

ONLY THE END: A COLLECTION OF CONNECTED SHORT STORIES

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

In a series of connected short stories, the author explores the funeral industry by following a body as it is prepared for its final resting. The EMTs, mortician, funeral director, and cremators offer their unique perspective on the many faces death can take. However, it is the eyes of the mourners and Benny himself that see the deeper impact of his passing. By uncovering who Benny was in life, a man struggling with marriage and fatherhood, the author shows just how far the impact of his death reaches.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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“Death is only the end if you assume the story is about you.”

-@NightValeRadio

## **“IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON, AND THE HOLY GHOST.”**

Before stepping inside, Benny briefly wondered if he would break the confessional. It looked super freaking old, like everything else in city churches. Tiny arches and ornate notches were carved into the wooden booth. It was gorgeous for what was essentially the place where people shat out their sins. A port-o-potty for the soul.

Benny’s wife loved this church. Wouldn’t shut up about it, really. It’s what made him choose this church. If they really knew his wife, maybe they’d know how to deal with her.

Benny made the sign of the cross over himself before exhaling heavily and saying, “Bless me Father, for I have sinned.”

“Name thy sins.”

“I was a wigger in second grade.”

A pause. Metal softly clinked on wood as the priest shifted on the other side of the partition.

“Um, what?”

Benny exhaled through gritted teeth. This was the Bronx, wasn’t it? Priests were supposed to know things here. These guys heard the sins of the hood.

“I, uh, don’t know what that is.”

“You know, a white nig-“

“You will not say that word in my church,” the priest said.

“Thought this was God’s church,” Benny said. He didn’t mean it as an insult. It was one of those sentences that came spilling out of your mouth so naturally that your brain doesn’t think to stop it. It didn’t matter how he meant it, though. The priest’s hazy outline stiffened on the

other side of the partition.

Benny shifted in his seat and pushed a huff of air through his nose. “It’s a white person who talks black.”

“Excuse me?” the priest said.

“You know, ‘whad up, cuh?’ and all that?”

“And how is that a sin?”

“Shit, Father, I don’t know.” The air shifted as the priest cringed again. “You’re supposed to be the expert here. I just say the crap I’ve done. You absolve it.” If this was how it was gonna go for the easy ones, Benny didn’t want to unload the heavy shit on this guy. Benny hadn’t been able to unpack it for the last three years, and if this guy couldn’t get past the word “wigger,” then this Confession was worthless.

“The Lord absolves it,” the priest said. “But only to those who have a penitent heart. If you’re not truly sorry for what you’ve done, then there is no help I can give you at the moment. You are welcome to come back when you understand Confession a little deeper.” The priest slid the partition shut, blocking the small, fuzzy view Benny had of his silhouette.

“Wait!” Benny said. “I have more.”

Benny didn’t know if he imagined a sigh on the other side of the partition, but the priest slid it open once more.

“Well?”

What was this guy’s problem? Sure, the wigger thing was a little juvenile, but Benny felt bad about it. He had spent all of second grade walking around with the black kids, trying to fit in, but they all thought he was making fun of them. He just wanted to be friends. Just wanted them



to see him as just another person. Fuck if he knew why else he did it; he was eight.

Besides, it was kind of funny. Kids did stupid shit that would haunt them as adults all the time. And Benny needed to lead with humor. It'd give him something to fall back onto when he spoke the words he needed to.

"I like to watch old people falling." No sound came from the priest. "Like, on YouTube, you know? There's all these old people videos. They're doing whatever, then out of nowhere, they just tank it. And it's hilarious, but it shouldn't be, right?"

"No, it shouldn't," the priest said.

"But they're so helpless. And their bodies aren't supposed to move faster than a snail's pace, but then they're suddenly slipping too fast and falling too hard." The corners of Benny's mouth turned upward. Heat spread across his forehead and cheeks as he tried not to laugh. It was ridiculous, really, to want to laugh right now. But Benny thought of a video in which a bunch of old geezers, like ten or twelve of them, were doing a team building exercise on a giant seesaw. Once it tipped, half those poor bastards ate it on the dirt below. He must've seen it sixteen times. It was a riot with the guys at work.

"Why are you really here?" the priest asked.

All thoughts of toppling senior citizens disappeared from his head.

"Excuse me?" Benny said.

"The kids in this year's Communion class stall better than you do. I don't stand for it in ten year olds, and I won't stand for it in a grown man. Yes, God can be scary. Sins can be scary. But we name them to take away their power. We name them so that we may find forgiveness in those names."

That was a freaking gorgeous speech. Solid morals, motivating takeaway. That charisma must've worked on most people, otherwise the church wouldn't be expanding.

But Benny wasn't stalling for God's sake, or the priest's.

He didn't find either intimidating. He just didn't like the idea of the words being released into the air. Because then someone else would know. And it'd be harder to erase. Harder to overcome. He was sorry for the things he'd done, the way he felt. But that didn't mean anyone else had to know.

"I don't love my wife anymore," Benny said.

Benny stared at the cubicle wall opposite the partition. The wood was smooth. Consistent. There were no swirls of grain, only a medium-brown color that reminded him of poop. Poop, not shit. Poop was healthy, tiny, and consistent. Sometimes it was even cute. Like little rabbit poop. Shit was nasty. A grab bag of gross. Shit was the stuff he could feel coming a mile away. The wood here was even and smooth: definitely poop-colored.

Benny shook his head and briefly marveled at how a church pew got him philosophizing about poop and shit and the nuance between.

He squinted harder. There, where the wall met the tiny seat he was sitting on – really, who had an ass this small? – there was something. Benny lowered his head to get a better look and ran his fingers gently over the wall.

There was a small disturbance in the wood. Tiny scratches, not enough to chip off the wood but enough to cut through the polish, crisscrossed over each other. Someone before him did not have an easy confession.

Benny wondered if they confessed their vandalism while they sat here. *I beat puppies,*

*performed forced sodomy on my wife, and am currently scratching the shit out of the confessional walls. Amen.*

It was stupid that someone would scratch like that. What were they afraid of? God already knew what they did. The stupid priest couldn't tell anyone, even if he wanted to. Benny hadn't set foot in a church in years, but that's the one thing he can remember being drilled into him.

*You can confess anything. You can confess murder and they cannot say a word. They can only set penance. Priests are bound by holy law to keep Confession a secret between you, him, and God. You can confess anything.*

God knew already. But that's where Benny's understanding of God stopped. As a kid, he'd been taught that, at the end of days, everyone would stand before God and be judged. But he'd also been taught that God forgot sins as soon as he forgave them. Baptism, Confession, these things wiped your slate clean. So did God judge everything? Or only the stuff he remembered? Was Confession like a big reset button? What if you went to Confession and then walked outside and got hit by a truck? Would God have nothing to judge you on except jaywalking? Did God care about jaywalking? Seemed like God would have bigger worries.

Benny certainly had bigger worries. He worried that Maria already knew his big secret. The way her eyes shifted over him whenever they fought was shrewd and calculating. She had to know that there was no more passion in his arguments. He never meant to fall out of love with her. As a boy, he hated his aunt and uncle for divorcing simply because "the spark was gone." It seemed lazy and careless. Only dumb fucks let their lives get to the point where giving up was better than pushing through.

Benny was the dumbest fuck of all. Not only did he let their relationship get to the point of barely-there kisses and half-hearted arguments, he drove it to that point. He was an asshole at every chance he got, mainly because he didn't know what else to be. He wanted his snide remarks to be cool, nonchalant, and funny, but it just drove Maria farther away. The farther away Maria held herself, the more Benny found that he didn't care. Didn't make him any less sorry, though.

Soon Cecile would figure him out, too. She inherited her mother's intelligence, and it frightened him sometimes. That girl deserved a man who wanted to stick around and be a father to her.

"For your penance, you will tell her."

*What?*

"No, that's not right. That's not penance. Penance is like three 'Hail Mary's or saying the Rosary or something."

"Fine," the priest said. "Read Psalm 23, then tell her."

"How the hell am I- Oh, stop *fucking cringing*, it's not like you haven't heard the word before! How the hell am I supposed to even bring that up? What good would it do?"

"It will put one or both of you into action. Your marriage has been blessed by God. No man can put it asunder. Not even you. The sacrament of marriage is truly strong, so you both will fight to make it work. And then everything will be as it is intended."

"That's the shittiest answer I've ever heard." Shit, not poop.

Why couldn't things just remain the way they were? Why couldn't the priest just reassure him that he wasn't going to hell for not loving his wife? At least then he could continue on as

normal. Telling the truth would involve work for either outcome. It would involve sleepless nights and anger and a horrible feeling gnawing in his gut.

“Communication is the cornerstone of marriage,” the priest said.

“You could say that about anything. ‘Seeing each other naked is the cornerstone of marriage,’” Benny mocked.

The priest shifted in his seat and the wood groaned. “Your penance has been given. You can take it or not.”

The partition slid shut. Benny let his head drop to his chest, hoping that the harsh motion would shake the priest’s words from his ears. He let it hang for a moment, until his neck became sore. He braced his hands on his knees and stood, squeezing out of the booth.

He walked out of the beloved church and squinted in the sunlight. The words weighed on him, as he knew they would. Hearing them, out loud and in his own voice, made it all too real. He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked in the direction to his favorite bar. He didn’t have to go home just yet.

## **INTERLUDE #1**

I have experienced loss, but not of the kind that I write about. My losses have been of falling outs and break ups, but never of death. I've always had the comfort of knowing for certain that the people I lost eventually went on to live happy lives. I knew for a fact that they were in a better place.

## PERMISSION TO HANG UP

The car was a warm cocoon against the painful whip of freezing air outside. I never wanted to leave. My tears didn't sting so much with the heater vents pointed straight at my face. I threw the car into reverse and screeched out of the driveway. After the fourth frustrating stop at an intersection, I snatched my phone from the console between the driver and passenger seats and pulled up my text conversation with Brenda.

"Where are you?" I had asked.

"Thought you said you were staying at the office. Alice said she could meet me for the show. Be home later tonight."

I mean, fuck me, right? Those were my tickets. I won them. I entered the freaking ticket lottery. I paid the money. There was no confusion. There was no possible dispute over who the tickets belonged to. They were mine, and Brenda knew it.

I entered the ticket lottery every day for her. Ever since she started talking about this new show, I tried to get tickets for the two of us. The box office was quick to tell me that they were sold out until next year. There was pride in the ticket seller's voice. The hottest show on Broadway, they called it. Revolutionary, everyone said. So people grabbed up the every single ticket for the rest of the scheduled shows for the year and I figured that's that, right? Well, Brenda wouldn't shut up about it. Talked about it every time a commercial for it came on TV or one of the actors was on *Good Morning America*.

Cars crowded the highway, but everything still moved fast. I gunned it up the entry ramp and quickly merged into the fast lane. I stuffed my phone in my pocket, and my fingers fumbled for the Bluetooth button on the dashboard.

“Call Brenda.”

The line rang for what felt like hours. When the answering machine picked up, I huffed and hung up before I could leave a screaming voicemail.

I changed lanes to pass some jerk who thought going 65 warranted him a spot in the far left lane.

My thumb wandered toward my wedding band, my fingernail catching in the grooves of the metal. I never took it off; a callous had grown around it for the past three years. Brenda took hers off every night and put it in an ornate dish shaped like a leaf. During the mornings when we got up at the same time, I would always watch as she slid it onto her finger with little to no resistance. A perfect fit. Sometimes she'd catch me watching. She'd smile then, kiss me, and shake her head in mock exasperation.

Slipping into a relationship with her all those years ago was too easy. Jackie had just ended it with me, nullifying the four best years of my life. I was numb. My friends eventually dragged me out, hoping that if I downed enough shots I would shut up about the break up.

The bar was almost exclusively lit with neon beer signs, making the place a patchwork of bright blue light and dark shadow. A girl with tangled, curly hair hopped off a barstool soon after we entered. Her smile split her face, and she bounded up to one of my buddies. She flung her small arms around his neck and squeezed. She was enthusiastic in everything, right from the very beginning. I should have known then that she was too good for me. A spark like that needs kindling, not the wet blanket of someone recently torn from a relationship.

Brenda smiled tentatively at me when we shook hands and introduced ourselves. She never once broke eye contact. It was impressive, but all I could think about was how Jackie's



eyes would have looked prettier under the buzzing lights. I said something stupid then - I can't remember what - about Brenda's name. Probably an alliteration or some goofy nickname that I had coined on the spot to defuse some of the tension I felt. Brenda practically snorted. She covered her mouth with her hand and shook her head, in the same vein as the joking exasperation she put on when she caught me fiddling with my ring.

Brenda would always meet my idiosyncrasies, strange habits, and ever-changing catchphrases with this amused expression. She was damn near perfect, so there was never a chance in hell for me to match that.

Which is why this betrayal of Broadway magnitude made me want to smash the new Mercedes we had just bought into the theatre, so that no one could see the show, not even Brenda.

And, of course, the one person who could always calm me down was the one person I wanted to rage at. I pressed the button again.

"Call Brenda."

After the third ring, the call connected and a rush of white noise filled the tiny cab of the car.

"Hello?" came Brenda's too-loud voice.

"Where are you?" I said.

"At the theatre. Looking for Alice." She sounded slightly breathless, the way she always did when the smell of hot garbage that midtown was famous for rushed past her nose. She told me she'd never get tired of living in the city, and I believed it wholeheartedly. She was probably smiling as she held the phone to her ear. That jerk. "What's up?" she asked. "Why'd you call?"

I swerved to pass a gigantic truck.

“That’s my ticket!” The words sounded childish as soon as I said them. I needed to explain rationally. I had been the one to put my name in the lottery. My name had been the one picked. Clearly, since I made the effort, the tickets would not be in our possession otherwise, and I should therefore be one of the persons to use the tickets. “I won them!”

“Wait, what?” she said. “I didn’t hear you. It’s kinda loud. You wouldn’t believe how many people are already lined up!” My hands tightened on the steering wheel at her words. Streaks of white and red light blurred in my peripheral vision as I sped up. The background noise of the call eventually coalesced into voices. Giddy tones of those waiting for the house doors to open. I shifted into the far right lane. Every lane other than the one I was in seemed to be moving the fastest.

“Brenda, tell Alice that I’m very sorry,” I gritted out, placated by the temporary increase in speed, “but the tickets are for you and me. Not her.”

I cared enough to get those tickets. I cared enough to enter in a random lottery and do a little superstitious dance and hope that I won them for the both of us. I did that with intent. For Brenda. If I did that for her, if I thought of her and gave her something that she really wanted, I cared, right? I loved her, right?

When you love someone, you do things for them. You make them happy. And I needed to love Brenda, because she loved me. I needed to deserve her, or else we wouldn’t work. And I hardly knew any life outside of Brenda.

“But don’t you have to work?”

A motorcycle merged into my lane, several yards in front of me. It seemed to know what I knew about this lane being the fastest; his engine squealed and he pulled ahead. Finally, someone who understood the highway's purpose of providing a *speedy* route for motorists. I pressed down lightly on the gas pedal.

"This show has been all you've talked about for weeks," I said. "I'd like to see it too, since it means so much to you."

"I can't really hear you," she said. "I think I see Alice--"

I glanced at the screen on the console that displayed the call information like I miraculously expected Brenda's face to be there.

"Screw that!"

