish specs - she never used to wear glasses, though they definitely suited her now - it was clear she was happy to see him too.

The two reminisced about days gone by as he drove her home, the van towing her car behind them. Half their lives had separated them at this point, yet it felt like nothing had changed at all. If anything, the passing of time drew them closer together than ever. They laughed, they joked, and they bonded in ways that they never really had done before.

There was one other very important difference this time, too. Toby no longer bore the same suffocating self-doubt that he had in his teenage years. He'd enjoyed a handful of steady relationships since then, and though none of them had quite worked out the way he might have liked, he had no regrets - they had all helped him grow and assure himself as a person.

He often wondered why his relationships never worked out. The answer was obvious, he reasoned. In the back of his mind he had always known that, no matter how stunning or committed his previous girlfriends had been,

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

he only ever really had eyes for one woman. And, after what felt like a lifetime, here she was again, sat beside him like some sort of crazy dream. Convinced that some form of destiny must be at work, Toby wasted no time in asking Sophia to meet up again, and to his great delight, she eagerly said yes.

*

A few weeks passed, and their friendship grew to a stage that teenage Toby would never have thought possible if he'd been told it at the time. Toby played a careful game, using his increased confidence to fleetingly flirt when he had the chance, but being conscious not to come on too strongly and scare Sophia off for good. Luckily, it wasn't long before she seemed to reciprocate his advances. Again, if the young Toby knew that one day the girl of his dreams would be calling him a handsome man, he'd probably have spontaneously combusted with joy. Now confident that he could risk taking the plunge, Toby did what he had always wanted to do: he asked Sophia out on a proper, bona fide date.

She didn't even need to think twice before accepting.

The long-awaited day arrived, and the romantic tension heightened over a candle-lit Italian dinner at a picturesque riverside restaurant. Toby knew Sophia earned substantially more than he ever could, but chivalry was not dead for him yet. He insisted on paying and then walking her home, offering his jacket for warmth as the cool evening air whistled around Sophia's exposed shoulders. Stopping outside her door, Sophia turned around to Toby

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

and spoke through her pearly white smile, a hint of nerves in her voice.

'Thank you for tonight, Toby,' she blushed, 'it's been perfect.'

Toby smiled in response, his cheeks also a little rosy. At last, he could say what he'd been bottling away for fifteen long, painful years.

'Not as perfect as you, Sophia.'

No more words were needed. The pair were locked in each other's adoring gaze, not even realising that they were slowly moving forwards into a close embrace. In unison, their eyes closed and their mouths puckered. The whole of their relationship flashed before Toby's eyes, from first meeting Sophia at school to this unforgettable, impossible moment that he hoped would last forever.

And then, as if all his wishes were coming true at once, their lips finally met in one incredible, tender kiss...

*

Toby came to in a hedge opposite the front garden of his house. His head was spinning and his vision was a blur. Wobbly and groggy, he got to his feet and brushed himself down. Looking to the sky, he saw the faint familiar glow of sunrise against the dark. What on earth had happened that night with Sophia? And why couldn't he remember any of it? He was pretty sure he hadn't had *that* much to drink...

After about a minute of uncertainty, his phone began to ring. He fumbled around for the vibrating mobile in his pocket before pulling it out and answering, still in a stumbling stupor.

It was Sophia! His heart lifted.

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

'Hello?' he answered, hoping she could offer some much-needed insight.

'Hello, Toby? Where are you?' she asked, quite worriedly.

'I'm... I'm at home. I woke up in a bush opposite the driveway a couple of minutes ago. Man, my head is killing me. What the hell did we get up to last night?'

'Last night? What are you talking about?'

'Our date? The kiss? Remember?'

'Yes, I remember - because it's literally just happened! We kissed, I opened my eyes... and you were gone!'

Toby wasn't sure how to process this news.

'...wha?! But it's sunrise!'

'No, Toby. It's *sunset!*'

Toby looked again at the sky. She was right: the sun was going down, not coming up. This was all too confusing for words.

'Well, shit...! I can't explain that one!'

*

And, at the time at least, they never could explain it. How Toby had miraculously, and completely obliviously, managed to travel halfway across town in less than a second was something that remained a mystery to both parties. It was a phenomenon that would surely have baffled even the smartest scientist, but they were certain if they told anyone about it they'd have just sounded mad. So, with no logical answer to be found, they decided to cut their losses and brush it off as a random, unexplainable event. It was just 'one of those things!'

But it wasn't random.

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

And it certainly wasn't a one-off.

Toby and Sophia met up again a couple of days later, capitalising on the earliest opportunity they could fit in around their work lives. They'd already broken the romantic ice and done the big first date, so for their second round they decided to keep it simple: a quiet night in at Sophia's place with a takeaway and TV. What could be better? In many ways, they actually preferred it to the meal, with both finding it easier to relax and let their true selves come forward in a more private setting.

