

All That You Leave Behind

I only wept the day my mother died because I knew I was next. That's how it was supposed to be, at least. Grandparents passed, then parents. Next, the children, and their children. The line of succession should be pristine and uninterrupted, like the pearls strung one after the other on the necklace I watched some washed-up cousin swipe from my mother's almost decrepit house.

When my brother called to relay the news of her passing, I held the phone a few inches away from my ear so it would sound as if he was whispering rather than sobbing. As my clammy hands fingered the volume button, his hollow voice became an afterthought while I pondered the upcoming obituary: *she is survived by her daughter, Blair, and her son, Braden*. It made me wonder what mine would look like, if I too would have estrangement in my family that wasn't so visible on the page.

"It's only a three hour drive, Blair." My brother swallowed hard on the other end of the call. "You owe her this."

I exhale. "Do I?"

Four days later and I still heard his raspy *yes* while I trod through my mother's house. The toes of my boots clicked against her dusty wooden floors, keeping time with the clock on the hallway mantle—the same one I used to ignore when I would creep back home smelling like I had chugged a few too many vodka cranberries.

I had never stepped foot in my mother's new house before. It was all industrial, metals and windows that had the singular goal of reaching the sky. Quite contemporary for a woman who collected vintage frosted glass slippers until the day she died. Perhaps a floating wooden staircase was her way of accepting modernism. I moved forward, fingers brushing against the

lush cast-iron plants she had set into drab aluminum pots. It seemed that this transition, at least, had been easier for her than the lip ring my brother sported the day he turned 18.

Most of the remnants of my mother were gone. Shrink wrap already suffocated her furniture; a few coffee tables and a cracked relic of a dresser were inching away from their respective rooms toward the moving truck outside. The boxes piled on her leather couch held her much prized Fenton glassware cradled in bubble wrap.

If my mother's home had a particular scent, I wouldn't know if it had left with her. But the smell of my aunt's rose perfume mixed with the smoke of cedar and sage made itself present when I stepped into the living room.

My aunt Natalie and her teenage daughter were huddled around the fireplace mantle. Her name took awhile to come to me, something along the lines of *Willow* or *Ivy*, words that made her seem more like an ethereal woodland spirit than a mean-spirited child who used to laugh while throwing mud at me. Both noticed me within moments, turning so slowly that it reminded me of the animated reindeer my mother made my father decorate the lawn with every winter.

"Blair." The name was a flavor my aunt hadn't tasted in a long time.

Her pursed lips went back to a thin mauve line as she assessed me walking around closed boxes to join them. Reading glasses hung around her neck on an amber beaded chain. I stared at her long enough to see the similarity of her nose to my mother's before being distracted by the quick motion of my cousin thrusting her hand behind her back. Her clenched fist wasn't big enough to completely enclose the rope of glossy pearls that was my mother's 10th anniversary gift.

"I hope you've been well. It's been so long." My aunt managed a smile, and tears built up in her squinted eyes. "If only you could have come back under better circumstances."

I tore my gaze from the necklace my cousin still tried to hide. “If only.”

My aunt sighed. “Juniper and I were just helping pack up some of Ava’s things.”

Juniper. Close enough.

I looked around the eerily empty house, seeing shadows slip across the hallway leading to the kitchen. “Not much left,” I said, more to myself than to them.

“Oh, no.” Aunt Natalie shook her head. “Your brother got to work on the place right away. Ava gave the house to him in her will.” Her eyes became even tighter slits as she looked at me. “Although that was expected.”

My throat clenched, and I coughed into my shoulder.

“Just a few of her baubles are left,” Juniper piped up. She shook her highlighted bangs out of her eyes before turning them to the mantle next to her head, where a faberge egg sat atop the poorly dusted wood. “Isn’t it just so pretty?”

My cousin continued to speak, but I heard none of it as my gaze was snagged on the egg. The sapphire shell with baby pink roses nestled between gold lattice pulled up a slew of memories, like tugging dandelion stems from the earth. I must have accumulated hours of staring at that egg when my mother would spit lectures and I found oblivion in tracing the fine gilded etches.

“You’re always staring at that egg,” she told me once, standing over my hunched body at the kitchen table. She had just caught me sneaking in well past my curfew. “Look at me when I speak to you.”

I never could. Not any of those times she scolded or fought with me, and certainly not the day she kicked me out of the only home I’d ever known. I could remember the echoing slam of

my packed car door, but didn't care to see the way her eyes looked on from under the front porchlight.

I pushed the faberge egg from my thoughts. "Where's Braden?"