An engine revved too loudly. At first I thought it was mine. My eyes leapt back to the road in front of me. The motorcycle was much too close. Before the thought of hitting the brakes made its way from my brain to my foot, my car lurched, and the motorcycle flipped up. The impact was deafening. The body riding the motorcycle came dislodged from the seat and soared through the air, limbs flailing fiercely.

And then there was nothing. No sensation beyond the car continuing to speed forward. The airbags didn't deploy. The engine didn't give out. No evidence of the chaos of a few seconds before lingered. I glanced in my rearview mirror. A dark shape on the road grew smaller and smaller as I continued to drive.

"What was that?" Brenda asked. I started at the sound of her voice. My eyes found the screen in the center console. It still displayed her name and the call time.

"A deer," I said automatically. My voice was flat, and it sounded ridiculous. I hung up.

The police, right? That was the next logical step. That made sense. My toes flexed painfully in my shoe as I pushed the gas pedal down ever so slightly.

“Call 911.”

I don’t remember the entire call. My voice was too reedy. I spoke too fast.

“I think I just saw a man on a motorcycle get hit on the highway.” I thought that’s what I saw. It is what I saw, isn’t it? What I did?

No, he was too close to me. It was his fault. And he barely even hit my car. He just flipped over it. He could have survived that. Anyone could have. He was wearing a helmet, right?

I knocked my hands against the steering wheel. He was wearing a helmet. He got too close to my car. People on motorcycles were always reckless. It was his fault. I did what was expected of me. I called the police. I had no ties to that man. No responsibility to him. That was the absolute truth of it.

Not for the first time in my life, I wished that I was still a kid. When faced with a crying child, adults are quick to wipe away their faults under the claim of “accident.” *Don’t worry about the spill. It was an accident.*

I looked in the rearview mirror. Streaks of orange street lights shot into the distance. My foot laid heavy on the gas pedal, an immovable weight. Dried tear tracks caked my face. No trusted adult was going to dismiss this just because it didn’t happen intentionally. Intent meant nothing. I continued to drive, putting as much space between myself and the accident.

As soon as I saw an exit, I took it. I found a spot to park and immediately threw my door open.

I always thought people who threw up on TV whenever they saw a dead body or an inordinate amount of violence were weak. I thought that watching the horrific things that happened on the news had jaded me. I thought attending my Nan's funeral had prepared me for any death I'd face thereafter.

So a small amount of surprise registered when I opened my eyes to see that my face was six inches from vomit-soaked asphalt. I wiped my mouth on the back of my hand and leaned back into the car to avoid the smell. Throwing up was the worst bodily function of all time. I could never control my body when I started heaving. And so soon after what had just happened, the loss of control was beyond disturbing.

Shaking hands undid the seatbelt, and I stumbled out onto the street. I took baby steps, careful not to trip, to the front of the car. I ran my hand over the jagged glass and twisted metal. The impact had punched a dent into the hood, but it was nothing that couldn't be fixed with one of those pressure guns the mechanics had. Several cracks reached slanted down from the top of the windshield like frozen spider webs. Harsh gray peeked out from the few places where the paint had been scraped off. I expected a spattering of blood or maybe a lingering extremity from the motorcyclist wedged into the front grate, but there was nothing. I had gotten off easy. I was looking at a couple thousand dollars' worth of repairs. For less than a thousand dollars, this could all go away. Then I recalled the horrible crunch of bone and flesh being reduced to nothing at eighty miles per hour, and immediately, as if a string behind my navel has been pulled, my back was hunched, my stomach was sucked in, and I unloaded what little there is left in my stomach on the ground.

A small tug of sensation on my thigh gave me enough of a distraction to breathe again. I took the vibrating phone out of my pocket and, without thinking, accepted the call. I put the phone up to my ear, but my throat was so raw that all sound died within it.

“Jeff? Are you there? What the hell happened?” Brenda’s voice echoed a little, but otherwise the call was quiet. The crowds from before were gone. My brain was focusing on silly things.

“I’m fine,” I heard myself finally say. I had never been able to lie to Brenda before. I wished that I could go back to that. My wife deserved to know what her husband had just become. But all I could think of was the car. Get the car fixed. It would all go back to normal if the scrapes and dents were smoothed out.

“You said you hit a deer.”

Fuck. I did say that.

She’d demand to see the car. She heard the volume of the impact. Would she know as soon as she saw the car? Did the dent shape look like a human’s? Did that mean I couldn’t even take it to a shop?

“Yes.”

“Well, did you stop? Is the car okay?”

“The car might need some work,” I said.

“Shit,” she said. I heard a faucet run on her end. Suddenly, I was very thirsty. “What about the deer?”

“Hmmm?” I brought my face up close to the hood of the car, needing to reassure myself that no blood, no incriminating piece of motorcycle had escaped my notice.

“The deer,” Brenda repeated. “Did you have to drag it off the road? Or did you call the police? Is it even their job to remove roadkill? Isn’t there a special department in the city for that?”

“Uh, yeah,” I said.

“What?”

“I called the police,” I said. “They told me to keep going. There was nothing I could do about it, and they had a man on-duty not far away.”

“Okay,” she said. “Are you all right, baby? You sound kind of out of it.”

I looked up and tried to make sense of where I was. On my left, neon lights advertising every cigarette I’d ever heard of shined out of the windows of a tiny lotto store. On my right, orange streetlights struggled to illuminate the sidewalk below.

“No. Yeah, I’m fine,” I said. I stumbled to the open car door, stepped over the vomit, and shut myself back in the Mercedes.

“Well, if you’re sure you’re fine,” Brenda said, “and you’re sure we can take the car to the shop tomorrow...” Her voice lilted at the end as she left the sentence hanging. She wanted permission to hang up. She wanted reassurance that everything was going to be okay and that I wouldn’t be angry if she went and enjoyed the show. More than anything I wanted her to keep talking to me. Her tone, colored with mild annoyance, held the promise of a world beyond this moment. A world where more was happening than me hitting someone with my car.

She gasped, then squealed. The phone crackled with the bad reception. “They just dimmed the lights! It’s starting soon. Maybe. Do they normally dim the lights in the bathroom too, or is the building just old?”

Her excitement made my stomach drop. Anything I said now would pull her out of the magic of this moment that she'd wanted for so long. She didn't deserve to know what happened. She didn't deserve a lukewarm partner, so she sure as hell didn't deserve a lukewarm partner who had driven away from the body of a stranger rather than stay and help.

And she wouldn't be stuck with me for very much longer, if there was any mercy in the world.

I didn't hit him. I didn't. I *couldn't*. That wouldn't happen to me. If I really hit him, I wouldn't have driven off. I'm not that kind of person.

But if I took the car to a shop, they would ask questions. And if I could hardly answer Brenda coherently, then there was no way in hell I'd be able to answer anyone else's questions. I'd tell them where I was, they'd be able to see my call history, and that would be that. The story would tell itself, regardless of what didn't happen. It didn't happen. It couldn't happen.

It would all find me, one way or the other, and Brenda wouldn't ever be able to look me in the eye again. So I savored the sound of Brenda's voice, tinged with unbridled happiness.

"Enjoy the show, baby," I said.

"Thanks! Love you!"

I hung up and tossed the phone onto the passenger seat. I didn't buckle my seatbelt. I wasn't going to drive anywhere. Probably wouldn't drive at all for a long, long time. I simply sat, kept company by the slight sputter of the engine. The leather driving wheel cover squeaked as my hands gripped it tight.



## **INTERLUDE #2**

But death creates uncertainty in all of us. What happens to us when we die? Where does our consciousness go? Does it cease to exist? And who will remember us when we're gone?

I am fortunate enough to have all of my family members alive. I don't have to think about those questions just yet. And I am so blissfully unaware of the agony of that loss.

## SOMETIMES IT'S BETTER, SOMETIMES IT'S NOT

### I.

"I hope he's dead," Jojo said.

"Seriously? That's sick."

Jojo shrugged off my disgust. Metal instruments rattled in their bags as Jojo sped the ambulance up the entrance ramp and onto the interstate.

"Sometimes it's better," Jojo said. "You've seen them. The painful ones. Sounds like this one is going to be like that. Poor sonofagun. A smear on the road. That's what it's going to be."

It *did* sound like it was going to be like that. The call was Priority 1. Critical condition. Pretty much dead but not quite there yet. These were the calls that made my hands sweat and my heart thump. We were either going to make a difference and be heroes or someone was going to die.

The interstates around the borough were beautiful on summer days. The hulking trees lined the road, casting shade over the traffic. The backlit branches would sometimes glow green, and if I were on my way to the Island, I'd pretend it was the Emerald City. But now, when the leaves from the branches were singed off by the frigid air, the trees strained to the heavens like greedy fingers.

As our ambulance ripped through the night, I kept my eyes forward, searching for the first signs of the incident. That didn't stop the trees from scratching at the edges of my vision ominously.

"There it is," I said.

The garish lights of the patrol car already on the scene nearly blinded us as we crested a hill. As soon as Jojo stopped the ambulance I was out, yanking a stretcher with me. Jojo followed as fast as he could, medical bag in hand.

A cop stood near the patrol car and waved us over as soon as he saw us.

“Got the call on the radio a few minutes ago. Got here as fast as I could,” the cop said as soon as we were within earshot. He mumbled a few meaningless details, but Jojo and I immediately snapped our attention in the direction that he was gesturing. A mangled motorcycle on the shoulder of the road, the twisted handlebars pointed toward the sky like a rude gesture. Not too far off, a dark, vaguely human shape was nestled in the grass.

“Shit,” Jojo said as he sprinted to the form. “Treating Priority 1,” he said into the radio clipped on his shoulder. I followed him as fast as I could with the stretcher.

I knelt by the head. He was a beefy guy, rubbed raw by the road. Bits of gravel seasoned his arms, were embedded in his face. I unclipped his helmet strap. A strip of burned skin branded the underside of his chin. I ran my gloved finger over it. No excess of blood. I tried to remove his helmet gently, but it hardly moved. I adjusted the stance of my crouch and tugged again. The helmet squelched as it came off, and dark, sticky blood ran down the back of the man’s head. I looked back to where Jojo was searching for a pulse at the man’s wrist. He fished a packet of gauze from the bag and held it out to me without me having to ask. He shrugged his shoulders a bit as if to say, *Told you it was going to be bad.*

My left hand pressed the gauze onto the back of the man’s head while my right tilted his chin back to open his airway. His head wasn’t misshapen. Brains weren’t poking out. I gently laid his head down, gauze cushioning it from the dirt and grass beneath, and began CPR.

Through the dirty, mixed scent of blood and the plastic of the mouth guard I caught the stench of his aftershave. It smelled like those discount bottles that you get at the kiosks directly outside of the department stores.

In between the first and second rescue breath I became vaguely aware of the flashing lights growing brighter and familiar voices joining the chorus of rushing cars and squawking radios. Feet and the wheels of another stretcher skated through my line of vision.

Jojo didn't give me the sign to stop, so I began chest compressions. The latex of my gloves squeaked against each other as I brought my hands together. I suppressed a shiver.

*One, two, three, four, five.*

I could be this man's salvation. I could make a difference. I could give him more years to live instead of the few seconds he seemed to have left.

I ducked my head to perform a rescue breath once more, and a sudden, horrific gasp from below me sucked the air from my lungs.

My feet fell out from under me, and my butt hit hard on the ground. The man's eyes fluttered open. They swiveled rapidly from one point to the next before focusing on me.

I had held more people in their last moments than the average person could even fathom. I worked daily to keep people alive. How many times had I hoped for this moment? It was horrifying. It sounded agonizing and it tasted like smoke.

"Gross," he slurred. Then his eyes rolled back and his body went still.

"Shit," Jojo said a few moments after the shock wore off us both. A declarative, not an expletive this time. I could smell it too. I nudged my glove out of the way of my watch.

"It's ten past eight."

Save for his head sticking to the grass a bit, it wasn't much trouble to load him in the bag, onto the stretcher, and into the ambulance. I climbed into the passenger seat and stared straight through the windshield.

Death was such a graceless experience. It made floppy, useless things out of people that were once strong, witty, or shy. Motion and energy turned into petrification. Movement turned into stillness.

"Sometimes it's for the better," Jojo said. He put the ambulance in drive. "The deaths get easier the more you do this."

"People have been dying around us for years. It's not better."

## II.

When I woke up, the tops of my eyelids were glued to the bottoms with gook. I gently swiped my thumb over the lids before forcing my eyes open. The picture frames on the wall opposite me were cockeyed where I had pushed Angela up against them last night. My clothes still lay bunched up on the floor, but hers were gone. Angela was gone too, so I got up, picked my clothes up, and buried them deep in her hamper like she told me to.

"Oh good," Angela said, poking her head in. "I was just getting these." She held up my running shoes before throwing them into the back corner of her closet. "We're not forgetting anything, are we?" she asked. "Your toothbrush is in my bathroom, and there's no reason for them to go in there. I stuffed your movies under the bed. Anything else?"

"You want to stuff me under the bed, too?"

"Ha, ha."

I placed my hands on Angela's shoulders. "It'll be fine," I said.

The doorbell rang and, despite my words to Angela, a million electric impulses rocketed under my skin.

"Shit," I said. I leapt over to the chair that Angela normally left her clothes to be ironed on. She had laid out an outfit for me last night. I yanked the shirt over my head. I smoothed my hair – hands moving from back to front on the top of my head and top to bottom on the sides of my head. Angela never got this. She said my hair looked the same no matter what, but it was like dental tools scraping against my teeth when she stroked my hair against the grain. I brushed it regularly. It was tight and kept. No need to mess with that.

"Hurry, hurry," Angela said.

I slipped my belt on and straightened my tie. "Let's do this."

In the front room, two steps away from the front door, Angela jumped.

"Did you put Mandark in the bathroom?"

"I've been with you the whole time."

Angela's eyes grew wide, and she shoed me back to the bedroom. I didn't move.

"He's not gonna bark. He hasn't this whole time."

"I don't care," Angela said. "He's not my dog. My parents are going to know something's up if they see him."

I knew she was right, but I still hesitated. The rest of my stuff could be squirreled away, no problem. Her parents didn't know about us sort of living together. They'd cause a fight over propriety and tradition. But Mandark? He wasn't a thing. He was family to me, and he certainly didn't deserve to be shoved away into Angela's bathroom.

“Rob! C’mon!” Angela waved her arms frantically as she spoke through her teeth.

I snapped into action. Veering to the right, I half-ran back into the bedroom. Mandark lay on a pile of dirty clothes. He hadn’t moved, even in all the excitement. If it wasn’t food, a toy, or me twirling his fluffy ears, it wasn’t worth it. I closed the door slowly – his big eyes laid the guilt on thick – and jogged back over to Angela just before she opened the front door.

The Upper Bronx was old. The houses were built on uneven hills years ago with wood that had turned rickety over the years. I ran my eyes over the roofs of the houses across the street whenever I went through Angela’s neighborhood. My gaze would hop from a low hanging porch to a particularly peaked eave before back flipping into the open air between houses. The grass in the yards stuck up at weird angles – spiky, perilous obstacles for my free running stare. Hardly anyone in the city owned a lawn mower, but at least it kept my mental acrobatics on point.

It was because of the crooked houses and the patchy grass that Angela’s parents looked horribly out of place. As thin as they were, made all the more slimming by their matching suit and power suit, they looked too big for the stoop, uncomfortable.

