

For the Cats by Julianah Vernon

I hate this.

I hate everything about this. I hate the bright fluorescent lighting, I hate the stiffness of this ugly maroon visitation room, I hate the vinyl chairs that have seen endless dead people, I hate those depressing flowers the funeral home picked out— I could go on for fucking hours.

I hate everything about this.

“I am so sorry for your loss,” yet another unknown relative of yours says to me. The balding man creepily takes my hand and I give my best fake smile, but all I wanted to say was when the last time they even saw your face (prior to you laying there in the casket).

Only two more hours to go, the gold dainty watch on my wrist you got me for last year’s sixth anniversary shows. Your mom is next to me, she seems to be feeling even more miserable as your dad basically holds her up. I grab her hand and we both hold each other tightly, preparing as the next wave of people standing in line move closer. They are crows on the side of the road pecking at roadkill, making wounds worse for their own gain.

The time passes, the crows all find their seats in the back—all your family fill the first and second rows. Now it’s time, the ugly fading carpet is my focus as I walk up to the podium; I can’t look at your picture, I can’t say your name, I refuse to look over at you— I might throw up all over the already vomit colored carpet.

I look out at all your family, some comforting and others just crows, and I find myself looking for you. But you aren’t there. *You* are to the left of me, laying lifeless, and probably look nothing like your true self because of the damage done.

I close my eyes and the image of you on our wedding day pops into my head, with your fresh haircut (you were so excited to show me) and that wonderful navy-blue tux. You looked at me with those adoring brown eyes as if I was everything, just as you were to me. A muffled sob breaks the eerie silence of the room, I open my eyes to realize the sobs are coming from me. Shit. I said I wouldn't cry, shit.

Your younger brother gracefully comes to my rescue, I can't look at him either as he practically carries me down to the chairs. He looks just like you, same eyes, same hair, it would hurt just to hear his laugh because it sounds so much like yours. He puts me in the chair he was in, and your sister-in-law pulls me into her. She holds me as I drench her black Chanel funeral dress and shake the entire room with my angst. I've always liked her, so did you. She was not a crow.

I have no idea where the rest of the day went, it's all a fucking blur. I look around, we are at your favorite tavern now, this was my idea. You aren't Irish but I am, and you always loved the idea of an Irish wake. So here we are, a bunch of sad and drunk people dressed somehow less depressing than we feel. The single bar tender is hopefully getting paid extra for tonight, who would want to deal with a funeral party for the entire night?

"Hey hon," your mom says as she sits down next to me at the bar, the stool squeaks as she climbs up.

"Hey," I manage to choke out, not trying to appear selfish next to a mother that just lost her son. I couldn't look her in the eyes, I felt guilty for the hours prior.

"Your mom and dad couldn't make it?"

"No, uh, they said something came up," trying to ignore the sudden jolt of pain. I down my third whiskey on the rocks.

Your mom grabs my hand before I can order another drink. She isn't a drinker, but I sure as hell am, especially right now.

"Wait," she waves over the bartender, "two more of those, please."

I guess death has a way of turning people into something they weren't before. We sat there in silence, just drinking and being near each other, alone. No one came up to us for at least an hour, until your dad came up and said the bar was closing.

I didn't think about what happens after this. I have to go home, to our home. I have to get into our bed, I have to sleep with just the cats keeping me company.

"You can come stay with us, sweetie," your dad says, grabbing my shoulder with his gentle hand. He must have seen the realization on my face.

"It's okay, I'm fine. I have to check on the cats, anyway. Thank you though, I will be over in the morning, if that is ok?"

"Of course." They both emphatically say in unison, pulling me in for a hug. I am so glad to have them; you gave me the first real family I have ever known.

Your dad calls me an Uber, and I wait for everyone to leave before finally standing up. The dark green room is comforting, we spent every Thursday night here watching hockey, and I always beat your ass in pool. Somehow this calms me down, until I see someone left the God damn stand with your face on it. How wonderful, I hear myself giggling.

"Let the widow take it! No worries, I got it!" I say to absolutely no one, except the poor bartender, who looks terrified.

"Whoops," I decided it was time to leave.

The Uber I was waiting for suddenly cancelled the trip, and the next closest one was thirty minutes away. I look back at the tavern, the bartender must have scurried out as fast as possible— everything was pitch black inside.

It was too cold to keep standing here. The air felt like shards of glass hitting my lungs, the snow was starting to stick. I felt sober enough to drive, it had been a while since last call, and the sadness probably dissipated the alcohol in my system. I shove your face in the backseat, I still couldn't look at your smile.

The roads were black, and everything was finally quiet. I felt I could relax for the first time in days without having someone tell me how sorry they are that you are dead. The silence felt peaceful, rather than scary.

I want to think about you—holding me, cooking for us because I burn everything, playing with the cats, but all the sudden a deer busts out of the woods on my right and straight in front of me. I try to take it slow, but the black ice on the road has the car spinning within seconds.

My eyes slowly open in what felt like seconds later, but the clock tells me it has at least been an hour.

