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Don't be a stranger

I nearly halted when I saw her. As if I didn't expect to run into her today. As if I hadn't spent the past week dreading it. She sat hunched over on the park bench like a professional mourner. I breathed and approached with caution. She didn't look up or acknowledge me when I sat next to her. I spent too long trying to think of something to say. I looked down at my hands as if they had the answers written on them. If there was anything to life I wished there was a cheat for, it was talking to what was left of my family.

"Good of you to show up, Synthia," she said. Finally, she looked at me with an expression that made me wish she hadn't. It occurred to me I may not have dressed correctly for the occasion. I was unaware that the dress code was a knit sweater that matched the shade of the overcast sky. I thought black seemed appropriate but maybe it was the Prada label that seemed in poor taste.

"Of course," I said, looking off at the playground across the way. Three young kids were making the most of it.

The judgment didn't leave her eyes as she continued to analyze me. "You haven't changed at all."

I wished I could say the same. From the lines etched into her forehead and the poorly covered gray in her roots, it seemed the years had not been kind to her. I was the oldest of my sisters, not that anyone could tell. It made sense considering that Claudia had always been better at growing up than I was.

I sighed and it came out uneven and shaky. There was an urn in the room that needed addressing. One of us was missing. “I didn’t know you were going to bring her.”

I read the steel engraving, ‘*Talia*’ or as we called her, Tiny. Partly because she was the youngest, partly because of her size, and mostly because we found it obnoxious how our parents made each of our names rhyme.

She clutched the lid, “Yeah, I bet you would’ve preferred I did this part alone.” “That’s not…” I began before giving up. “Please, can we not do this today? Tiny wouldn’t want it.”

“She never did want us fighting, but that didn’t stop us before.” she almost smiled, but after just a second it dropped and the lines on her forehead deepened. “I just can’t believe it. You know, that she would do this, after mom-” her voice broke.

“I know,” I said, “but you know how it was for her. She took it the hardest out of any of us.”

“I wasn’t aware you took it any way at all.”

I sniffed and dug my four hundred-dollar boot into the dirt. “That’s not fair.”

She didn’t respond, just went back to watching the kids play. One was getting her shoe tied by her dad before running back into battle.

“I just- I don’t understand why she stuck so close around that place,” I said.

“That house was a curse and she should’ve let it go, yes, but we can’t all run away and move across the country.”

The dreadful ‘curse’, was something we made up as kids before even moving into the house when no one wanted to approach it on Halloween. Really it wasn’t all that menacing, it just stood out with its dark stone instead of brick like the surrounding houses. That and it was somewhat bigger. It had a black gate wrapping across the yard. Our mom had wanted to get rid of the gate because she thought it seemed pretentious but our dad joked that he liked how important he felt pushing a button and driving through it. The day they put an offer down he lifted me on his shoulders so I could get a good look at the house over it.

He was the first victim.

“There was no curse, other than what we believed in to existence,” I said.

“You can really still say that after everything that's happened?” Her voice was thick and her eyes red.

What happened to our dad was a freak accident. There was a draft coming through a crack in the attic one winter, and in the nights before we found it, we slept in our parents’ bedroom, using our body heat like a generator. The only one not to complain was Tiny, she found the whole thing to be such fun. We’d have to stop at a Redbox every night to pick out a movie or she’d whine.

I think she was more than a little disappointed that day when he called down to us, “Found it!”

Family time, it seemed, had come to an end.

The wood up there wasn’t sturdy, and the leg of his ladder went straight through the floor. When he fell he landed on his head. It killed him instantly.

“That place *ate* our family,” she dropped her face into her hand and sobbed into it.

I reached for her but stopped short, my hands were always cold. Too cold to bring comfort to anyone.

“*That’s just God’s way of saying you’ve got a warm heart,*” my mom would say.

She didn’t handle dad’s death very well. It was she who ran up after him when we heard the crash. Her scream, the exact sound of it, never left my head.

“Mom?” I asked. “What are you doing?”

She held her hand millimeters from a glowing ring on the stove. “Just starting on dinner,” she said, though she switched it off. She touched my cheek as she wandered past me. Her hand was still warm.

It wasn’t long after that when she made her departure more official. I found her in her bed, I hoped she was sleeping but I knew better. I remembered everything I needed to do from watching her after dad died. I got my sisters out of the house, I called 911, and I had my grandparents come get us, the only part I forgot was to react. I just stood there and watched while Tiny and Claudia did that for me. It seemed from their display that crying (but so loud it was more like screaming) was normal.