“Darling!” Angela’s mother flung her arms wide. Angela stepped into the embrace before gesturing for her parents to come in.

“Mom, Dad, this is Ro-“

“Oh, we brought this!” Angela’s mother took the covered dish from her father and thrust it forward into Angela’s arms.

“Uh, thanks.” Angela set the dish down on an end table. “Like I was saying, this is Rob.”

I stepped forward, arm extended. My dry lips squeaked around my teeth as I pulled them into a smile.

“Nice to meet you,” I said. Angela’s mother gave me the dead fish. Angela’s father did the “bro shake”: one bone-crushing squeeze to assert dominance before dropping the hand.

As soon as I rocked back on my heels to Angela’s side, her mother’s head began swiveling back and forth, taking in the room.

“So this is the city,” she said.

“Well, actually, this is Angela’s house,” I said. Nobody laughed.

“Mom, this is kind of the edge of the city. There are houses instead of tiny studios. You can see the sky. Somewhat.”

“It still seems urban.” Angela’s mom glanced at me. I tried to relax the stiffness in my shoulders. It could have been a completely innocuous statement. She could have accidentally let her eyes land on me as she said it. Could have.

I ran my tongue over the roof of my mouth and tasted the slightly sour sweetness of the morning. It meant that I had spent all night here, next to Angela, albeit with my mouth unattractively hanging open. But Angela wanted me. She curled around me at night, made space for me in the house that was slowly becoming ours instead of hers. I tried to let that comfort me as Angela forced a smile and led her parents to the kitchen table.

I hadn’t seen the spread when I ran to hide Mandark but it was impressive. There was barely any room for the dish Angela’s parents brought. Not only were the good plates out, but the placemats were out as well and so was nearly every piece of silverware Angela owned. The food smelled delicious. The strawberry jam that Angela had spent weeks making would add just the right amount of sweetness to the spice I could smell in the breakfast sausage. Fresh bread lay, already sliced, on the table, and a plate piled high with pancakes sat in the middle of it all. I



immediately sat at my usual place at the table. Angela's mother scrunched up her brow at me before sitting to my left, in Angela's usual spot.

"So, Robert," Angela's mother said as Angela and her father sat down, "what do you do for a living?"

"Rob actually just took his EMT certification," Angela said.

"So you're not doing anything yet," her mother said.

"Well, hold on, Harriet, that might not be fair," her father said.

"Shush, Elliot."

Angela's father grimaced. His arms crossed in front of his chest and each of his hands began kneading the opposite arm.

"I've been working at Lincoln Medical," I said. My tentativeness made it sound like a question. "I interned there and they're going to keep me on."

"And how much will that make you?"

The atmosphere had shifted just over the border of hostility. I didn't want to start anything, but if I was going to have to hide my possessions, the extent of my relationship with Angela, and make my entry level job sound like a CEO-level position, something would slip sooner or later.

"I'm sorry," I said, smoothing my hands on my pants to keep calm. "Is there a problem?"

Angela's mother raised her eyebrows and pursed her lips. Her shoulders tensed, her posture ready to support what I'm sure was a biting verbal attack. But it never had a chance to come.

Chair legs screeched on the linoleum as Angela flopped to the floor. Some of the food fell to the floor, too. I didn't realize what was happening. I couldn't. Nothing like this had ever happened before, and there was no cause to believe it would happen to Angela. Instead of jumping into the crisis with a clear head, as I had been trained to do, I bent to pick up the plate of sausages and sat it back on the table. And then the shame reached me. My first real, unexpected crisis after my exam and I saved sausage before I saved a human being. A human being that I loved.

The directions started to flood my brain: *check for signs of consciousness.*

I shook her shoulders. For an absurd moment, I didn't know what name to shout. Angela? Baby? Sweetheart?

"Angela! Can you hear me?" I said. No response.

*Give bystanders specific jobs. Point at someone, address them, and tell them to call 911.*

Angela's mom screamed my name, her voice torn at the edges. "Do something!" she said.

"I'm going to, but you need to call 911," I said.

*Tilt the head back, and check the airway for obstructions.*

"But you're an EMT, you can save her now!"

"I don't have my bag here or any of the guys. Call 911!" While I shouted, I silently prayed that this was only a demented dream. Or that Angela would pop up, laugh, and explain that this was only a final training test that all EMTs go through and I passed spectacularly.

Angela's mother finally whipped out her phone as I bent my head forward and breathed into her daughter's mouth. I'd never get used to the sideways, slack-jawed kiss of CPR. It wasn't disgusting, just strange. I didn't even have a mouth guard, but it didn't really matter. I pushed

another exhale forward as forcefully as I could. If I could save her, I could be the hero. Angela's mother would have no reason to dislike me. I would be the man who brought the breath back into her daughter after that awful health scare, not the man trying to steal her daughter away.

I could make a difference here. I could be my girlfriend's salvation. I could be more than the guy who gave her compliments and bear hugs at the end of a rough day. I could give her years to live instead of the few seconds he had left. I wouldn't stop.

*One, two, three, four, five chest compressions. Hold the nose and breathe into the mouth. Listen for breath. One, two, three, four, five chest compressions...*

A strong grip roughly pulled me from my work. My head snapped about wildly, looking for the person responsible.

Dark, kind eyes. A square face. Jojo.

His mouth was moving, and I squinted, desperate to concentrate on his words.

"That's it, Rob. You did good, buddy, but it's over now." I vaguely became aware of distraught cries. Jojo started speaking again. "They said you've been at it this whole time. You've been pounded her chest for five minutes. It's over."

I looked over Jojo's shoulder. Angela's mother was breathing into a paper bag before muttering something about needing a toilet to throw up in. Angela's father's face was red, his eyes squeezed shut. His hair was no longer elegantly slicked back, and his hands stayed firmly planted over his mouth. Angela's body lay on the floor next to me. I must have missed the moment where it went still and stopped being a *she* and started being an *it*.

"There's nothing you could have done," Jojo said. The words sounded so effortless.

I didn't cry. I merely knelt on the cool floor and let time pass. My hands hurt, but everything else felt normal. I was kneeling next to my beautiful, dead girlfriend and I felt disturbingly normal. I was messed up. Death didn't just happen to people. It ripped their lives apart, made them sob and curse. But I knew there wasn't anything I could've done or could do.

Minutes without my noticing anything, and they rolled Angela out the front door. Fluffy fur tickled my ankles. I turned to see Angela's mom swaying slightly, gesturing to Mandark. She drew a shuddering breath.

"I didn't know she had a dog."

### III.

They put us in room four. They told me I could take as much time as I wanted. I wanted months. I wanted years, but I knew what they meant. The tech in the deceptively cheerful scrubs gave me a sympathetic look when I said it'd be awhile.

"Poke your head out when you're ready," she said, and she closed the door.

The examination table was smooth and speckled with different spots of gray finishing. The glare reflecting off of it from the too-bright halogens above made it look clinical, cold and uninviting. The words "execution slab" screeched into my brain, so I kept Mandark cradled in my arms. He was bundled in the blanket that he had stolen from me when I was ten, the one that covered his bed every night. I sat on the only chair in the room. Its plastic squeaked.

I ran my hand over Mandark's fur. It sifted easily through my fingers, soft and perfect. My mind detached for a moment, thinking instead of how beautiful it looked: my smooth, dark fingers combing through the fluffy white. He trembled after the fourth stroke. I parted the hair on

his forehead, and the pale skin of his scalp easily peeked through. My palm covered it and it was cool to the touch. If I rubbed harder and longer maybe it would warm, maybe he would feel like the dog he once was.

I shifted him in my arms and lowered my head to look into his eyes. I wanted to see the eyes that I had known for fifteen years. Those eyes were always happy to see me. They were always calm.

They were the eyes that had gotten me through hurricanes.

I had just graduated high school when Mandark and I got our own place. It was still in Florida, twenty minutes from my parents' house, but I didn't have nearly enough money to move out of state yet. I bought a jug of water when they announced the twin hurricanes were coming. I didn't think it'd be that serious. The worst we'd ever had to do after a hurricane was replace some siding.

The next day, after the first storm, the power was knocked out, and I lay sprawled over the couch in nothing but my boxers. The heat pressed against the hollows of my eyes and coated my body with slick sweat and condensation.

Mandark had laid, spread eagle, on the kitchen tile. Save for the occasional huff, he seemed pretty comfortable. He hadn't moved, at least. I unstuck myself from the couch and laid myself in front of him.

His eyes shifted, focusing on me. They were so incredibly dark and deep. I blew a puff of cold air in his face and snorted when he blinked.

"You lose," I said. And it was the last thing I said for the rest of the day.

We laid there, nose to nose, for hours. The cool tile chilled my sweat and I started to shiver, but still I didn't move. The sunlight waltzed around us, changing with time or climate, I did not know.

The buzzing of the streetlights had just begun before thunder and the rush of heavy rain drowned it out. Mandark and I rode it out together. The windows rattled and lightning cracked right outside the apartment, but neither of us budged. It was soothing to know that I had someone with me while the world smashed into itself outside. It was then that I knew I had made the right decision. Mandark and I were going to be just fine on our own, starting a new life together. My eyes closed first, but I heard the tiny yips of Mandark dreaming before I finally nodded off. When I woke up, Mandark was still there, and the hum of the refrigerator told me that the electricity was back.

Mandark's eyes looked shallow now. The exam room lights caught in the swirly mess of his cataracts. His eyes slid in my direction, but I couldn't be sure that he could see me, even as close as I was.

He had been lethargic since we moved up north. Angela had always thought he was just a lazy dog, but I knew him differently. Even at his laziest, though, he was never quite like he was now, shaking in my arms. More violent than Angela's passing.

"I'm sorry, buddy," I said. "So sorry that it's like this. I'm sorry you're in pain."

Before I knew what I was doing, I started rocking the both of us back and forth. My eyes started to hurt and there was a pull at the roof of my mouth. I sniffled and the sound startled me into a sob.

I pressed a wet kiss onto the top of Mandark's head.

“We had fun, right? You had a good life. I snuck you treats. Made you fat.” Another cry threatened to rip itself from my throat. I forced it into a shaky breath instead.

I took him to the beach. Celebrated his birthday every year. Let him play with every other dog he met. Brought him to live at Angela’s. Thoughts of her unfailing love filtered through my mind, and a strange thought overtook me, and I couldn’t help the wet noise that burst from my mouth.

“You never got laid, though!” I sobbed. “I’m so, so sorry.”

It was completely ridiculous, and I knew it. My body tried to giggle and cry at the same time, but it resulted in a copious amount of snot shooting out of my nose. Mandark didn’t react at all.

My chest hurt. My heart. Mandark always pawed at me or nuzzled me or did *something* when he knew I was upset. The bundle in my arms was becoming less like Mandark with every second, and I didn’t want to stick around to see what would be left when all of him was gone.

I stood up slowly, awkwardly opened the door with Mandark still in my arms, and stuck my head out the door.

“Um, I think it’s time.”

Mercifully, the vet came in soon after.

“I’m going to need you to place him on the table,” she said. “You can still keep an arm on his back or on his head, but I need him to be on a stable surface.”

I was not a stable surface, so I did as she said.

The vet pulled out two syringes.

“I’m going to give him two shots,” she said. “The first is a sedative. It’ll make sure that

he goes peacefully in his sleep. The second will take a minute or two, but it will slow his heart rate down until it stops. Are you ready?"

It was too much. I was just a guy cradling his best friend. I couldn't give that kill order. It would be heartless. And the awful throbbing in my chest made it painfully clear that I still had quite a heart left.

The vet saw my face and stepped closer to Mandark and me. "Here we go," she said. She slowly stuck the needle in his side.

"He's going to be asleep soon," she said. "Now's the time to tell him what a good puppy he is." The sentiment was nice, but her voice was off. It was the overly placating voice of a parent forced to check for monsters under their kid's bed. But it was going to be over soon, and what she said made sense.

"Goodnight, Mandark. I love you. You were *such* a good doggy."

I tried to look him in the eyes again, but they shut too quickly. I wiped my face with my already-wet sleeve.

"I'm going to do the second injection now," the vet said.

Time dragged forward, until that moment when Mandark became too still. I looked up. The vet nodded and told me to take my time before she left the room.

My spine straightened. The dog on the table looked foreign. As if Mandark had been deflated. I pushed my fingers through the fur on his back. It felt eerie. My own hair stood up on end. The body beneath my fingers was too pliant. It didn't absorb the motion of my hand at all. Because that's all it was now: a body. A minute after the second injection the last bits of Mandark drifted away. Someone became something. As it had many times before.



I didn't want to cry in a room with this thing that I no longer knew. So I wrapped a little excess flap of Mandark's blanket around the head and left to go cry in my car.

I bent my head over the steering wheel and started sobbing so hard that it quickly devolved into coughing and heaving.

I was getting used to crying in my car. After Angela, I couldn't stay in the hospital room for very long to mourn. Only her immediate family had that privilege. So I found solace in the most private place I could think of. It was awkward then, too. People getting in and out of their cars, rushing to see sick loved ones, and there I was. In the middle of the parking lot, in full view, whimpering and bawling.

I had no body to hold in either instance. I wanted something to bury or sprinkle or keep in an urn above the fireplace. I wanted *something*.

If I couldn't have the life, the energy, the motion of Angela or Mandark, I wanted the empty shell. Because something was better than nothing. I had to believe that stroking Angela's hair or Mandark's fur was far better than clutching the steering wheel of my car with a death grip.

I didn't want to leave the rooms that they were in. I didn't want either of them to be alone, even though I knew that they were far away, if anywhere.

Crying in the car sucked. I deserved to be with the people I loved. Especially when they had left me alone. I made Angela laugh. I kept Mandark active. I liked to believe that I brought something unique into their lives. I deserved to be in the rooms with them way more than a random vet tech or Angela's family, who had caused her so much stress.

But they had already been taken. It was over. So I sat in the car and let myself be hypnotized by the texture and imperfection of the dashboard. My vision blurred in and out of focus while I clutched at anything solid – the gear shift, the radio knobs, and the A/C vent – to root me in the pain.

### **INTERLUDE #3**

I've been to memorials and funerals before. People in black gathered around a ceramic jar painted with flowers. I tried to imagine that it was my grandmother or grandfather or anyone I loved instead, just to see what it felt like. But I found that I didn't really want to. My heart wasn't in the hypothetical, so I stopped trying. And then it was over. Everybody went home and moved on.

## OPEN CASKET

The hair swirled and clumped in graceless circles as I swept. They began to look like creatures the more I carried on: curled and sleeping, tired after the long day. The white puffs were from Mrs. Baez who came every other week to get her hair cut and styled. Not that there was any much of it left to style. The specks of glitter were from a girl going to a quinceñera too shy to make an appointment. The sparkles in the makeup seemed to make her smile a bit more, so I gave her a shit ton.

The bell above the door chimed as the door swung open. Should've locked it first, damn it.

"We're closed," I said. I kept my back to the door, hoping it would be a deterrent for whomever decided it would be a good idea to get a haircut at five past fucking six.

"Jeannie?"

I turned. Maria stood by the front desk, darkened into a silhouette by the setting sun shining through the glass door behind her. Her hair looked terrible. It was scrunched up on one side, like she had been yanking on it. I couldn't see her face; the light behind her was too bright. It was her thin frame and giant ass, though.

