

Headstone

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It was Grandma Lynn, but it wasn't. Her skin was a waxy glaze that dulled with every passing minute. The make-up the mortician lathered on her face didn't create the warmth or gentleness I was promised. It made her look hollow. Cold. Dead.

On the morning of my grandmother's death she told me she had been visited by a strange man in the night. "He had the prettiest blue eyes I'd ever seen," she mused. "Such a nice boy told me that everything was going to be all right." At first I thought she was talking about my father or the doctor who put up with the novel full of questions my mother asked every time he entered the room. It wouldn't be until much later that I realized that she wasn't talking about the living at all.

All day people wandered into the wake to gawk at the grieving family and whisper about the sideshow freak granddaughter. "She doesn't care." "I heard she's made of stone." "She just needs time, I think." When they came to console the family they avoided eye contact and mumbled their apologies. I never understood the saying, "I'm sorry for your loss." What did they have to be sorry for? They didn't kill her; cancer did.

Sometimes people would whisper to her, telling her secrets like she could still hear them. I wanted to yell at them, show them she was gone, that she couldn't hear their sorrow or confessions. Tell them that they needed to move on with their lives and let the dead lay. But I couldn't do it. It would involve me turning around, and I didn't want to see that thing lying in the wooden case. That dead thing. It wasn't Grandma Lynn. It was only her shell.

During the sermon, I expected her to sit up. I wish she had. Then we could stop this nonsense, and everything would go back to normal, no bawling mother, no pill-popping aunt, no drunken father. Everything would just melt back to normal and Grandma would call me up and ask if I wanted to bake cookies for the homeless.

On the move to the cemetery, my heart seized in my chest and a sharp pain rang out in my abdomen. We were on our way to place her into the ground from which she would never come back. My world crashed into a kaleidoscope of colors; she was dead, gone, never coming back. The car suddenly became a human oven. I needed to get out, to go somewhere, anywhere that was away from here, but there was nowhere to go except back to my memories.

The day we went through Grandma Lynn's things, we were trying to find "the perfect outfit" for the wake. I had just sifted through a pile of roaring twenties style clothing when I found it. It was a golden strawberry hand-stitched diary. I had never known my grandmother to keep a journal, but as I read each entry I realized she thrived on the pages she wrote. Toward the end of the entries the flowery descriptions of her hopes and dreams began to fade and a stale pattern began to erupt. All solemn and cold, all talking about him. The entry struck me the most was also the last: *He visited me again last night. Every time he visits I want to leave with him, and I've remained strong for Daphne's sake, but I can't do it anymore. There's so much pain. Tonight when he calls upon me I will dive into his deep blue eyes and leave this world behind. Stay strong, Daphne, my darling. I love you.*

"For God's sake, Daphne, she's your grandmother. Suck it up and show some respect," my father's voice brought me back to reality. He was sneaking sips of brandy as we turned into the gravel driveway of Moral Bates Cemetery. We passed lines of gray stones, symbols of the equalizer, the end.

Wails of torment filled the graveyard as her last resting place was filled with dust. When I looked up from the opened ground, I saw him standing in the shadows. I could only make out the black of his suit, but I knew it was him.

"Daphne, can you take the car home to get the food ready? I'm going to stay here and make sure everyone gets proper directions," my father said unscrewing his flask and grabbing my blubbing mother around the wrist to pull her toward more people who were ready with more apologies.

Without my father's body heat, the car was now a freezer, but I didn't bother with the heater. As I backed down the gravel driveway, I caught a glimpse of the man in shadow again. I slammed on the brakes, shooting gravel in every direction and jerked the car into park. The air outside the car was colder than I remembered and with trembling lips, I called out to the man I knew had taken my grandmother.

"Who are you?"

He didn't answer. He only glanced at me as if I were some inconsequential shadow, so I tried again, stepping

closer this time. "Who are you?" The air surrounding him was like ice. My body betrayed my mind, and I began to tremble.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, probably hoping I couldn't hear.

"Who are you?"

Annoyed by my persistence, he answered, "I am nothing. I am everything. I am the equalizer."

A shrill wind echoed through the tombstones and time ceased to matter. I didn't want to believe it, but this man, this towering, soul-stopping man was really death.

"Why..." I struggled to find my voice, "why did you take her?"

"It was her time." My heart grew heavy with every breath. I was lost. He answered my questions, but that didn't make the pain vanish like I had hoped. I wanted to argue with him, pull out charts and diagrams, and prove to him that it wasn't her time to go, but I couldn't. I was prepared to fight death for her sake, but I froze. He frightened me. My entire being wanted to jump up and run from the destroyer of civilizations, but I couldn't. I could not fight him, but I would not leave my ground.

"I'm sorry," he said again. He was like everyone else apologizing to me. His back was still facing me, but the hairs prickling on the back of my neck told me he was smiling. "I'm sorry about how cold I'm making you and how afraid you are of me. But," he turned, his eyes blue and as vast and open as the sea, gleaming down on me, "I am not sorry about taking your grandmother."

A switch flipped and what was once fear of death was no longer filled with anger and resentment. "Why would you be? It's all part of the job description anyway, isn't it? You just take and take and take. Never caring about who you affect, never once realizing that the life of the person you just took..." Tears were flowing from my eyes now. The days of dry spells had ended and now the rainforest had returned, "that the person you took was the one person that...that," I couldn't speak. Visions of my grandmother blocked my rage, and I did what I had been neglecting to do since her departure, cry.

My knees buckled with despair, but strong arms intercepted my appointment with the ground. I buried my face in his silk Armani suit, smearing mascara on its crisp lapels, but death just kept telling me that it was good that I could finally let it go. "Don't stop," he whispered, "just let it all out." His stiff movements made it clear that, although he was trying to help, he was uncomfortable with the situation. It wasn't like death to console the grieving.

After my tears dried, he lifted my face to meet his blue gaze again. "I can't explain to you why I had to take your grandmother, but I can show you." He lifted his hand out toward me.

It was not cold like I expected. It was soft and warm.