Mom left a note in her perfect handwriting that just said, ‘I love you. I’m sorry. I’ll see you again.’

It wasn’t out of character for Tiny to leave those same words but that didn’t make it any less shitty that she did.

Claudia’s crying persisted so I pulled my sleeve over my hand and wrapped my arm around her. She looked up at me with swollen eyes, “Why did you have to go?” she asked. The answer seemed obvious. After our parents died and we lived with our grandparents we all coped

in different ways. Tiny cried herself to sleep every night, Claudia spent an entire class period at the guidance counselor every day until she graduated and started paying for a therapist, and I got a job and eventually a scholarship from the farthest school I could find.

“Why did she have to stay?” I asked. More so to the sky than any person. “She didn’t even leave the neighborhood. She probably passed the house our parents died in every day on her morning commute. You think that was good for her?” I was losing control of my voice. I wasn’t allowed to be angry about this, as absent as I’d been, but I was.

“She wanted to stay close. She didn’t hate the house like we do. That’s where she remembered them. I think part of her thought they would still be in there if she went inside, laughing, waiting for her,” she said.

That sound was familiar. It rang in my ears.

I stared at her. I couldn’t pull myself away from the sight of her broken face. The longer I looked, the more I could sort of see my sister again. The one I grew up with. She was in there, however deep. Life, it seemed, was just a series of loss from the beginning of your existence when you have everything, to the end. Her face was a withered portrait of that reality. It was sort of beautiful really. I envied her grief. There was no life in being frozen.

My little sister Tiny killed herself when she was twenty. Now she was only ash so there was no image left to disprove the one in my mind. The one where she’s six years old and dragging me to play, or crying over movies. So much loss... and me, with my cold hands and a face unchanged, that’s what I had to show for it. I couldn’t bring myself to feel it. I was too weak.

Ten years I was gone, she never stopped trying to get me to come home.

There was a tree not too far from us and tucked in its branches was a nest. A cardinal rested in it but she looked off. Like she was forgetting how a bird is supposed to be. Her feathers

were a darker russet than normal, still damp from the morning rain. Her eyes had no color, but they looked out into the open air, anticipating. It was like she was waiting for something. More than that, it was like she was willing it to come. I'd never seen a wild animal want in such a way before.

Two miracles happened then. One: another cardinal flew into the nest, and the change in her was subtle. She just went back to being a mindless animal, content with existing. Then: I started to cry.

I thought I might shed a symbolic tear or two and be done with it, it started that way, but then it burst out of me and pushed me onto the ground. It was a rushing river, black and ice and unrelenting. It pulled me under all at once and it did not let me up for even a breath of air. I shook and heaved and rasped and wailed and it hurt. Physically hurt so bad I couldn't stand it. I clutched my hand over my mouth to control the awful sounds that I didn't even recognize as me. I didn't want to disturb the kids' play.

Claudia didn't say anything. She just joined me in the grass and held me together until the shaking stopped. It seemed like forever until my body finally exhausted itself into stillness. Then I was just numb. My sorrow was still in there waiting to ravage its way out again just as soon as my body could take it.

"Hey," she whispered, gentle now. Probably because I was finally displaying an emotion she understood. "This isn't forever."

I wasn't sure what she meant. I didn't see this ever going away but maybe that idea was something that helped her get through the day. Maybe some 'professional' told it to her one day and she just adopted it from them. Or maybe she was right. If childhood is the kingdom where

nobody dies, maybe death is waking up from a deep sleep on your parent's bed with the sun on your face.

It was a sentiment that most likely killed my sister and my mother, but it brought me to my feet.

Eventually, we brushed ourselves off and Claudia picked Tiny back up from the bench. "That house is like a black hole for our family," she whispered, "I just wanted a better way to remember them. Without getting stuck there."

One of the boys conquered the rock wall that mimicked a real canyon. I smiled, "I think you picked a pretty good way."

"I wasn't sure you'd remember," she said.

It had been changed up a bit since the last time our parents brought us there so it took me a moment to place where we stood as our old park. "I remember Tiny getting stuck up there because she thought it was much higher than it was."

She laughed, "Mom and dad said 'jump!' as encouraging as possible. And still, she didn't budge until they helped her down."

She met the eyes of the dad and he smiled at her with a warmth no stranger could manage, and something clicked.

"Do I... get to meet them?" I asked. One of the children, her daughter, followed her dad's gaze and met mine. Her smile reflected that of a life without loss. I hoped, pointlessly, that would never change.

The tears in Claudias' eyes were different now, hopeful. "Promise," she said, "A few years from now, you won't just be a memory to them."

I nodded, and she led the way.