"What's up?" I said, keeping my grip on the broom. I wasn't going to stop sweeping just for her. She came in practically every day to gossip, and her theories of who got Mr. Gonzalez from the bodega down the street into the sack didn't warrant me staying at the salon any later than I had to.

She drew in a shaky breath, and it was then that I stepped forward to really look at her.

Maria held her arms loosely crossed in front of her. Her eyeliner was smudged at the

corner of her eyes, as if she had been rubbing them. She looked like hell.

“Was it Benny?” I said. She flinched as I said his name. I let the broom clatter to the floor and rushed to her. I unfolded her arms and started looking for blemishes, bruises, anything. She shook her head, but I kept looking. “I swear, that stupid sonofabitch-“

“Benny’s dead.”

I stepped back, eyes wide.

“Dead?”

“Motorcycle accident. Cops came and told me.”

“When?” I asked.

“Last night. We had a fight. He left. I thought he was just blowing off steam today. But his face got pretty messed up and it took them a long time,” she paused, shuddered a bit, “to identify him and contact me.”

“Where’s Cecile?”

Maria answered by not answering.

“Jesus. You can’t just leave a kid at home like that when shit like this happens.” I grabbed my coat and nudged Maria out the front door of the salon. I turned to lock up and Maria began muttering details of what the cops told her – how fast he was going, what road he was on – without even bothering with an excuse for why she left Cecile alone. I nodded as I hurriedly put the chain on the door. Her words were drowned out for a moment as I pulled down the cold, metal grate over the salon-front. I didn’t ask her to repeat any of it.

Maria’s house was only a block from the salon. Usually Jovanotti songs blared from the iHome in the kitchen, but silence greeted us when Maria’s hands finally stopped shaking and she

could get her keys in the door.

Maria went straight to the kitchen table and sat, head in her hands. I hesitated, wondering what the hell I should do. Why wasn't she calling for Cecile? Why wasn't she a sobbing mess on the linoleum? Or putting on a brave face and making funeral arrangements?

"Cecile?" I called, tentatively.

"She won't come out," Maria said. "Locked herself in her room after I told her."

"And you just left her? The fuck, Maria?"

I loved my friend, truly. Maria kept me sane. She unwound me when work had me tied up and tense. She listened without judgment and loved all despite reason. But dammit if she wasn't an irresponsible mother. Dammit if she didn't deserve the angel that was her little Cecile.

Maria lifted her head and laid her hands on the table. Her fingers scrabbled at the wood, searching for purchase in the smooth swirls of cedar. She eventually paused and gestured for me to sit opposite her. The chair screeched against the linoleum.

"I came to you because I had a favor to ask," Maria said.

"Okay?"

What did she want? Money for the funeral? Working the salon didn't pay much. Making the arrangements? Calling the family? Maria's family sucked. Out of the two family functions Maria invited me too, one was spent convincing an aunt that I was not Maria's lesbian lover, and the other was spent hiding from her rather handsy father.

"I want you to do Benny's hair and makeup."

"Excuse me?"

"Benny's hair and makeup. For the funeral."

We lived in the part of the Bronx where anything you could possibly need was in a two-block radius. A gym, three Starbucks, a lingerie shop. Even a weird, voodoo, witch shop run by a round-faced man in huge glasses. Surely there was a mortician somewhere nearby.

“I don’t think that’s allowed.”

“Sure it is,” Maria said. She waved her hand in dismissal. “What, you think there’s some special mortician school?”

“I’m pretty sure there is-“

“Well, too bad. We’re already tight on money, and I want Benny to have an open casket.”

“Maria, I really don’t think I can do this.”

She looked at me for a moment before getting up. She fiddled with the dishes piled in the sink. The harsh clanking of the porcelain made my shoulders tense.

“We’ve known each other since grade school, Jeannie. I bailed you out of shit. You’ve bailed me out of shit. Hell, even Benny’s bailed you out of shit.”

I tense even more. She continues.

“We’re family, and family fucking does stuff for each other. So you’re gonna fucking do this for me.”

I knew from years of experience that whenever Maria started using the F-word liberally, it meant that she was in stubborn ass mode, and I’d better agree to whatever messed up plan she had.

“Fine,” I said. Maria shrunk at my words. The anger wrinkles disappeared from her forehead. Her hands drifted uselessly to her sides.

The empty space of the kitchen pressed against her, making her into something smaller,

lesser than she was. The dust swirls, catching the last light of the day, swung into her.

After a moment of stillness, her body shook. Her eyes shut, and her forehead crinkled. Pain, and painful to watch.

As a reflex, I stood, walked to her, and pulled her into me. Her face was hot against my neck, but not wet. I held her close as the tearless sobs tore through her. It felt good. For a moment, we were kids again, and she was crying because she failed another math test. For a moment, I was the only good thing in her world, and damn it if I didn't feel good about that. I'd find Cecile later, when I wasn't being so selfish. But at that moment, I didn't want to move.

#

The room was surprisingly well lit. I always thought rooms where this stuff happens were dark. Crematoriums with walls black from soot, morgues with flickering lights, coffins kept in rows in the dark. That sort of thing.

The walls in this room were white, as were the cabinets. It looked like a doctor's office, without the annoying posters reminding you to get a flu shot and wash your hands.

Tori flitted around the room, opening cabinets at random and taking a bottle here, some gauze there. I had only met her a few hours previously, and I already screwed up.

"But you're pretty," I had said after she told me her name.

"Thanks."

"No, but you're *too* pretty."

I meant to say that she was too pretty to fit the stereotype of this profession. Too pretty to only be seen by guys and girls too stiff to compliment her. It was still a douche-y sentiment, but it



was made all the more douche-y by my absolute lack of tact.

“Um, all right,” she had said.

Now, she bent over Benny’s body, swiping his face with a small makeup pad. Her movements were minute and gentle, as if she were afraid of hurting him. She looked up and caught me staring.

“I told you that you don’t have to watch this part. It’s totally fine if it weirds you out. It usually does when it’s family on the table. I’m almost done anyway.”

“Oh, no. No, I’m fine.”

Even if Maria hadn’t thrown a fit when she found out I couldn’t do the makeup, even if she hadn’t insisted that I sit with Tori and “make sure she does everything right,” I would have stayed in the room. It was fascinating.

Benny had been shot up hours ago with the chemicals to keep him from decomposing. He was dressed when I came in the room. Maria had sprung for a new suit. “Cecile can wear the same uniform to school next year,” she had said. It was the only time I ever wanted to rip clothes off of Benny.

He looked more peaceful now than he ever looked passed out drunk: eyes fully closed, limbs laying in an orderly manner, and chest still. No sign of trauma save for the tiny abrasions on his face that Tori was almost finished covering.

“Maria really doesn’t trust anyone around this guy?”

I tore my eyes away from her dainty hands and focused on her face.

“Sorry,” Tori said. “I just don’t get too many people observing this part.”

I focused on the subtle pinstripes of Benny’s suit for a few moments before responding.

“Benny was the kind of guy you couldn’t leave alone for too long.” I said. “He’d find some way to get in trouble.”

Tori chuckled. “I don’t think you have to worry about that now.”

I tightened my mouth into something I hoped looked like a smile. She bowed her head a little, like a sort of apology for her gallows humor.

“Well,” Tori said, straightening, “I’m done with the restructuring. His face was pretty bad, but there was a lot of it was on his torso, and the suit covers it nicely.” She hesitated, and a few strands of hair fell across her face. “I know Maria made you bring the makeup. Saw the bag when you walked in.” She pointed to the bag that I had hastily stowed under my chair, which was packed to the brim with Maria-approved cosmetics. “You want to...?”

Tori gestured to Benny’s face.

My intestines twisted. My neck prickled. I had the sudden urge to go to the bathroom. Or to remember an important errand on the other side of the city. The other side of the world.

Tori must have read that on my face, because she held up her hands in reassurance.

“It’s totally okay if you don’t want to,” she said. “Maria just said that you all were close. That you had done her makeup since you were kids and gave Benny every haircut he ever had for the past ten years.”

Because we were family. I did those things for Maria. Because she needed me. And I needed her to need me.

My body stood without my brain ever thinking of the action. I brought the makeup bag from under my chair and placed it on the table where her tools lay. Then I turned to face Benny.

Bodies without life seem deflated, lesser somehow. Everyone looks smaller in death,

without the benefit of motion to remind everyone how much space we take up. Dead bodies are absolute, indelible shells of the life that once was. Marked by mistakes and injuries, but unmoving.

From the chair in which I sat while Tori completed her work, I could simply write off Benny as a prop in the room. This close, I couldn't deny the hollowed look of the body in front of me. As a man who spent his life taking up as much room on the couch as he could, his slight form on the gurney in front of me was almost laughable.

I pulled the foundation from my bag, holding it up for Tori's approval.

"Yeah, he's primed," she said. "You can use pretty much any makeup on him now."

I dabbed some of the makeup onto a sponge wedge and hovered it over his face for a moment, unsure of where to start. I finally settled on his cheekbone, taking the sponge across his face in an ungraceful swipe. I immediately looked to Tori, expecting her to take the sponge from me. She nodded instead, urging me on.

I brushed the sponge over Benny's cheek again, blending the foundation. I tried to mimic Tori's care, her attention to detail, but my fingers trembled too much.

The sensation of applying pressure to his face was different. Where a living person would absorb and react to the movement, Benny was unyielding. I was putting makeup on a rock.

Some of the foundation built up in his premature wrinkles. Two lighter lines of beige spread from his nose and curved around his thin lips.

"Easy fix," Tori said. She came around the gurney to stand next to me. Her hand reached for the sponge in my hand. She hesitated, eyebrows raised as if asking a question, and then took my hand in hers.

“Use the big end of the wedge, where the big corners are.” She guided my hand down, smoothing the collected makeup across Benny’s skin. “See?”

“Thanks,” I said. Her hand was warm on mine, another stereotype busted. “I’ll have to remember that the next time I do this.”

She laughed and let go.

I set the sponge down and picked up an eyebrow pencil.

“He always had terrible eyebrows,” I said.

“Yeah, looks like a dismembered caterpillar.”

I laughed, bent down, and touched the side of Benny’s face.

It’s what I always did for clients before applying any kind of fine makeup to their faces. I gently held their cheek to reassure them that I wasn’t going to hurt them and to make sure that they didn’t move. Benny did not need my touch for either of these reasons, or for any reason at all.

He was so cold that my hand quickly jerked away.

“You okay?” Tori said.

“I’m fine. It’s like touching a frog.” I heard my words as if they were spoken by a different person. They sounded childish, but Tori laughed anyway.

“Yeah,” she said. “I guess so.”

I placed my left hand on the gurney beside his head to satisfy the reflex. Then I lowered my right hand, with the pencil, to his face, taking care not to touch him.

The dark brown began filling the missing patches of hair and rounding out what little eyebrows he did have. Concentrating so intensely on one feature of the face, I could almost

pretend that it wasn't Benny under my hand. I could focus on the shape of the brow and the structure I was implementing. For a moment, I was an artist. Back in my element. I made beauty out of mediocrity.

And then I touched him again.

It was quick: a small brush of my pinky against the bridge of his nose. But it was enough to frighten me again. I jumped, and the pencil slid against the upper part of his eyelid.

An ugly slash of brown marked his face, and my breath caught. I'd seen this kind of mark before.

Maria called me that night sobbing. I found her on her front stoop a few minutes later, hugging her knees to her chest and pressing toilet paper to her face.

"Let me see. Stop it, let me fucking see," I said.

She slowly lowered her hand. A small cut ran from just above her eyebrow to just below the crease of her eyelid. It wasn't much, but it was more than there ever should be.

"Where's Cecile?"

"At a sleepover."

"Good," I said. "Get in my car. I'm taking you home."

"It's really not that bad."

"You called me. Now get in the fucking car."

"My medication--"

"I'll get it if you get in the car," I said. I pressed the keys into her hands and nudged her toward my beat up piece of crap. She shakily opened the door and stepped in. "Lock the doors," I said.

The inside of the house was dark. Death metal blared, distorted, from the iHome in the kitchen. The lack of light and the abundance of noise dulled my senses, sending pinpricks of green and blue across my vision and a pounding in my head, like a bad dream. I nearly tripped over the laundry basket on my way to the bathroom, but I didn't dare turn on a light.

I felt my way through the medicine cabinet. I picked up a bottle at random, held it up, and squinted. The tiny words on the label looking nothing like "Lithane." I stuck my hand back in the cabinet.

*Square bottle, square bottle, square bottle, where the fuck are you?*

On the bottom shelf, I found it. It hid behind other, smaller bottles, and I had to carefully extract it. I held it up to whatever dim lighting there was. The first letter on the label was definitely an "L", and that's all I needed to haul ass out of there.

My heart stopped when Benny's silhouette appeared in the hallway in front of me.

"The hell you doing here?" he said.

"Getting medicine."

"Where's Maria?"

"She's coming with me." I tried to keep my voice calm, but I had to raise it to even be heard over the guitars wailing from the speakers.

I tested my limits, inching forward a step at a time. I couldn't see his face to tell if this was an acceptable move. He didn't move to stop me, so I slid past him and headed for the door.

"Didn't realize it was Dyke Day."

The words were a whip to my back. Gut-wrenching shock replaced seconds later with absolute horror and pain. The words brought me to a halt at the front door.

“Excuse me?” It was the only sentence I could think to sputter out. It was a phrase I used when Cecile said something mildly disrespectful or when Maria had a rather intrusive piece of gossip.

I realized it was the wrong thing to say once Benny started moving toward me.

“You heard me. You think this’ll be the time she leaves me for you?”

“You think that’s what this is about? That I’m taking Maria away so that I can get in her pants?”

“Don’t play fucking dumb,” he said. “Seen how you look at the girls in your salon.”

“So?” My knees were locked. My hands shook. One firmly gripped the rattling bottle of pills; the other stayed on the doorknob. “Who the hell cares how I look at other girls? I’m taking your wife away because you fucking hit her.” I spit the words out, acid on my tongue.

He stepped closer, nearly pressing up against me. He took a long, slow breath, and I smelled mint. The spit in his smile glinted in the dark.

“Promise I’ll be good if you let me watch.”

Disgust ripped every retort from me. I turned the doorknob, determined to leave, no matter what the consequences.

Benny did nothing, both of us surprised at my sudden movement. I sprinted to my car and took Maria home, both of us silent as the grave.

I blinked, and the memory disappeared. I was back in the white room with that fucker’s body underneath my hand, and I was laughing.

It was hilarious. Gorgeous, wet, wonderful laughter spilled out of my throat, and I did nothing to stop it. I snorted.

Benny looked fucking ridiculous, and it was the best thing in the world.

Tori came beside me, gently taking the eyebrow pencil from my hand.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I shouldn’t have even suggested it.”

She hugged me. Her arms squeezed me too briefly, and I felt colder afterward. I shook as she let me go. The hysterics had taken over my body like an unknown puppeteer. My hands flopped like a marionettes, trying to convey something, anything.

“He’s in a better place now,” Tori said.

She placed a hand on the small of my back and guided me from the room.

“I’ll finish him up. I promise I’ll take good care of him. You can wait in the hall until I’m done, okay?”

I nodded, and she shut the door behind me.

The last I saw of Benny was that small, brown line on his eyelid.



## **INTERLUDE #4**

And that's all I know about dead people. Their faces become incomplete memories and flat photographs. They become bittersweet reminders of the incredible joys of life and its inevitable end.