"Kitchen," was my aunt's only response. Her reading glasses now rested on the top of her nose to study the decoration. Nearly inaudible whispers from my cousin containing my name followed me as I walked away from them. Maybe she was an ephemeral woodland spirit after all.

One side of the hallway boasted a framed picture that said *live, laugh, love* in curly script. I rolled my eyes. The other side was covered in pictures of smiling family members. I didn't bother looking for the face I knew wasn't there.

The kitchen table was in disarray, official-looking documents covering the surface like a blanket of paper snow as my brother stood there, arms tightly crossed. His fiancée, Dani, rubbed his back, soothing him, the new diamond on her engagement ring glittering as her manicured hand traced his shoulder blades. She saw me first, smiling weakly. After a few taps on his neck, Braden finally looked up.

Stubble lined his chin and jaws. He had gotten a new piercing on his eyebrow since the last time I saw him a month ago. His brow was still a bit swollen and red, much like the skin around his eyes. Spotting me, his eyebrows shot up and he winced.

I never understood why he was so into piercings, but I supposed the obsession was better than the one that led him to dye the tips of his chestnut hair platinum blonde from middle school until the start of college.

Dani came forward to give me a hug first, tight and warm. My brother followed, arms unfolding loosely as I stepped into his embrace. His chin rested on the crown of my head, and it made me think of the summer he grew like vines and I became the shortest of the four of us.

“Where are you putting all of her things?”

Braden ended our brief hug. “An auction. Everything she gave to me that I don’t need.”

“Everything she gave to you.” The words came out slowly, like trudging through the thick swamps that appeared every spring. “You read the will without me?” I despised the way my voice cracked.

“I didn’t even think you’d come, Blair.”

I studied the whites of his eyes. “Oh.”

He wrinkled his nose. “There wasn’t much anyways. She named me executor, but the lawyer is taking care of most of it.”

I only stared at him, just then noticing how long my jaw had been clenched for.

Was I in it?

Turning away from him and Dani, I ran my hand across the cool granite of the kitchen island, wondering how many dinner parties my mother had thrown here, how many times she and my brother and Dani or anyone else stood under twinkling lights during a holiday, unperturbed by the ghost I had become. The one I had turned myself into.

“I’d still like to see it.” I didn’t feel as certain as I sounded.

Braden nodded. “Sure. Tomorrow. After the funeral.”

Dani, who had been observing us silently, moved toward the fridge. “Something to eat or drink?”

“I’d just like to sleep.”

She blinked in solemn understanding. Her expressions had always been like clay, molding easily to fit the concern or excitement she needed to display. I always thought that’s

why my brother fell for her from the moment he met her in highschool. Dani knew how to show that she cared.

“There’s a room for you upstairs,” Dani said while pouring a glass of water from the filter. She took a sip, then made her way back to my brother’s side to hand it to him. “It’s mostly empty, but I can find some extra sheets and pillows.”

I thanked Dani, following her out of the kitchen with a nod to Braden. She brought me up the floating staircase; the trek felt like slow motion. Gathering some floral sheets and a flattened pillow from a hallway closet, she stopped before a closed door to hand them to me. I reached out to grab the pile from her hands, but she held on for a moment.

“He’s glad you’re back.” Her gaze flicked back and forth between my eyes. “We all are.”

I thanked her again and took the bundle, opening and closing the door quickly before she could say more. A bed with a yellowed mattress and an old dresser greeted me. I idly pulled a drawer open to find a small jewelry box. My pulse decided to race itself as I realized it was the perfect size for a ring.

I flipped the top up. Empty.

Falling asleep sometime later was easier than I anticipated, perhaps because of the relief I felt in knowing I was far away from the room I grew up in and the house my mother didn’t want me in anymore.

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The funeral for Ava Hewitt was a large affair. Larger than she would have wanted—I knew that much, at least.

I drove with Braden and Dani to the funeral home. The parking lot was already full, people from town standing around frozen in their black attire. They looked like dead flies.

I didn't know if people stared at me when I entered through the glass paneled doors. Blair Hewitt back at last after five years, they would surely be saying. I merely looked straight ahead at the polished cherry wood coffin.

Braden knew he couldn't expect me to line up beside my mother's dead body and listen while people who thought they still knew me spouted condolences. My aunt Natalie and Juniper were fine enough replacements, soaking up the attention of my mother's grieving acquaintances while I stood in a nearby corner with a Dixie cup of lemonade trembling in my hand.