The darkness drew in and, after they were both appropriately full of curry and red wine, Toby finally posed the question.

'Shall we try that kiss again?'

Sophia giggled amorously and ran her slender fingers through the tuft of his hair, before gently holding the back of his head and leaning in for kiss number two.

*

This time, Toby woke up in the pitch black of night in a large stack of bin bags. Despite the lack of light, he recognised the area as somewhere slightly outside of town, probably a good couple of miles away from his house.

He got straight on the phone to Sophia, not even waiting for her to answer when the call connected:

'It's happened again, hasn't it?'

*

It was obvious that, for whatever unknown reason, the universe simply didn't want Toby and Sophia to be together. Knowing now that Toby would be flung away

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

from her in an instant every single time they kissed, they agreed to hold off on physical contact in their relationship for the immediate future. But of course, it wasn't quite as simple as that. Nature was desperate to keep them apart, yet nature also kept pushing them together. After all these years, Toby and Sophia couldn't keep away from each other, and they literally couldn't keep their hands off each other either. To have finally won the heart of the person you love, but to never be able to fully embrace them, is a torture all in itself. There were moments when they simply couldn't resist succumbing to their urges, either because they were a bit too tipsy to care, or because they just wanted to keep testing the system - but, sure enough, it kept happening, time and time again.

Both still uncertain of the how or why of this curse, Toby and Sophia were only able to conclude two things that were always consistent about it. The first, as they already knew, was that it only ever interfered when they dared to share a kiss. The second, and slightly more concerning, was that each and every time they pushed their luck, Toby was sent further and further away. The first few occasions set an unfairly local precedent, only sending Toby within a reasonably sized radius of his home. His landing wasn't always the most comfortable or dignified, but it was nothing he couldn't bounce back from with a few favours or a semi-expensive taxi ride. But it wasn't long until the patience of the universe seemed to wear thin, and soon Toby found himself waking up in places he'd never even heard of, let alone been to. Sophia's kisses were sending him to all four corners of the United Kingdom, and eventually across the continents to Europe, and Asia, and Africa. It was great for getting a one-way ticket to a faraway land, but this wasn't quite the magical mystery tour

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Toby had in mind. Finding yourself with no money, no change of clothes, and no clue where you were was not his idea of a good time.

After a number of months and too many irresponsible kisses to count, the curse had left both Toby and Sophia stressed out and exhausted. It would often take Toby days to find his way back to her, and it was starting to take a noticeable toll on their spirits and bank balance. He loved her, and she loved him, but sometimes that just didn't seem enough in this cruel, cruel world. Yet still they soldiered on, Toby determined that this affliction was not going to cost him the girl of his dreams.

Then, one day, things got a little too out of hand. Their careful approach slipped up once again, and their ongoing series of near-kisses turned into one of the most dramatic near-misses yet. Whereas before he'd always ended up on dry land, this time Toby found himself flung into the middle of a storm-ridden ocean. He was clinging on for dear life on the side of a jagged rock edge, rain lashing down upon his face and the strong salty waves crashing relentlessly against his body. It was only by pure luck that he was noticed by a passing fishing boat, also caught up in the storm, which was able to drag him to safety before being swallowed by the jaws of the sea.

It was in this period of time that Sophia, all alone without any form of contact from Toby for several weeks, properly let the reality of their situation sink in. She was riddled with guilt at what she had done, and at what she kept on doing. How stupidly selfish she felt. Every time she gave in to her desires, she was putting poor Toby in terrible danger, all while she got to stay at home completely safe. Mentally it was eating her away with worry, but that was nothing compared to the physical torment that Toby

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

was constantly being subjected to. Was their relationship, and their failure to resist physical contact, worth all of this pain and suffering? When he came back - *if* he came back - would it be kinder for them both just to call it a day, and let the universe win?

She sat on her bed in silence, a singular thought circling endlessly in her mind:

Toby, or not Toby? That was the question.

Sophia stared longingly at a framed photograph of them both on her bedside, taken on one of the rare occasions that they actually got to spend any time together any more.

'Oh Toby... where *are* you?' she wept. Through harrowed tears of heartbreak and sorrow, she cried and cried waterfalls into her pillow until she could cry no more.

*

Sophia couldn't express the sense of relief she felt when Toby arrived on her doorstep almost two months later, unshaven and haggard from his ordeal. She rushed him into the living room and hastily offered him as much food and drink as she could spare.

'What happened to you?!' she asked, overcome with concern at seeing her boyfriend's dishevelled state.

Toby told her the story of how he had ended up in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, off the shores of New Zealand. He told her how the fishing boat had rescued him and fought against the storm to reach a lonely lighthouse for the night. He told her how they'd set sail for land the next morning, and how he'd had to struggle by on scraps from strangers. He told her how no one would believe his story, and how no one would give him the time of day, not

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

even the British Embassy, until he had earned enough money to prove that he was a UK citizen and needed safe transport home. Sophia knew it would have been bad for him, but this was beyond her wildest fears.