## THE J FAMILY

“John? John, for god sakes, pick up. Well, fine. Just make sure Jessa takes her medicine. And she still needs to call me every night, John. You two have fun.”

The machine beeps and falls silent.

*She's got medicine?*

I walk to the small bathroom in the hall and start to rummage through Jessa's sparkly bag. Stuffed at the bottom are two bottles of pills.

“Great,” I say before looking closer at the labels. Something for digestion. What, does she poop uncontrollably now? That'd be too much. I jam the pills back into the bag.

I lift my head and force myself to meet my own eyes in the mirror. It's not a super attractive sight. My chin is spattered with a sorry excuse for stubble, and my eyes won't open any further than halfway. Every man I've ever seen with a kid of his own has a certain look about him. A surety in his motions, a sixth sense that seems to school his expressions for him when his child acts up or supplies him with the correct words of advice in times of trouble. I do not have this look. Nor do I feel like a father.

I never avoided fatherhood outright. But when Joan gave birth to Jessa, I wasn't tethered to the ground anymore; I was tethered to this cute bundle of enormous responsibility. I realized that for the rest of my life, I'd be measured by the way my daughter did in school, by her participation in clubs or sports, by her happiness. My life wasn't my own anymore, and that was too much to ask of me. A week out of the year was a good enough time.

The bed in the spare room creaks, and Jessa arrives in the doorway a few moments later. Her eyes are huge and she looks fully alert, which is beyond me. It's still mostly dark outside.

How the hell do kids get up so early without an alarm when they run around yelling and playing all day?

We stare at each other for a few moments before my face contorts and I let out a loud sneeze.

“Mommy calls that a screeze,” Jessa says.

“Huh?”

“A scream sneeze.”

I’d heard her mom call it that when we were together. Joan hated when I sneezed loudly, but I couldn’t help it. Joan usually came with Jessa. Dropped her off with me at the airport and spent the week in the city while I had Jessa. This time her cousin was flying back into La Guardia around the same time as my custody week, so Jessa flew with her.

Normally I had a few minutes to see Jessa and Joan side by side. I had a chance to see Joan’s eyes on Jessa’s face. Joan’s features mixed with mine, the one thing that was still shared. I like seeing some evidence that, at one point, Joan and I were together. We were a unit, a team, an us. It is so easy to let time wash out my memories, bleach them into an unemotional past. But whenever I picked up Jessa at the airport, for the briefest of moments, the three of us would be together. The memories would come rushing back, and the ‘what if’s would bounce around my imagination. As much as it sucked in the end, I’m addicted to the memories of having someone, of having Joan. A perverse part of me wants that family, but only for a moment.

Without that moment of connection, the made up term sounds strange coming from Jessa’s mouth. I nod, unsure of how else to respond. She stands there for a few moments, leveling me with her giant eyes.

“I have to go to the bathroom, John.”

“Oh, right,” I say, moving into the hallway. The hall isn’t too spacious, and the hem of her nightgown brushes my leg as she passes me.

She’s been calling me John since I picked her up from the airport last night. The summer before she called me Dad, and the one before that she couldn’t say much of anything. I guess I don’t mind being called John.

I head to my room and start getting dressed. The heavy, stiff smell of suits hits me as soon as I open my closet doors. I choose a deep purple shirt and pair it with one of the more plain jackets. Black slacks, black tie, and a purple pocket square. My shoes, shined the night before, squeak a little as I slide them smoothly over my dress sock covered feet.

I pause to look at myself in the mirror next to the closet. Free of soap streaks or dust, it’s the one thing in the apartment, my suits excepted, that I clean regularly.

I flex my arms and twist my torso a little, finding a little give in the jacket. The thick cloth runs smooth down my sides. I stand a little straighter, tugging imaginary wrinkles from the suit.

After a few moments, I reluctantly leave the mirror and head downstairs. Jessa sits at the breakfast bar with a Betty & Veronica Double Digest, flipping the pages too fast to be reading them.

“You like that?” I ask. I picked it up at a newsstand the day before last. I don’t own any storybooks or sing-alongs, and it was a buck twenty-five.

“What’s her name?” She turns the book around and points to a small panel taken over by vibrant red hair.

“Cheryl Blossom,” I say.

“I like her. She’s pretty.”

She flips five more pages in a matter of seconds.

“You take your pills?” I ask. Jessa looks at me, confused. “The pills in the bottles in the bag upstairs. Did you take what you needed?”

“You gotta sprinkle it,” she says.

I need a translator to talk to this kid.

“Sprinkle?”

“On applesauce. That’s what Mommy does.”

I go upstairs to retrieve the bottles. Both labels read: “May sprinkle capsule contents on unheated applesauce.” Infuriatingly specific.

“I don’t have any applesauce,” I say as I come down the stairs once more, a bottle in each hand. “Cereal is going to have to do.” Jessa doesn’t look up from the Double Digest. No protest from her. Must not be that bad if her medicine is altered, then.

My shoes squeal on the wood floors as I turn to the cabinets and pull down two bowls. I feel an undercurrent of guilt, turning my back on her. It’s something that George taught me when he first gave me a job: don’t turn your back on the client. She doesn’t seem to mind as the flutter of a few more pages reaches my ears.

“Want some cereal?”

“Yes.”

I reach into the pantry without looking and find the only box on the second shelf, take it out, and pour the cereal into both bowls. Should I let her pour her own milk? Could she even hold up the jug with her little arms?

I eventually pour the milk myself, ending my internal debate, and scoot the bowl in front of her. She gives it a cursory glance and looks at me.

“I don’t like this.”

“What do you mean, ‘you don’t like this’?” I say. “You haven’t tried it.”

“I don’t like this.”

“Well I poured it for you, so you should have a bite.” My face feels hot. The suit is suddenly too tight, and I tug the bottom of the jacket to straighten it. The moment stretches on, seconds taut and tight, and I’m waiting for the awful instant when it snaps.

Jessa grabs the spoon awkwardly and brings a few cornflakes to her lips. She chews with a sour face and swallows painfully.

Her huge eyes lock onto mine with ferocity, and I try to curl my toes in my unyielding shoes to keep myself from taking a step back.

“I tried something new,” she says. “I don’t have to try anything else new for the rest of the day.”

“Okay. Did you like it?” Stupid, idiotic question.

“No!”

My eyes dart around the pantry, searching for a magical breakfast feast that will spontaneously appear.

“Well, that’s all I have.”

“I don’t want it.”

I try to chew my cornflakes as loudly as possible to kill the silence this time. They have stores for pet food and plant food; why the hell don’t they have stores for kid food? Food that won’t cause tantrums or illogical arguments or this god-awful, unending silence. I need to patent that idea. I could be a millionaire.

When I scrape the last of the soggy flakes into my mouth and drain my bowl into the sink, I turn to face her unwavering stare once more.

“I need you to get dressed,” I say. She doesn’t move. “Your mom already picked out all of your outfits for you.”

Once we make it up the stairs and into the spare bedroom, I find that the contents of Jessa’s suitcase have already been spilled out onto the floor. I glance at my watch. I need to leave in ten minutes if I’m going to make it on time. Taking care of another human being definitely does not fit into my schedule. Especially when that human has disrupted all of the prearranged outfits.

“I wanted to find my other Barbie,” she says when I ask her for an explanation to the mess.

I crouch down, careful not to rest on my knees and dirty my slacks. There’s a handful of neon leggings tangled together not too far from a small turtleneck and coat.

“How about this?” I hold up the turtleneck.

“No!” She stumbles back from it like it’s a straitjacket. I briefly wonder if Joan sent all of Jessa’s least favorite clothes just to mess with me. She must at home giggling at the thought of me having to wrestle a little girl into wearing whatever awful outfits she sent over.

“Fine, what about this?” I hold up another shirt at random and Joan nods before I can properly look at it. Of course, I picked up the pink, bedazzled atrocity with the word “Diva” emblazoned on the front. The top of the ‘D’ spiked into devil horns and the tail of the ‘A’ curved into a devil’s tail. They make these shirts for children?

“You can’t wear this. Not to my work.”

“No! I want to wear it!”

“You really cannot wear this,” I say. I look at my watch again. Seven minutes until I need to leave. “How about this one instead?” I hold up a plain green shirt.

“I want to wear the pink one!” Her high, slightly lisping voice is working itself into a yell, and everything within me seems to clench up at once.

My home is for me. The rooms are filled with things that make me happy: books, a TV, a few pieces of art. I eat my breakfast quietly while I browse news articles on my phone. I go out when I feel like it. I don’t plan meals.

My home is not a place for arguing. Raised voices have never had a place in my rooms. My schedule does not allow for another’s likes or dislikes. My life does not have room for dependence. It’s only been one day, and Jessa is already making me tense at every bump in the road.

Frustration raises my own voice several notches. “You’re wearing the green one. Put it on now.”

She doesn’t protest, but she doesn’t move to change either. Instead, she offers her hands up to the ceiling, her arms barely stretching past her large head. Children have frighteningly



large heads. I realize after a moment that she needs me to change her, and I gently tug the nightgown up and off her before quickly pulling the green shirt and matching leggings on her.

“My daddy lets me wear the pink shirt,” she says as I put her socks and boots on.

I know that I should protest here, assert who I am and how awful the shirt is, but instead I ask, “Your daddy?”

“My other daddy. That lives with Mommy.”

That explains why I’ve been demoted to “John” then. I can’t immediately tell if that makes everything worse or better. “Daddy” is too frightening, but so is being called “John” when I’ve been pushed into it by some unknown idiot who jumped into the father role willingly.

She’s dressed, and that’s all we need for now. No time for existential crises.

“Come on. You can bring two toys.”

Jessa quickly gathers as many toys as she can into her arms. A stuffed animal under each arm and a Barbie in each hand.

“Whatever,” I say.

#

It’s 8:10 when the front door of the funeral parlor shuts behind us, cutting off the cold wind at our backs. The lobby is bright. Two crystal chandeliers throw bold blocks of color and light onto the ceiling. The carpet is a terrible shade of aquamarine, but it cushions feet like a dream. George put a lot of thought into the color of the walls when he first started the place and settled with a nonthreatening, light tan: not as harsh as white, but not as homey as a darker brown would have been.

I don't even take off Jessa's coat or my own. Instead, I lead her by the arm to the offices. I want George to see that I'm here, barely late. The family hasn't even arrived yet.

George isn't in the lobby when we pass through, so I beeline for my shared office with him.

"Hey," George says as I open the door. "You're late."

"I know," I gesture to Jessa as an explanation. "The flowers come in yet?"

"Yeah. Already in the main room. Everything's all set up. You didn't have to worry about this one. We already had it taken care of."

"I know," I say. I turn to Jessa. "You can play in the hall. Do not go into the main room. Do not talk to anyone wearing black. I need to work for a bit."

I nudge her into the hall and she goes without protest. I shut the door behind her and sink into the chair at my desk.

"You sure you should do that?" George asks.

"Do what?" I say through my hands on my face.

"Leave her out there like that."

"It's for my own sanity."

"That bad?"

"Every time I get two seconds alone I feel like I'm going to spew a bunch of profanities, 'King's Speech' style."

"You could've taken time off," George says.

I know I could've. George is a generous boss. A kind man. But I don't see it as kindness when it means that I have to constantly supervise another human being.

I sit up and take my hands from my face, not sure whether my hands are clammy or my face is sweaty. “Joan’s with another guy.”

George swivels his chair side to side, as if he needs to slosh the information around inside of him before he can come up with an intelligent response.

“Does he have a ‘J’ name too?” he asks.

I let out a laugh, short and ugly.

Joan is crazy about names. She said that us having a shared first initial was an indicator of our compatibility as soul mates, or something. She insisted on naming our child something with a “J.” It was a big deal to her, and I began to wonder if George’s question held some validity in it as I boot up my computer and run through my daily e-mails.

Names mean nothing. They’re just a noise someone makes when they want your attention. Joan liking the noise assigned to me seemed to make her think it would make her like me. Maybe that’s why she gave Jessa a ‘J’ name: one last-ditch effort to brand her as mine. To make me want the ‘J’ family life.

I look for the time in the lower right hand corner of the computer screen.

“Crap,” I say. “The family will be here soon.”

I get up and stick my head into the hallway. The lights are off to save money on electricity, and the only dim light comes through the small window at the end. Save for the radiator, there’s nothing in the hallway.

“Where the hell is she?”

“Hm?”

“Jessa. Did you see which way she went?”

“I’ve been in here this whole time. How was I gonna see which way she went?”

My heart starts pounding and the reverberations pulse uncomfortably through my arms and into my fingers. A muscle tic starts throbbing just above my right knee. I tear down the hallway and scan the lobby. She’s not behind any of the plush, upholstered armchairs. Not under the coffee table.

I hardly waste any time in the bathroom, immediately dropping to my hands and knees upon entering. I crawl past each stall, checking for small feet. Nothing.

As soon as I open the doors to the main room, I know I’ve found her. I can hear her soft murmuring. She’s standing on tiptoes at the edge of the casket.

“No!” I nearly trip as I break into a sudden sprint down the main aisle. “Don’t touch him.”

Jessa looks up at me, confused. I realize then what I must look like, and I nervously smooth my hair and straighten my jacket.

“We don’t touch people in these,” I say, gesturing to the casket. I look inside for the first time. The guy’s wearing too much makeup, but maybe that was his thing when he was alive. He looks barely peaceful. Faint age lines slice across his forehead.

“He doesn’t have a pet,” Jessa says, holding up a stuffed animal.

“He doesn’t need one.”

“But he’s sleeping.” She speaks slowly, exasperated. She’s so full of conviction. He *needs* a stuffed animal. Sleeping people always have stuffed animals, and she’s determined to set right this terrible oversight.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I say. My mouth hangs open, waiting for more words to push through it, but I have nothing. I have no idea what Joan’s taught her about life and death. What words explain this to a five year old without the crushing fear that we’re all going to fade into nothing one day? I eventually settle on, “He’s in a really deep sleep.”

That will probably bite me in the ass later, but I can’t bear to bring this existential crisis down on her now. Not when she looks so concerned for the dead man.

She suddenly lifts herself on her tiptoes again and gently flings her stuffed elephant into the casket. It bounces a little on the man’s face and settles next to his neck.

I gawk for a moment, shocked at the irreverence of it all. I look down at Jessa, and, in the light, I finally notice that her giant eyes are green. They’re not particularly vibrant, but I can’t find it in myself to look anywhere else. Her eyebrows scrunch together, confused and hurt that I don’t want this man to have a stuffed animal snuggle with him as he lies in a polished box.

She needs discipline. She needs to learn that funeral parlors are not the place for pressing stuffed elephants on to unsuspecting corpses. She needs to learn that death is serious. This room is for serious things, and I am serious.

I give her a half-smile and say, “That was very nice of you.”

She beams.

“Let’s go back to the office.” I push her ahead of me, up the aisle. With her back to me, I carefully remove the elephant from the casket and place it next to the arrangements of flowers.

## **INTERLUDE #5**

We carry on with those that are left with us. I look around at my friends and family and switch between hoping I live longer than they do and hoping I die first so I don't have to feel their loss.

But these are all distant worries. In an office, on a biking trail, at the dinner table, death seems so far away that it doesn't even register as a thought.