I teetered back and forth on my black heels, scoping out the crowd for someone I might recognize. I was pondering what year of high school Juniper must have been in when a flash of navy caught my eye. The color wasn't dark enough to not stand out against the crisp black suits and knee-length dresses. The existing frown on my chapped lips deepened; my mother wouldn't have been impressed.

I stared at the wool sports coat for longer than necessary before I realized I knew him.

The last time I spoke to Leo Conrad was sophomore year of highschool outside my bedroom window, where I had shined my phone flashlight into his shocked eyes and promised to never talk to him again. It was one of the few I'd been able to keep.

His hair had been cropped short to his skull in all the years I'd known him. Ever since middle school he talked about graduating early and joining the military to fly jets. I liked him. A lot. Too much, as I eventually learned. There was something intriguing about a boy who dreamed of becoming a part of skylines rather than watching them from an office window.

At least, until the intrigue lifted its veil and all that was left was a man who never made it off the ground.

Braden had filled me in over the years. After everyone at school watched him leave at 17 to get his GED with more eagerness than we knew how to respond to, Leo failed basic training and was kicked out. Despite what happened before the summer he left, I still had felt disappointed for him.

Leo was looking down, hands in his pockets, as he waited in line to speak with my family. His hair now curled over his ears. I was thinking about the way his shoulders didn't quite fill out his coat when a voice next to me said, "He's cute, isn't he?"

The sharp intake of my breath made my voice sound hollow as I turned to Dani. "What?"

She nodded to where he stood. "Leo."

The lemonade in my hands shook so badly I was afraid I'd spill it over my dress. I took a sip and shivered despite the liquid running lukewarm down my throat.

My mother had said the same thing to me about him, once. I was seven, and she was picking me up from school. The usual traffic jam of moms in minivans had us waiting beside the rusted chain link fence of the recess playground. She was scolding me for the bright green grass stains on my new jeans, waving her hands around by the car dashboard. They had paint swatches on them, colors like cream and ecru that no one but a true interior designer could tell the difference between. Like a sinner in church, I turned away from her preaching to stare at the playground, where Leo and some other rowdy boys played kickball. His hair had been a bit longer than his mother usually let it grow.

I hadn't noticed the lull in my mother's lecture until she said, "He's cute, isn't he?"

A blush had blossomed on my cheeks as I jumped, realizing she had followed my gaze. "I guess."

“That reminds me of your father.” It was one of the few times I remembered her smiling. “I looked at him the same way in college from across my structures and materials lecture.”

I had perked up instantly at that. I used to be enthralled when she talked about love.

I remembered her looking down at her gold wedding ring fondly. “Someday, this will be yours,” she had told me. “You might change your mind a few times about who will put it on your finger, but you’ll always have it.”

Her eyes were shining when she looked at me, and I had shyly glanced down to play with my seatbelt. The affection had warmed me more than the hot air blowing from the vents.

Dani’s voice pulled me from the memory. “Are you okay?”

I attempted to hide my shaky breath as I said, “Fine.”

My thoughts returned to Leo. Why was he here? I wasn’t aware of a connection to my mother other than myself and my brother. But I vowed to never hear of him again, and he and Braden weren’t near enough in age to be close friends in grade school.

I watched as he made it to the front of the line, shaking hands with my aunt and cousin and, to my surprise, hugging my brother, before placing his hand on my mother’s casket for a moment. It rested there long enough for me to see the handprint he left after he walked away. He didn’t notice or look at me the entire time, and I didn’t think I wanted him to.

With the visitation ended, we were ushered to the nearby church. I walked behind Braden and Dani, observing the way their clasped hands connected their shadows.

The service was short. Tearful. I was grateful that I could sit in the first pew to not have to see more wet cheeks than my family’s. My aunt Natalie saw my dry eyes when she passed me to go up and receive communion. I saw every bit of my mother in her disgusted expression.

She wore the same look the night of our last fight, along with a wool shawl around her shoulders and over her arms, crossed in disappointment. I had been caught sneaking out. Again.

That time, it wasn't to go sit on the swings at the local playground with Leo Conrad, tracing our feet in the sand and our histories along with them. I had just needed to be away from her—a feeling I had felt everyday for the two years prior.

My mother didn't speak as I came through the door. I first saw the fire from her lit candle reflected in her eyes and then the heap of things nestled against the Victorian staircase. With a squinting gaze I noticed they were my possessions: clothes, shoes, a few of my favorite books.

“What's going on, Mom?” I knew that the panic in my voice was showing, but my mother remained static, indifferent. “You're kicking me out?”