'At least they spoke English there,' he quipped with a half-smile, 'so that was one upside...'

After a solemn, accepting silence, Sophia brought up the inevitable.

'Toby, look, while you were away... I've been thinking... all of this, this curse, what it's been doing to me, and what it keeps on doing to you,' she gestured towards his ragged clothes and shaggy hair, '...would it not be better, safer for us both if we...,' she hesitated, 'you know...'

Horrified, Toby didn't even let her finish the sentence.

'No!' he exclaimed, defiant.

'But we can't keep doing this, Toby! I don't know why any of this keeps happening, but somebody up there doesn't want us together and I don't know how much more of it I can take!'

'No Sophia! I've waited my whole life to be with you and I'm not going to give up on us now! Not after all of this!'

'But what if it *kills* you?'

'I'd rather face death than a life without you!'

'But... just how much more can you keep putting yourself through?! What if the next time sends you to the Arctic? Or the South Pole? Or worse? How far are you willing to go for this, Toby?'

'To the ends of the earth!'

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Toby's powerful reply punctuated the conversation and brought the tension to a halt. The two of them took a long, deep breath.

'I'm sorry,' said Toby, now feeling a lot calmer. 'Maybe you're right. I'm only thinking of myself. I know none of this is fair on you either.'

Sophia, against all of her deepest intuitions, reluctantly took her stance.

'I just don't want to keep hurting, Toby. And, most of all, I don't want to keep hurting *you*.'

It took a while, but Toby knew this was a fight he couldn't win. He had no choice but to accept defeat.

'I wish it didn't have to end like this,' said Sophia, her eyes streaming with tears.

'But you're right. It must,' reiterated Toby, if only to drill it into his own head. 'But I want you to let me do one last thing before I go.'

'Anything, Toby. Anything for you.'

There was a pause as he gathered his thoughts.

'I want to kiss you.'

Sophia wasn't sure how to react.

'But... Toby...!'

'No, Sophia. Please. If I have to go, and if this has to be the end, I don't want it to be on bad terms. Because that's not who we are, and that's not what we've ever been. I want the lasting memory of us to be the soft touch of your lips, of me kissing you goodbye, one last time.'

'I... I can't though... what if you...!'

'I promise, after this, I won't come back. I won't keep putting us through this any more. I'll let you know I'm okay, don't worry. But I'll be far enough away that I won't be able to reach you, and that way I won't be able to give in to temptation any longer. You'll be free to move on with

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

your life here, and I'll be able to start a new one, alone. Wherever that may be.'

'Toby, you can't do that! What about your home, and your business?'

'Please, Soph. You really think I could stay here after this and not want to be around you? Look, I'll figure something out. I don't want to leave, of course I don't. But, if anyone has got to send me away, I want it to be you.'

Sophia understood. She didn't necessarily agree with Toby's plan, but it was sounding more and more like the only way. She somehow had to be cruel to be kind.

'I love you Toby,' bawled Sophia, leaning in for one last kiss with her beloved.

'I love you too, Sophia,' requited Toby, bracing himself for the terrifying unknown.

Their lips touched and fell into the old familiar embrace. Time slowed down to a crawl as they shared what would surely be their last second together...

*

Toby opened his eyes. He expected to find himself buried under an icy snowdrift, or floating helplessly in the cold depths of space. Yet, against all the odds, there he was, still sat in Sophia's living room, and his lips still pressed against hers.

Sophia opened her eyes too and could scarcely believe what she was seeing.

'T...Toby?!' she stuttered, overwhelmed.

'Hello,' he smiled, just as confused as she was.

'But... but... you're still here! This doesn't make any sense!'

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

'Looks like you can't get rid of me that easily!' he laughed.

They kissed again, just to be sure. Toby remained where he was.

'Oh my god... does... does this mean... it's over?!' asked Sophia, a glimmer of optimism finally returning to her voice.

'I hope so,' comforted Toby, holding Sophia tightly in his arms. 'I bloody well hope so...'

He was never, ever going to let go of her again.

*

They never did work out what had caused the curse in the first place. But it seemed, at long last, Toby had finally proven himself to the universe. He had gone to the ends of the earth and back again for the person that he loved. No matter how hard it had tried, even the forces of nature couldn't fight back against a love as strong as that.

Toby and Sophia were overjoyed at their newfound freedom and made the most of their relationship. They had an awful lot of lost time to make up for, so they kissed, and kissed, and they kissed some more. It was as if the two of them were stuck together like a pair of ultra-strength magnets, bound together by an invisible bond that simply nothing could repel. And they kept on kissing, all throughout the rest of their happy lives together.

No longer did every kiss force the two of them further and further apart. Now, each sweet and tender embrace just brought them closer and closer together. More than anything else in this world, there would never be another truth more precious to them than that.