## BAMBINA

Benny is dead, and mom is crying. That's how it's been since ten days ago when they cleaned him off the side of the road and two policemen showed up at our door with their caps removed.

But now Benny's *dead* dead. Like, in the coffin, stiff suit dead. His family is here. Dark panty hose and shiny black shoes shuffle in front of us. The nice ones stop and tell my mom that they're sorry, but most move along, trying to find a seat. When it's time to start, Mom pinches my sleeve and walks me to the front where we sit. I quicken my steps so it doesn't look like she's dragging me.

Fr. Luca from Precious Blood starts talking. Mom was able to get Fr. Luca to do the ceremony because Benny's parents are dead and his aunts and uncles only came into the city two days ago. They're all from Buffalo and have crinkly skin and shiny jewelry that stands out against their black clothes.

Fr. Luca has grown a goatee since we last went to church. It looks scraggly and bobs up and down while he talks about dust and eternity. I don't like it, so I turn my head down to the fraying red carpet.

Despite never meeting Benny, Fr. Luca sure has a lot to say about him. Light and life and the love of Jesus in him and all that.

#

I woke up in the middle of the night. It was a slow wake up. Feeling returned to my arms and then my legs, as if my body was testing if it should drop back to unconsciousness. Once I

could feel my back and sides, I knew there was no going back. I started to curl into a ball to fend off the aching pain, until I felt a warm slickness between my legs. I jumped off my bed and pulled the covers back. The soft glow of my green nightlight illuminated the edges of my bed but quickly turned to an imperfect circle of black in the middle. I ran my hand over it. The darkness was unpleasantly wet. I ripped the covers off the bed and let them fall to the floor. The wet had got on the mattress too, but the circle was smaller. I ran to the switch and turned the lights on. My eyes narrowed in the brightness. The same brightness that turned the dark on my mattress to a dull red. The color you sometimes see if you shut your eyes tight from the bright sun.

I remembered the wet between my thighs. I looked down. It looked like I was dying. I peeled my pajama pants off me.

There was too much blood. Il sangue, Mom would say when I scraped my knee too bad. The videos at school said there would be some blood, but it couldn't be this much. This was like the war movie that Mom caught me watching one day and spanked me so hard.

I poked my head out of my bedroom. Mom and Benny's door was closed. That meant no knocking, no interruptions. I'd have to take care of it myself.

I snuck into the bathroom. I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself, so instead of getting in the shower, I ran a washcloth under the sink and wiped my legs down. Then I wadded up some toilet paper, and stuck it in my underwear. When I got back to my room, I turned off the light before I could look at the mattress. I could pretend it was clean that way. I fell asleep there, no covers, just the cool air on my back.



#

The funeral home is in one of the old buildings on Wyoming Drive, squished between the gravestone place and a shoe place. The cold air from outside leeches in through the thin windows and the crack under the front door. It tickles my ears and makes my hair stand up. I rub my arms, but the long velvet sleeves chafe my arms. The draft picks up around my calves, and I shift, crossing my ankles and pressing my thighs together.

That's when I feel it.

My legs tighten, determined to add more to the discomfort. My back feels like it's bunching in on itself, like an accordion.

I shift again, and the wetness is for sure there, making it uncomfortable to sit. I can't tell if it's seeped through my panties and onto my dress, or even onto the seat cushion. My palms start to sweat as I look around at the other chairs in the room and see their white cushions. If I wait, it could get all over the chair, and everyone would see.

I look up at Mom. She's crying, and there's no way I can ask to leave. Now is not a good time. Now is never a good time.

Instead, I tighten every muscle below my waist and hope Fr. Luca's goatee will stop bobbing up and down soon.

#

It was Saturday, so my alarm didn't wake me. Usually Mom would gently slap me on the rear if I wasn't up by nine and mutter something about wasting the day. When my lids finally peeled themselves back from my eyeballs I saw that it was nearly half past ten. I jumped up.

I gathered up the sheets from the floor and bunched them in my arms until none of the blood was showing. I didn't like looking at it. I stuffed them in the bottom of my hamper and put on clean clothes.

I took off the ruined underwear and I stuffed them deep into the trashcan, and then carefully laid the trash that was already there until there was no sign of the grossness. Then I went downstairs.

Benny was sitting, half asleep, in front of the TV. He had been working graveyard shifts for the past couple of weeks since the diner extended their hours. He looked angry, even in this state. His fingers twitched every few seconds.

I'll wake him up once I count to seven, I thought. Then I counted past seven and promised myself I'd wake him up once I counted to twenty-one, because that was three times seven, and three and seven are both lucky numbers. And I needed lucky numbers.

I waited too long. He must have known someone was watching him, because he jolted. He nearly tipped the blue recliner over, but he swirled his arms gracelessly until he righted himself.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I need Mom to take me to the store."

"Your mom's at work," he said.

"Yeah, but I need stuff for school. And she knows what to get me," I lied.

"You know what to get?"

No. I really didn't know. I searched Mom's cabinets, but there was nothing. No pink boxes with women dancing on them, like in the commercials. Nothing but nail polish, baby powder, and a box of open pregnancy tests. I was screwed.

Benny stood up and walked to where his boots stood, by the back door.

"I'll take you. Get your coat."

#

It's Mom's turn to stand where Fr. Luca stood and speak. I hear low whispers. The woman two seats down from me crinkles her prayer card.

"Benny was one of a kind," Mom manages to say before sobbing. The rest of her words come out shaking and garbled. She starts listing out generic adjectives, but I don't even know if Benny was any of them. "Funny," she pauses to blow her nose, "smart, and nice."

I don't know about all that. For the most part, Benny was just there. Unless something set him off. Then Benny was here, there, and all up in your face. But at wakes you say nice things. You nod your head and forget the bad stuff.

But I can't forget the feeling between my legs. Maybe if I run to the bathroom now, she won't stop me. She won't make an even bigger scene in front of these people. Most of them we had just met, after all.

#

We walked into Walgreens, and the lights were too bright. Way too bright to sneak around, to sneak a box into my coat.

“You see what you need?” Benny said. I jumped.

“No, not yet. I think poster board is by the cards.”

Of course, cards. There was always something coming up. A friend’s birthday. His mom’s, maybe. He had a revolving door of friends and relatives. It was bound to be one of their birthdays soon.

“So maybe you could look at the cards? That way you’re not bored while I’m looking at poster board?”

“Cecile, seriously? Just pick out a poster board.” He smiled a little bit, but it was tight. The lines under his eyes crissed and crossed, making shapes. It was like the tangrams we played with in school. Except the shapes under Benny’s eyes were the color of the leftover turkey that Benny insisted we try every Thanksgiving.

It was a nice gesture and all, but it wasn’t the same as Mom’s lasagna, and he knew it. But he still tried to get us to like the things he liked. Do the things his family did. And if I didn’t like it, Mom would shush me and he would say, “Tough shit.” I learned to be quiet after too many holidays or dinners like that.

The Walgreens smelled in that itchy way, the way it smells when you stand right in front of an air vent backed up with lint. I took a few steps forward, hoping the smell would go away. It made it hard to concentrate.

“Easter!” I finally managed to shout.

“What?”

“Easter is coming up.”

“Yeah. In, like, three weeks.”

“So you need to get Mom a card. It’s important to us.”

“Seriously?”

“Si,” I said. “Devi pagare per una carta. A Mama piace mercoledì delle Ceneri.”

“Okay,” he said. “Meet me in the cards, then.”

It was mean, and kind of rude. But I needed him gone, and nothing made him squirm like Mom or me speaking a language that he only knew one or two phrases in. I didn’t know as much as Mom, but it didn’t matter. I could have been speaking nonsense and he still would have run away.

I waited until he turned into the aisle before quietly sprinting to the one marked “Feminine Hygiene.” I scanned the boxes quickly and began to devolve into panic.

None of these could fit into my coat. I walked farther down the aisle until I found the travel size packs. I glanced both ways twice before scooping up a travel pack of Tampax Regulars and shimmying them up my coat sleeve. The sleeves were tight enough to keep them in place.

I ran out of the aisle, desperate to flee the scene of the crime.

I found Benny in the cards aisle, where I left him.

“They don’t have what I was looking for,” I said.

“Poster board? It’s right over there,” he said.

“It’s not the right kind.” My face started to tingle. It itched. My ears burned. I forced my eyes to focus on Benny’s nose so they didn’t dart around suspiciously. I stared at his nose until everything around the center of my focus blurred and blackened into fuzzy pinpricks.

“Fine. Let me buy the card.”

There was electricity in my feet, my fingers. I wanted to run. Every bit of my body screamed to run forward, but my feet calmly walked with Benny to the cash register.

The girl behind the counter was chatting on her store-issued walkie talkie headset, and looked annoyed when Benny approached her.

The transaction took forever. She scanned the card and tapped her fingernails against the counter while Benny fished his wallet out of his back pocket. I bounced on my heels, convinced that motion would chase away the stupid needles of embarrassment that kept poking my face.

Finally the receipt printed and I made a beeline for the door. I had barely made it three steps when the cashier's walkie talkie beeped.

“Um, excuse me?” the cashier called out. Benny turned around. My stomach dropped. “My manager said your daughter took something? Could you check her pockets?”

Benny sighed, turned toward me, and rolled his eyes. And that's when I did it. My stupid, idiot brain was on flight mode. So I took a step back.

Benny stopped and tilted his head. My step back was enough to arouse suspicions of my guilt, and now he was searching for more. I tried desperately to look at his face, but the burning under the skin of my face locked my muscles in place.

“What is it?” was all he said. Not a “What's wrong?” way of asking, but a “What the hell was so important that you had to steal it?” way of asking.

I shook the travel box of tampons out of my sleeve and handed it to him. Once he started to look at the box, I glanced up at him.

He had an expression similar to the one he had when we walked in. However, instead of a tight smile, it was a tight frown. He handed the box to the cashier.

“Say you’re sorry.” He tilted his head down to me.

I looked at the cashier’s nametag. Terri. It was crooked.

“Sorry,” I said to the nametag. I looked at the floor.

“It’s fine,” Terri said. “I’ll just put them back.”

“No,” Benny said. “Ring them up. We’ll pay for them.”

The pinpricks traveled to my neck. My face felt so tingly that I thought it was going to fall off. I wanted to reach up to hold it in place. Instead I stood there, arms clenched to my sides, staring at the speckled carpet of Walgreens while Terri rung up my first tampons.

#

A lot of people want to talk to us after the funeral. Mom pinches my sleeve again, but I wrench away. Everybody has started to line up to view Benny, so I can’t see my chair anymore.

“Excuse me,” I tell Mom, who looks like she’s unraveling, “but I need to take care of something.”

I put a couple of steps between us. Then a lot. Then the bathroom door, and then I lock myself behind a pockmarked stall door. I bunch up my velvet skirt and shove down my panties.

There is nothing. I run my fingers over them just to be sure. Nothing but white cotton.

#

The car rattled even after Benny put it in park in the driveway. He had swiped the volume dial down as soon as we got in the car, so we rode home in silence.

He unbuckled his seatbelt and turned to me, but he left the car running. I stared straight ahead. I had cried a little bit at the store, but once the car gave me motion and some noise, I quieted. It distracted me from the terrible tingling in my face. The ride was soothing. But now we were home and Benny was staring and it was awful again.

“I’m disappointed in you, Cecile,” he said. That was something my mom said when she was angry. I didn’t like it. It left me with nothing to say. “Why did you try to steal this?” He held up the bag. Through the plastic, I saw the woman doing yoga.

He shook it a bit when I didn’t answer. The plastic bag rustled.

“We didn’t have any,” I said. It was the only thing I could say.

“And asking for it never crossed your mind?”

I didn’t answer again. He huffed.

“Do you know how much you embarrassed me?” he asked. My eyes snapped to his. The tangrams beneath his eyes pulled at each other as he kept talking. “They probably thought that I was using you to steal stuff. Do you know how bad that makes me look?”

He shook the bag again.

“Do you know what this means?” He tilted his head like he was waiting for an answer, but I knew he wasn’t. He was getting worked up. People didn’t like when you interrupted them getting worked up. “It means you’re not our bambina anymore. You’re a grown up. Grownups don’t steal.”

“Don’t call me that.”

Benny leaned back a little bit, and his eyes widened.

“What? ‘Bambina’?”



“I’m *not* your bambina!”

“That’s what I’m trying-“

“You’re not my dad. You don’t know-“

I stopped. He might not know what the blood and the grossness was like, but that didn’t mean that I wanted to tell him.

“Cecile?”

I looked up, and he was all blurry. I had started crying again and already my vision was fuzzy. I could see Benny, but not his face. I tried to picture a different face on him. A dad’s face. It didn’t work, so I cried some more.

“Here,” he said. He put something cool in my hand. It clicked softly as I moved it closer to my face. Colorful beads on an elastic band.

“Got it from one of those quarter machine things,” he said. “Remember we used to do those when you were little at the 7-Eleven on the way home from daycare?”

I didn’t remember.

“Bet if I was your Dad you’d remember.”

I wasn’t supposed to hear it. I really wasn’t. He said it low, and to the steering wheel. But still my head jerked up and he looked at me, mouth hanging open. He knew I’d heard. Maybe that’s why he kept his mouth open: the hope that an apology would somehow fall out, too.

He cut off the engine and opened his door.

“Go to your room,” he said. “Your mom will talk to you when she gets home.”

#

I walk out of the stall and wash my hands. I sing “Happy Birthday” twice, like they taught us in health class. On the second verse, the beads click together as they fall down my wrist. The elastic band has stretched out over time. The colorful gift from a man who wasn’t my father and was my father.

“Cheap piece of crap,” I say. But still, I adjust it, push it up my wrist, and continue washing my hands.

## **INTERLUDE #6**

Even as I mindlessly watch zombie shows and horror films where corpses literally shuffle by as a terrifying threat to the scrappy protagonists, I do not contemplate my own mortality. No one wants to think about it. Not even when it's staring them in the face.

And I'm sorry.

I'm sorry that I participate and perpetuate this culture where you, the dead, are not honored and remembered beyond a short ceremony huddled around a ceramic urn painted with flowers. I am sorry that as soon as you die your body is seen as a thing rather than a person. It is something to be moved to a freezer, to be disposed of, a hassle to be dealt with.

## DANCING SANTAS AND ZIPLOC BAGS

Everyone in the Bronx called it the Crazy House. It sat on a street corner three blocks from the elementary school. Once the first snow of the season laid down a delicate carpet of ice, the neighbors began to anticipate the annual spectacle.

Archie's mom would start it after they saw that all of their neighbors' lights were off. To keep the mystery alive for the neighborhood, she told him. Archie attempted a smile and pretended like it was true. Like they had cared about a neighbor in the last five years.

The neighbors had brought plenty of sympathy and casseroles in the months after Archie's father died. They sat on the couch and offered up nice words, but there's only so much people can take of talking about the dead. So the casseroles stopped coming. And so did the neighbors. But that was okay. Archie's mother filled up the space in the house with heaps of clothes, books, and any stuffed animal that Archie dared to look at in the store. Christmas was just a reason to get more stuff.

"Wanna help?" his mom asked.

Archie reached up into the freezer to find the tray that molded ice into Batman's symbol.

"Nah," he said, as he popped the tiny silhouettes of bats into his nighttime cup. The ice bobbed and swirled with water and a few specks of dirt.