She shook her head, the bun at the base of her neck never loosening. “You have a choice to make, Blair. If you're going to live under my roof, you can either do as I say or you can leave.”

Panic turned to anger, the emotion where I always headed these last few years. My hands had immediately tightened. “So what? I can't go out?”

“I clearly remember telling you that if you kept this little running away thing up, there would be consequences.”

I scoffed. “Running away? I literally just went for a walk.”

Her expression finally cracked then, marble meeting its ruin. “And do you remember what has happened before, when you did that?”

My exhale could have blown out the candle with its ferocity. “Of course. Of-fucking-course you have to bring that up.”

She stepped toward me, finger pointed, sharp-tongued. “And I'll keep bringing it up until you decide to take some responsibility for once.”

“Me?” My tone was hissing, spitting. “Maybe you could take responsibility and act like a mother *to me* for once.”

The fire reflected in her eyes became an inferno, hazel turning molten. “Then maybe you can stop to think about this family instead of thinking about yourself.” She stepped toward me again. I could smell her lilac perfume mixed with the pervasive scent of paint. “All I know is that Braden wouldn’t have left that night.”

The noise that had come out of me was some strangled shriek, the sound of a hopeless animal stuck in a trap. I pushed past her, picking up a pile of my clothes. She followed me out the door to the rickety wrap-around porch.

“So you’re choosing yourself again.”

I fumbled with my car keys, barely registering the sound of the unlocking trunk in my fury. “I don’t know how many times I have to apologize. How sorry do I have to be?”

She flicked the porchlights on. Standing there, small and huddled, I would have felt pity for her shivering form had she not spoke with such malice. “Until you learn.”

I sniffled, wishing it had been from the cold rather than the tightening of my throat, the liquid wanting to spill over my cheeks. “What do I still have to learn, Mom? How to live without a father? Basically without a mother as well? ‘Cause I’m already there.”

Running back into the house, I grabbed more of my things. My mother kept the door open for me, and I had known instinctively it was her way of telling me to go. “Tell me whose fault it is then.”

“No. I’m done. You win.”

“Tell me, Blair. Whose fault was it?”

My anger welled and welled. “You already blame me, and have made everyone else blame me. Let’s just leave it there.”

She blocked my path to the door, cornering me against the oak newel at the bottom of the stairs. “That’s not good enough, Blair. This is where you can try taking responsibility. Be an adult.”

My teeth ground against each other. “Get out of my way.”

“I want to hear it.”

“No.” A sob finally escaped my throat. I hadn’t felt in control of myself then, my own resentment and guilt mixing together on a palette, creating the ugly mottled color I saw in my vision as I looked away from her burning eyes to the small table next to the staircase. Her most prized glassware sat atop the quilted table runner. In my rage I grabbed a cranberry colored fairy light—her favorite—and smashed it on the ground between us.

“Just leave me alone,” I whimpered, stepping past her frozen form, refusing to look at her any longer. “It’s what you’re best at.”

I hadn’t cared that she followed me as I ran out to my car, slamming the door and pulling out of the driveway. The lights on the porch never wavered even as I was out of view. I had thought of Braden, sleeping heavily through the sound of breaking glass, wondering what he would think when he awoke to my empty bed and a text that merely read *I hope you don’t blame me too.*

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When the service ended, I stayed behind while everyone followed the casket single-file out the church’s doors. There were more flowers on the steps leading up to the altar than my family would know what to do with. A canvas picture of my mother was propped up on a tripod.

It was an older one, I could tell. She hadn't let her honey brown hair turn completely gray yet. For a while, I stared at the image of a woman I hadn't seen in five years. My own hazel eyes stared back.

A cough came from behind me seconds before I realized I was no longer alone. A flash of navy came into my periphery, and Leo Conrad met my gaze easily.

"So. You're back."

I exhaled slowly, acknowledging the broken promise to my teenage self. "So are you."

His lips twitched. "I've been back for awhile."

"Right."

"But you," he started after a quiet moment, narrowing his eyes, studying me. "Have you conquered the world yet?"

"Not even my own."

His laugh rumbled up to the pulpit. When it finished ringing out, Leo became somber. "I'm sorry."

For what? I wanted to ask. So I said, "Thank you."

He shuffled his loafers back and forth, looking down at them. A few curls of hair rolled into his eyes.

"You know," his voice was low, and it reminded me of crickets on that summer night and quiet taps on my window. "I only heard about what happened with your father when I came back from basic."

"Don't." I silently cursed my hands that began trembling at my sides.

Leo looked up again, hands in his pockets. "I just wanted to say that I get why you blamed me."

I sucked in a breath. Of all times, he had to bring this up now.

My head shook on its own accord. “I didn’t—”

“But you did.” He took a step closer to me. “I know from the way you looked at me when I came back the next night.”

My throat was tight, like he had wrapped a noose around it. The next words came out in a whisper. “It was easier than blaming myself.”

Leo’s hands came out of his pockets, reaching towards me. “Hey, you can’t blame yourself either.”

“But I can.” My hands wrung my dress. “I do.” I looked at my mother’s photo. *And so did she.*

He gazed at me like I was wounded—the way he did the night after at my window. Except now, he knew why. “You couldn’t have known he would overdose.”

I fought off the tears that begged to fall from my eyes. “That was my job,” I choked out. “I was the one who was supposed to watch him. The doctors always told us he could wake up and forget he had taken his medication.”

Leo said nothing. His hands twitched like he wanted to either hold mine or stuff them back in his pockets.

I wiped my nose, taking some of the makeup off. “But I went out with you instead. Of all nights,” I said, shaking my head. I could feel the bun in my hair begin to loosen. “I just couldn’t say no.”

Balancing in my heels became a chore. I sat down in the first pew behind me, the nobs of my spine hitting the hardwood back. Leo didn’t sit next to me, but I felt the warmth of his palm on my shoulder. It lingered long after he had walked away.

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After, I helped Braden pack an unsightly amount of roses and daisies into his car. I repressed the urge to snap the lilies from their stems as we walked up to the church altar.

Braden watched me roll the petals in between the pads of my fingers. “Careful with those.”

The look I gave him was unbearably stern. “They’re just going to die anyway.”

“I suppose.” My brother tightened a glittery white ribbon around one of the pots. “But it’s nice to have something.”

“Easy for you to say.”

He heard my muttering, and paused. His voice carried the same somber timbre as the funeral organ music when he spoke. “You might not want to be here, but I appreciate that you are.”

I picked up a pot planted with an inordinate bunch of light pink peonies that tickled my cheek. “I think I want to be what Mom wasn’t. You know, like, subconsciously or something.”

His look was a blank canvas, so I painted the picture for him. The ways our mother was never there for me. How she dropped me off at dentist appointments and drove away, leaving me alone in a lobby full of teens who had parents to talk to. How she only ever saw a single one of my soccer games, but that was because she was working on the remodeling of the store across from the field. How she seemed to be busy whenever I asked for a ride to the local mall.

We made it to his car, setting down the bouquets in the trunk with relief. Dani waved at us from the passenger seat. Braden loosened his black tie, shrugging off my stories. “I never saw it that way. She always drove me to band practice. Even when I pretended to be sick to get out of calculus she came to the high school to pick me up.”

I brushed the fallen soil from my hands, shaking my head. He wouldn't understand.
"Let's just go," I said. Even Dani winced from the hard slam of the trunk door.

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When we all came back to my mother's house, I asked Braden to show me the will.

"Hold on," he told me, pulling out his phone. "I'll call the lawyer."

It was a little while later that I stood at the kitchen island with a steaming cup of coffee that Dani forced into my shaking hands. She and Braden sat at the table, going back to looking at my mother's bank statements and insurance documents.

To my confusion, the person who walked through the hallway after we heard the door open was Leo, a manila envelope resting under his arm. He was still wearing his funeral attire.

My mouth was still opening slightly in astonishment as he walked to the table and began speaking with Braden. I had never asked what he had done with his life. Never would I have picked law school to be his second option behind flying jets. It made sense now, why he was even at my mother's funeral in the first place. I knew it couldn't have been because of me.

"We already went over this." Leo pulled a few papers from the folder. "But it's good that Blair is here now, since she's mentioned."

My hands tightened around my mug. "I am?"

All three looked at me, the panicked excitement of my tone making them study me curiously.

Leo nodded once. "You are."

I could hear my heartbeat in my ears. I cleared my throat. "Well. What is it?"

He strode over to me, placing his finger on the words printed just at the bottom. "The sapphire egg."

I felt like I had sunk to the bottom of a river with stones tied to my hands and feet. “Her faberge egg?”

“That’s the one.”

“Oh.” I skimmed the rim of my mug with a finger. “Oh.”

“She can have it now, right?” Dani shifted in her chair.

Leo straightened the papers using the table surface. “Since it was bequeathed to her, yes.”

My eyes met Braden’s. I knew that he could tell I wasn’t sure how to feel about all this.

The fact that she left me the egg. The fact that she left me anything at all.

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Haley Makes