"That's right. I forgot big boys are too cool to help with decorations," she said and she marched outside with a plastic reindeer under each arm.

Archie stuck the Batman tray back in its spot – left of the three normal trays, right of the tray that made tiny drinking glasses of ice, and above the old Batman tray that had chipped two years ago – and zigzagged his way through the house. They didn't divide the house by rooms;

they did it by piles. Straight past the dirty pile of clothes, right at the pile of clothes that needed ironing, left at the mountain of toilet paper rolls, and behind the moat of school papers. When he was in first grade, he easily hopped the papers to land on his squeaky bed. Two more years and the pile grew so thick that he stopped trying and merely walked over them to his bed. They stuck to his feet.

He spent most of the night in the weird space between sleep and consciousness. He rolled around in his sheets to the uneven beat of the hammer on the roof. The noise of his mom nailing his father's favorite holiday to every available surface.

#

Archie's desk is one of his favorite places in the world. It's small, a place within a room really, and not much to speak about. But the surface is smooth, and Archie loves running his hands over it. He loves that when he does so, the whisper of skin on wood is the only thing he can hear. No generator motors, no cacophony of music boxes and high-pitched singing dolls, and no muffled sound of his mother flitting from pile to pile, muttering about where some arbitrary trinket had gone.

He'd moved out of his mother's house as soon as he was legally able. Getting scholarships isn't too difficult when you have good grades and literal mountains of proof that your mother was providing a toxic living environment. Scholarship foundations ate his past up in his essays. Life unfolds easily for him now in a series of achievable steps: get a college degree, get a job, meet a girl, and then start a family. Easy peasy.

As he runs his hand along the shiny wood once more, his phone rings.

“Hello. May I please speak to Archie Phillips, please.”

The double please throws him off. This person is trying to be extra nice to him. No one has ever been extra nice to him.

“Speaking.”

“This is Tim from the Bronx Medical Examiner’s office. I’m sorry to ask this of you, but we believe that your mother has passed. However, we would need you to come into the office and identify her for us.”

Archie’s face immediately numbs. He miraculously keeps the phone held to his face, but sweat slicks his cheek against the glass.

His mom is dead. Sure, he has to go identify the body, but he knows it’s her. He has been waiting for this call since he left for school. All of the junk was eventually going to fill every crevice of the house, was eventually going to push out all of the air and suffocate her.

Archie’s shaking hand searches for a scrap of paper on which to write the address for the morgue, but there are none lingering in between his neat stacks of textbooks and his color coded notes. He finally gives up and scrawls the address on his hand and prays that he won’t sweat it off.

#

Archie usually hopped the low fence in the backyard to walk to school in the mornings. Instead, he swung around the front yard to see his mom’s work. Everything was still plugged in from last night.

The armada of decorations took over the front lawn and even spread to the roof. Hundreds upon hundreds of lights gleamed even in the raw light of a new sun. Plastic reindeer stood at a risky angle on the roof, sniffing the butt of a Santa too tall to have been sold in the same set.

The snow did not flatter the aged, plastic snowmen gathered by the front window. They looked like the “before” picture of the teeth brushing brochure they passed out at school.

The most spectacular thing of all: the lawn was alive. A horde of Santas swung their hips, blew saxophones, and bobbed their heads up and down – all dancing to music long removed from their animatronic bodies because of complaining neighbors. Archie squinted and concentrated very hard; he could hear a tinny noise in his mind, the weakest memory of the cacophony that once was.

He heard kids walking up behind him, gawking at his house. His mom appeared at the window, about to wave. He quickly turned away.

The kids were still talking about it when they sat down for lunch.

“Did you see? They finally lit it up.”

“Really? Already?”

“Yeah. There must have been a kabillion Santas.”

Forty-seven, Archie corrected mentally. There were forty-seven Santas wedged into the snow on his front lawn. They were all rescues.

His mom always waited until Christmas was over and all the stores slapped reduced prices on the decorations. No one bothered getting post-Christmas Santas in the already-ravaged decorations section in Wal-Mart.

“They look so sad,” his mom always said before putting five Santas in the cart. They didn’t have a shed in the backyard, so they would get put in the holiday pile when they got home. That was in the back of the house that would’ve been a study in a normal home.

Her charity didn’t end with the Santas. She would then rescue a Nativity scene, some snowmen, a blow-up snow globe, and even a menorah.

“So all the neighbors feel included,” his mom said. She always felt the need to expose her excuses to the open air.

The boys at school didn’t need to know all this, so he munched on his sandwich and didn’t bother to correct the Santa count.

#

In a cold room, they peel back the sheet and Archie looks at the shell of his mom. Her hair snakes away from her head, tangled and dull. She is thin, though Archie has no doubt that if he were to go to her house that moment and open her pantry, there would be no less than ten stacks of canned goods and fifty Lunchables piled on top of one another.

Mountains of material with no use.

He stares for so long that everything around her drifts out of focus and her outline grows fuzzy. When he is able to slam his eyes shut and look away, a greenish imprint of her floats behind his eyelids.

“That’s her,” he hears himself say. They quickly cover her again. “So what happens now?”

“If she had a will, we defer to that for the handling of the remains.”



“She never had anything like that.” Wills are a division of assets. Wills would take ownership away from her. She would never allow such a thing.

“Then we defer to next of kin. That’s you. You can have her buried or cremated. There’s also a lot of new options that are becoming trendy. I heard of a company not too long ago that presses your loved one’s remains until it turns into a pseudo-diamond.”

Cremation. It sounded good and final. More than final. It would reduce her. Unmake her. She crammed Archie’s life full of stuff, full of her. It must have been exhausting. And Archie could think of no better rest than being made into nothing.

This place is soothing, he realizes. Or, at least, the concept behind it is. For the people who pass through here, there is nothing left but rest. Nothing. No things.

For the people who work here, nothing is important beyond the facilitating of that rest. It’s peaceful. As if a hook has pierced him behind the belly button, Archie feels as if he is being dragged forward, encouraged to wander in farther and stay.

#

The End of Lunch Bell rang and Miss Pope came to scoot the class into something resembling a line. Archie quickly swiped his hand across the table, grabbing one of Grace’s empty Ziploc bags as he always did.

Grace was blind, so her parents always packed each food item in her lunch in a different size bag so she knew what was what. PB&J went in a big one. Grace would swipe the excess jelly onto the bag, so Archie never stole those. He always took the smaller ones, the ones that held carrots and Goldfish.

Her bags were always stamped with some kind of design. Some days it was lightning bolts and zigzags. On other days, bright yellow faces offered big smiles to Grace.

Grace who loved quiet time even though she couldn't read. Grace who smelled like new plastic pencil cases. Grace who wrote in pink pen because it's not like she'd ever erase anything anyway. Grace who never could see Archie taking things from her.

The lunch bags were always so happy and colorful. So like Grace. They snapped open so crisply that Archie associated the sound with her. When he was alone, he'd snap them open and closed real fast. Or he'd trace his fingers along the designs she'd never see. He had to appreciate them enough for the both of them.

It didn't seem fair that the flashy bags never were able to bring happiness to her. They were useless, and Archie couldn't stand to see her throw them away every day without knowing what they were. It was needless waste. So, he always sat diagonally from her, close enough to grab one bag a day without being noticed. He would shove it in his pocket or ball it up in his fist until he could get it into the safety of his backpack.

He started keeping them when Miss Pope began to talk about 1st Grade. They had to learn additions before going to 1st Grade. They had to learn manners because the 1st Grade teachers wouldn't tolerate talking back. Different teachers meant different classes. And different classes could mean no colorful lunch bags down the table to look at every day.

On this day, his hand shook as he kept the bag enclosed in his fist. Once the class made it back to the classroom, he made a beeline for his backpack hung on the back of his chair. Grace sat next to him, and, even though she couldn't see it, he liked to stuff the bags in before she got to her seat.

Jessica Pollini slammed into him while racing Anya Jurgens back to their seats. Archie reached out to his chair to break his fall, but he knocked it over.

His backpack fell to the floor and out poured the dozens and dozens of Grace's Ziploc bags. Hearts and rainbows printed on thin plastic scattered all over the floor.

Laughter closed in on Archie.

"Your mom packs your lunch in girl bags?"

"She knows you're a boy right?"

"Are you a girl, Archie?"

"Saving them to hang up on your wall later?"

Archie scooped up the bags and hastily stuffed them back into his backpack. His ears and forehead burned. After a few seconds of searching, he found Grace's face. She followed behind the clacking of her cane. Her forehead crinkled like she was confused by the noise. Mrs. Pope followed her with her arms slightly outstretched like a nervous shepherd.

"What's going on?" Mrs. Pope asked once she got Grace safely to her desk.

"Nothing," Archie said. The bags stuck out of his backpack in awkward angles.

"Archie, come on. You don't need all of those. Bring your bag over to the trash can."

Despite the command, Mrs. Pope picked up his backpack herself and upended it over the can, letting each reminder of happiness fall into black. Archie shook. His stomach felt as inside out as his backpack. He felt like someone hit him with a shrink ray.

For the rest of the day, the kids took turns leaning toward Archie's seat and hissing, "Girl."

Archie tried studying Grace's expression in one-second intervals, but he couldn't tell if she heard anything about the bags. To be safe, he didn't talk to her for the rest of the day.

He walked home to avoid more whispers. He could hear the whir of the mechanical decorations before he saw his house. He rounded a corner and was greeted by forty-seven painted smiles.

Archie sprinted and then dove. He connected with the biggest Santa on the lawn. A hollow figure without a lot of substantial weight. Archie sailed into another, smaller Santa while his flailing legs knocked over one of the plastic wise men. He scrambled to his feet, picked up a reindeer, and began beating it against the ground.

His mom flung the door open.

“What're you doing?”

She was nothing but a small blur of movement in his peripheral vision until she hoisted him from the middle and hauled him away from the now-shattered reindeer.

“Archie!” She tried to wrestle him as he squirmed and flailed. She eventually sat on his chest, and he had to pause his resistance to suck in air.

“You do not tear apart Christmas! I worked hard on this for you and-“

Archie heaved, his chest barely raised his mother at all.

“You will clean up this mess. You will put everything back in its place,” she said. She scooted off of him and stood. Archie gasped and rolled over, face down in the snow. His heavy breaths only made it easier for him to start crying.

“I saved Grace's Ziplocs and everyone found out and Mrs. Pope made me throw them all away and I cried because now I won't remember.” He sobbed into the snow. It shifted under his

face and slid into his mouth and nose. “If I don’t have the bags I won’t remember what day Grace had hearts or how many times she had rainbows with the little clouds or what she had for lunch. I won’t remember today or the day after that or the day after that.”

After snorting into slush for a few minutes, Archie opened his eyes to make sure his mom was still there. She was. She cocked her head and stared at him.

She walked off for a second. The dull crunch of the snow marked her footsteps. She came back and crouched beside him.

“We won’t forget today,” she said. “We have this. Now go put it in one of your special piles and get cleaned up.”

He didn’t look down at what she placed in his hands until he got to the bathroom, marked by piles of toothbrushes.

She had given him the shards of the reindeer that he smashed into the ground. He ran his finger over each jagged edge before lifting the toilet seat, tossing them in the bowl, and flushing them away.

#

Archie looks down at the shiny silver apron as he ties its strings behind his back.

“You clock in yet?”

Archie lifts his head in surprise. Leslie’s head is poking through the door to the hallway.

“Yeah,” Archie says.

“Well, come on. We’ve got a lot.”

Archie mashes his street clothes into his locker a few times before he can close and lock the door. He grabs his gloves from the bench and shoves them on his hands before following Leslie into the hall. Archie flexes his fingers, getting accustomed to the loss of dexterity to the bulk of the protective material.

If Archie's eight-year-old self could see him now, he'd freak out. Archie has to dress up like a superhero for work every day. *Or maybe it's a supervillain's outfit*, Archie thinks as he grabs a mask off a hook on the wall and fixes it over his face. No matter the ethical alignment, Archie looks cool in his gear. It's all bright and reflective, like a sophisticated android's hull or the flashy spandex of a man with super speed.

He's always liked superheroes, but he stopped collecting comics years ago. All of those issues stacked up too quickly.

He finds Leslie in the prep room. Vaguely humanoid forms wrapped in heavy gauze line the walls of the room. It's always somewhat of a shock to see how many bodies can fit in a room.

Over the years, Archie tried to puzzle out why his mother never threw anything away. Was it some misguided attempt to not let anything go to waste, as his interactions with Grace had been many years ago? Was it a desperate means of remembering Archie's father?

Whatever it was, it was finished. Archie opted for cremation, some small, spiritual part of him hoping that it would put his mother at ease to become nothing after a lifetime of harboring everything. The idea of cremation seemed so beautiful to him in that moment that he began asking questions. Answers given fueled his interest and soon he found himself declining enrollment and working at the crematory. Certification and job training were quick, compared to what he would have gone through in college.

“This one first,” Leslie says, pointing to a larger body. Archie slides his hands under the body’s shoulders and lifts while Leslie grabs the legs and does the same. They heave the body into a long box on a waiting gurney. No frills. The box has no decoration or indication of precious cargo.

Archie grabs the tag from where it’s stuck on the body’s torso before Leslie puts the lid on the box and begins wheeling him into the next room. Archie follows.

The heat of the crematory proper immediately zaps any moisture from the air. Archie walks to the log and quickly transfer the body’s name and date of death into the numbered column that corresponds with the numbered furnace that Leslie stops the gurney in front of. The name is gone from Archie’s mind as soon as it enters it. Something that starts with a B. Masculine, maybe? It matters even less when Leslie opens the door and, impossibly, more heat floods the room. Sweat curls around Archie’s fingers and makes his gloves squeak. He moves to the furnace and grabs the metal plate sandwiched between the box and the gurney. On Leslie’s count, Archie lifts the plate, fast and harsh. The box slides, displaced from the gurney, and into the furnace, guided by Leslie’s hands.

Even after Archie turns away, a spot of dancing brightness remains in his vision, the negative of the searing orange mouth of the furnace.

## **INTERLUDE #7**

In my culture, death is used as entertainment for its shock value. Any of your favorite characters may die because this show is gritty! It's realistic! But the characters always mourn for an episode or two and then never mention the dead again. On to the next shocking death.



## GENTLE HANDS

I clutched my purse closer to my chest as I walked up to the glass counter. Squat perfume bottles and gold compacts filled with pressed powder and eyeshadow sat in the display case underneath the counter. My hand automatically reached out to steady myself, but I did not lay in on the glass. I didn't want to smudge the brightly lit display. I shifted my weight on my feet instead and glanced around for a sales associate.

Wide-eyed models stared down at me from the huge promotional pictures behind the counter. Actresses and singers, barely in their 20s, with their own makeup and perfume lines. In the pictures their hair billowed around them, each girl a perfect nymph with the one secret product that would make any woman irresistible.

My knuckles groaned as I tried to flex my fingers. It was cold in the department store. That alone might have sent me back out into the summer heat, but there was nowhere else I could go. The ladies at the corner salon were all from Jersey and hated me. Jeannie and I shit-talked their business as much as we could back when she was still alive and the salon was still open. A few years gone was not enough to heal that wound. The unisex salon a block over would give me the same old lady electric blue eyeshadow that they had given every woman over sixty since the eighties. And I couldn't do it myself. Damn hands.

“Is there something I could help you with?” The woman before me wore a black pantsuit.

The bracelets on her wrists jingled every time she smoothed nonexistent flyaways into her carefully crafted updo.

“You do makeovers, yes?”

She inspected her nails. “We can do a demonstration of several of our products. What kind of look did you want?”

“I want to look beautiful,” I said.

“Well, yeah, obviously. Are you wanting the natural look? The red carpet glamour look? Something more appropriate for work or-?”

“Like this.” I held the picture out to her. She studied it for a moment before making a face.

“This is you,” she said. I nodded.

It was a professional shot that Benny had paid for himself. He liked the soft lighting in those photos. He’d paid for a family shoot. Something new to fill the picture frames littering their house. It was nothing fancy. Just a hazy blue backdrop in some dark room in a JCPenney. But Benny had cracked jokes and made bad puns the whole time, making me and Cecile laugh. It added some sincerity to the carefully posed shots.

This picture was of me alone. Benny recited the same joke he had on our first date when I asked if he had a lighter handy. What’s the difference between a hippo and a Zippo?

In the picture I had a small smile, but the real emotion was in my eyes. They were focused just to the left of the camera, looking at Benny. In that moment, he was just a man cracking up his daughter and wife. He was simple and good, and it was so easy to love him. It showed on my face, my relaxed gaze.

Benny immediately ordered a wallet sized copy of the picture to carry around with him. The way he adored that picture, I wanted to be that girl forever. Looking in the mirror at that makeup counter, I needed to prove to myself that I could still be that girl.

The woman in the black pantsuit gestured to the chair beside the counter. I quickly hoisted myself into it and savored the look of surprise on the sales lady's face. I was fifty, not dead.

I jumped when her eyes suddenly appeared in front of mine. She held me captive for a moment, and then her attention leapt to another region of my face. She did that for a few tense moments, rendering all of my imperfections into her brain. Then she picked up a small palette of powder and began.

She dragged the brush across my cheeks delicately. Every swipe of a new product was applied with the slightest of touches. The entire time, I kept my eyes closed to the harsh light of the store.

“So what brought you to us today?”

“I'm meeting my daughter for lunch later,” I said. “Thought it would be a nice surprise.”

“Yeah? What's her name?” I had no illusions that this woman truly cared about the name of my daughter, but her voice was so soft and warm that I played along.

“Cecile,” I said.

I wondered if this woman was as gentle in other aspects of her life as she was when she was applying makeup. I imagined her face surrounded by the steam from a pot of boiling water, deliberately flicking just the right amount of salt into the cooking pasta. Or carefully tapping a nail into the wall with a hammer and perfectly hanging a picture. Hers was the telegraphed touch of an artist, and having her talent wholly focused on me made me fidgety.

“Stop scrunching your nose,” she told me. “The foundation gets caught in the wrinkles.”

I knew I had wrinkles. This was a fact well-cemented into my brain by hours in front of the mirror. The amount of clear tape I had put on my face before bed to smooth out a prominent wrinkle is embarrassing. Cecile says that people at her work still ask her if the pictures of me on her desk are pictures of her sister. It's a kind lie.

I had time to get used to the changes. It was all so gradual. One year, it would hurt to hold the hair dryer for too long. But the hair dryer was heavy and cumbersome. Then next year, it would be the straightener. Then the brush. Kicked out of my profession by my damn hands.

I would have Cecile braid my hair tight and then leave it in for a few days. I'd promise her a hot dinner if she came over to comb through the tangles and rebraid it.

I'd tell myself that lots of women did this. Some chopped most of their hair off and wore it as a white puff, so I had to be doing better than a generous percentage.

Yesterday I was walking to the bodega around the corner from Cecile's when I saw Nick, an old friend of Benny's. I waved at him as he passed, and he raised a tentative hand in response.

"How have you been?" I asked him. His head tilted to the side like a dog who heard a strange noise.

"It's Maria," I said.

He exhaled, chuckled a little bit. "Oh, Maria. Hey. Sorry, I didn't recognize you."

A cold knife of dread ran through my heart. Sure, I hadn't seen him in a while - Benny's funeral ten years ago, around the neighborhood every now and again - but he had seen my face plenty when Benny was alive. If he could not match the woman he saw on the street with the woman he knew as Benny's wife years ago, how much had I let myself go? Who else wouldn't recognize me?

Ever since I was ten, balancing a mantilla on my head while I recited the Apostle's Creed for my Confirmation, I knew that there was an afterlife. There's life beyond life. And there's rules to get there.

Benny followed the rules at the end. He went to church and confessed, almost like he knew the end was coming. He did what he had to, and he undoubtedly went to Heaven. Dammit, I followed the rules too. I was going to Heaven, too.

When I got there, would Benny recognize me? Or would I just be some face that he would pass by without another thought?

I asked Nick how his family was. I even kept a smile pasted on my face until I told him that I needed to get going. I didn't even go to the bodega. I went back to Cecile's and made some excuse, the owner's son got sick or something, and told her I'd go without milk for a day more.

I left soon after. She asked if I wanted to get lunch the next day.

"At Joneses? The pub?" she asked.

"No," I said. "How about the new taco place?"

"Around the corner from Macy's? Yeah, I guess."

#

The pantsuit girl's name was Peggy. Such an old name for a young girl. I had opened my eyes after she spread the shadow over them, and it felt awkward to look her in the eye while she devoted so much attention to my face.

I couldn't help but to tell her about Benny. Couldn't help telling her the real reason why I was in her chair. I didn't have much time left. That much, the doctors made clear, whenever

Cecile forced me to go for a checkup. I was going to meet God and Benny soon, and Benny had died young. His soul was always young. Time separated us, aged me. I wanted to take every precaution, however stupid, to know that Benny would know me.

Once the topic of death was out there, she slowly slipped back into her sales pitch. I forgave her for that, though. I knew it was a part of the job. It was more comfortable than talking to a woman about the makeup she'd be buried in rather than the fact that she would be buried soon.

She told me to smile so that she could swirl blush on my cheekbones. It was an easy gesture.

Out of nowhere, she pulled out a spray bottle.

"Close your eyes again," she said. And that was all the warning I received before the shock of cold mist was spritzed onto my face.

"What the hell was that?"

"Just water. It sets the makeup so that it lasts longer."

Good. I wanted it to last as long as possible.

"Can I see?"

She swiveled my chair around so that I was facing the counter. There was one of those expensive mirrors, the ones with the lights around the edge and ten times the normal magnification. My face took up the whole reflection.

The makeup was painted on thick, and it took me a moment to find my features in the reds, pinks, and golds. But there I was. Broad set eyes with heavy lids. Straight nose. Big lips; I always liked those best.

But wrinkles had a home there too. Uneven planes of my face. Thick brows. Peggy was good at her job. I was what I was, and the makeup highlighted that.

Benny's girl and not Benny's girl.

## **INTERLUDE #8**

Death is something to be dealt with quickly and then brushed away. And I'm sorry that it's come to that.

But I'm sorry in a selfish way, because I do not want to be brushed away. I do not want my face to be hard to look at as soon as the life has left it. I want to continue on past a few nice words at a funeral, even if it's in an abstract way. Even if my great great granddaughter doesn't know my name, but she takes a moment every now and again to appreciate the past actions of the dead that led to her life, that would be enough.



## TRICKS

I squeezed the atomizer of the empty perfume bottle for the fifth time. It wheezed pathetically. The “try me” bottles ran out quickest at the beauty counter, but there were so beautiful that I found them difficult to throw away. So I played with them to amuse myself and pass the time.

Shirley passed her shift along to me again. She acted like it was some big favor. Which it was – I needed the money. I just didn’t need the halogen lights searing my retinas or the frustrated customers looking for a register. A man walked up to me like he had been wandering in the desert for forty years and plopped a shirt on the counter. He looked at me expectantly.

“No, sir, the register is over there,” I pointed behind him. “It’s in Men’s Shoes. There should be someone there to help you.”

“Can’t *you* help me?”

“I’m sorry, sir. My register is offline at the moment, but they’d be happy to help you in Men’s Shoes.”

As he lumbered away I caught half-grumblings of “customer service not being what it used to.”

It wasn’t even a lie. The register crapped out on me halfway through a sale. But so it went in the life of a retail worker: always getting attitude from strangers for things beyond all control.

My shoulders slumped from their “ready to help you” posture, and I surreptitiously pulled my phone halfway out of my pocket. Four hours left in the shift. Two missed calls from Bonnie.

I'd sent Travis to the airport to pick her up. She'd be pissed when she found out that I had picked up an extra shift instead of coming to get her.

A woman dressed in what looked like 90s Land's End fleece and denim so stiff it could stand on its own approached me. Her dark hair was streaked with grey and pulled back into a tight braid.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"You do makeovers, yes?"

It took most of my mental fortitude not to roll my eyes. We had women like this at this counter all the time. They wanted to be pampered, to "try" our products, and then ultimately walk away without purchasing anything. These women wasted my time and chipped away at my commission.

I nodded, giving her a chance to continue. She pressed her mouth together in a smile so thin, it merely looked like another wrinkle in her face. I began to probe for more information, when she held out a picture.

She gave me her thin smile again. She bobbed her head forward as if encouraging me to get on with whatever sales pitch I had. I glanced down at the picture. It was small and worn. Crinkles along the edges had discolored the photo. In it, a woman and a small girl smiled. It was a typical professional portrait background, very similar to the one we had on the second floor of the store, but it didn't feel as posed as most glamor shots. There was something genuine in their expressions. As if someone had just told them the world's greatest joke. It wasn't hard to tell that the woman in the photo was the woman in front of me. Eyes never change.

I gestured over to the makeup chair. I'd do this out of sympathy, if anything. She was really pretty in the photo. It couldn't have been easy to lose that.

Before I could question my decision to have an older woman hike herself up into a high-seated make-up chair, she hoisted herself up easily.

My mouth snapped shut so fast that I bit my lip.

"Okay," I said, squinting through the pain. "What's the occasion?"

"I'm meeting my daughter for lunch later. Thought it'd be a nice surprise."

I began to wipe her face clean with some makeup remover. This was always Bonnie's favorite part whenever I brought freebies home. She called me a "professional makeup artist" and insisted that I list it that way on my resume. I entertained her for a day before changing it back to "JCPenney Sales Associate – Makeup Department."

The old woman in the chair giggled.

"It's so cold," she said.

"Sorry. It's just for a moment."

"No. I like it. Makes me feel alert."

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Bonnie again, probably. I could almost hear her chewing Travis out as she furiously dialed me:

"Two months. Two fucking months away and she can't have one night off to come pick me up? I'll be damned if she's not sleeping on the couch tonight."

Which was fine with me. Our couch was pretty damn comfortable. What drove me insane were the dirty looks I knew I'd get when I came home. Somehow, working to pay rent while she went off to "find herself" was an offense on par with shitting in someone's purse. Bonnie was a

hypocritical free spirit. Her passion was awe-inspiring. It drew me in and gave me warmth. To be near her was to be infected with her incredible desire to seek out danger and excitement.

Dancing, camping, open mic nights – she did it all with vigor. But only she was allowed to have the passions. Only she was allowed to go off to a two month artist retreat. The rest of us had to stay here and maintain a stable environment for her to come home to whenever she wanted.

Envisioning the inevitable expression on her face when I saw her after my shift – raised eyebrows and flared nose in feigned, but failed, indifference – made me want to throw expensive bottles of foundation and lip stain across the room.

“You know what they call makeup in Italian?”

The woman in front of me kept her eyes obediently closed, but one eyebrow quirked in my direction. I didn’t know what they called makeup in Italian, and I didn’t really have a burning desire to know, but the expression on the woman’s face made it seem like she was offering up the most valuable secret the world had ever known. Polite indifference beat the growing rage I felt deep in my belly, so I indulged her.

“No. I don’t. What do they call makeup in Italian?”

“Il trucco. Know what that means?”

“What? You just told me. Makeup.”

She held up a hand, eyes still closed as I put her face on.

“The direct translation is ‘trick.’ Italians call makeup ‘tricks.’”

“You trying to trick someone?” I asked.

“Well, someone of my age trying to look twenty-seven - wouldn’t you say that’s a trick?”

I smiled, even though she couldn’t see me. “Twenty-seven? That’s specific.”

“Hmmm?”

“You said you wanted to look twenty-seven when you first sat down. And again just then. Any reason why?”

“That’s how old I was when I saw him last.”

“Thought you said you were meeting your daughter.”

The foundation was collecting in the crinkles of her face. The sponge wiped away the buildup instead of blending it. I held my hand up hesitantly, a question. She nodded, and I brushed her face with the tips of my first two fingers. Her skin was soft, worn. Like an expensive couch or purse.

I don’t know why I kept talking. I hardly knew this woman, and here I was, voluntarily asking her about her kids. It distracted me from my buzzing pocket, though.

I stepped back once I was satisfied with the blend of the foundation and saw that she was fiddling with a ring on her left hand.

“My husband,” she said.

“Sorry?”

“I’m actually meeting my husband.”

I set the bottle of foundation down and pretended to debate over the blush color choice so that she wouldn’t see the confusion I could feel working its way across my face.

“He passed away years ago,” she said when I didn’t reply.

I whipped my gaze back to her.

“And you’re meeting him?”

I gave her a once over. Was she going to die in my chair? Was I liable for that? Bonnie would be super pissed if I came home with a far-fetched excuse like “someone died in my makeup chair.”

“Tesoro, don’t look at me like that. I’m not going to die right now.” She giggled again. “I’m going to take a picture and keep it on file with the funeral parlor. The doctors tell me I don’t have the best heart in the world, so I’m making the arrangements now.”

“Much less morbid,” I said. The lady rolled her eyes, clearly exasperated by my sarcastic tone.

I’d never really known anyone who had died. It seemed like such a faraway concept. It happened to other people or other people’s loved ones, but never to me. But here was this woman, flaunting it in front of my face. She had practically dragged me into the process too by making me prepare her for it. I nearly closed the lid on the blush box and walked away from this tangle of macabre issues when she spoke again.

“When you’re in my position, when you’ve lived this long, and you haven’t seen him for years, you will do what it takes to look good for your big debut up there.” She pointed her thumb up to the ceiling and raised her eyebrows like she was giving some tawdry advice.

I brought over the blush and glided the brush over her face. Her wrinkles deepened.

“Sorry.” Her smile flashed under the bright department store lights.

Her eyes closed as she came back to stillness and compliance under the brushes and sponges. She breathed softly, easily. Nothing but lines of age graced her face. No further indentation of worry or sadness. She *loved* this.

This woman harbored deep love for her long-dead husband. The weird, yet sweet, commitment that she still had for him brought warmth to my fingers and across my cheeks. It was exciting to know that a love like this existed. Someone could feel this way after decades of absence.

All that time had only made her more excited about the reunion, however hypothetical it may be, and yet I was going to get the evil eye for not rushing to the airport after being left for two months.

I made this woman in front of me feel the joy of seeing her husband again, to the point where she couldn't keep it to herself anymore. I helped her express her love. I was able to be a part of the passion instead of merely allowed near the passion.

My phone buzzed again. Bonnie's face spread across the caller ID.

I looked back up at the woman. She hadn't even opened her eyes.

I shut the phone off, picked up the brush, and continued dusting her face.

## **FINALE**

So I will do my part. I will make an effort to remind myself that energy is neither created nor destroyed, so that someone else might remember my energy. It continues on.



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