“Fuck,” I groan, realizing the wetness on my face was actually blood. The deer was lodged in my jeep's hood— and the giant tree that the back half of my car was embedded in seemed to be holding it up.

“Well, well, well Al,” says a voice next to me. Your voice, it sounds like your voice.

“What have you gotten yourself in now, sweetheart?”

You ask me. You. You are dead, but as I look next to me there you sit, in that tux from our wedding day. You look like you used to.

“How?” I manage to say, trying to ignore the blood and dizziness.

“No time for questions, we have to get out of here— hey! Why would they use that picture? I look so bad!”

I start to laugh, like belly laugh, the way you used to make me laugh. It felt so good, I hear our laughs come together as we both cannot stop. The sudden ache in my chest is what stops me, your look of concern reappears as you hop out and over to my door.

I must have passed out again, when I come to, I am sitting on the ground and leaned against my car.

Your hands help me up, and I look back at my destroyed jeep Cherokee, the one you found at a vintage auto-shop. You bought it for me on my 27th birthday, we drove around with the windows down for hours that day, listening to every classic rock cassette tape you could find.

I must have flipped a few times. Everything is shattered. It’s dead now.

I look back at you, telling myself you were an obvious figment of imagination, but the little voice in my head was wishfully thinking you came to save me.

“FUCK!” You yell, scaring me to death.

“Sorry, uh, no signal babe.” When did you grab my phone?

Well, shit. The nearest gas station is five miles behind us, and the tavern was at least ten miles further.

“The closest thing is the hospital babe, three miles that way,” you say, pointing up the dark backroad.

I shudder at the thought of walking in the cold, but thankfully the cold is making the pain go numb. You wrap your arm around me, and we start to walk.

“How are you here?”

You glance down at me and seem to laugh; I don’t understand why.

“I am always watching you, silly.”

“That’s pretty fucking creepy,” I laugh out, the pain creeping up my spine. You just roll your eyes and we keep going.

We finally see the first blue hospital road sign, it’s less than two miles now. I can’t tell if this is real. I don’t know if I want to keep going.

“Okay, Al, only a bit more to go,” you say, encouraging me to keep fighting.

I don’t know if I want to fight, I feel like that deer lodged in my hood— stuck, no control over its own life, trapped in tragedy. I stop walking and you turn to look back at me with confusion on your face.

“Al? What are you doing? We’re almost there, you can’t give up now.”

“I just—I, I need a minute,” I feel the tears burning down my face, meeting every scratch and piece of glass in my skin.

I sit down on the side of the road; thankful no cars were out this late to see my catastrophe playing out.

“Al, you don’t have time for this,” you say, sitting down next to me and laying your left hand on my knee. I then notice the protruding muscle poking out— the destruction of my body was too much to look at with my own eyes.

“I just need a minute,” I can’t bring myself to meet your eyes. I know what the hospital means— yes, survival, but it means saying goodbye to you for good. I didn’t get to say goodbye before, I haven’t had any practice.

“You know, Al, I can still see you from wherever I am,” you chuckle, you’re trying to use humor to fix everything, like always.

“You better not be watching me in the shower, you creep.” We both laugh, knowing damn well you were.

I knew that the end of your life, our life together, wasn't the end for me. As much as I had nothing left to fight for in my selfish heart, I had an entire life to live— even if yours got cut short.

“Exactly, Al, you have to take the cats to the Grand Canyon, you have to go see the northern lights, you have to do everything you used to talk about after one too many shots of tequila,” you add, interjecting on my thoughts.

“Speaking of the cats,” you add, “you have to stop giving them so much catnip. I literally think our cats are nipheads because of you, they get the munchies when you leave!”

Laughing so hard I have to use my hands to hold me up, I shake my head in disbelief at how crazy you are.

“Okay, okay— I can't handle anymore laughs, my head is going to explode,” I manage to get out.

You smile and stand up first, reaching down to help pull me up. We walk in silence for the rest of the way, and finally see the giant building across the highway.

“This is where I stop, Al.”

“I know, I just wish you could've made it through,” I look up and meet your brown eyes for the first time.

“Alaine, you know I fought harder than I ever have, I wanted to stay so badly.”

The sound of you saying my name makes me realize how long it has been since I heard you say it, and everything comes crashing back into my head. I start to scream, cry, yell. I can feel you watching me, and I know it hurts you, but it hurts me more.

I let you pull me close, allowing myself to give up on the temper tantrum I was throwing.

“You have to go in. We can’t both be dead, babe. Who would take care of the cats then, Al?”

Shit. You were right, those goddamn cats.

I grab your face in my hands, wanting to just see your eyes one more time how I remember them. We both lean in for one more kiss. One more hug, the last hug I will ever get from you.

“I love you so much, Al, I am so sorry.” You are crying now.

“I love you. Please don’t go,” I cling onto you.

You just smile and kiss my head like you have done countless times before. We stand there for a while, until I start to feel myself drifting.

“I think it’s time, love,” you break the sounds of my avoidance.

“I know, I know.”

I turn to look at the hospital and then back at you. You are smiling now, looking at me like I am still your everything just as you still are mine. You hold onto my hand for a few seconds, wrapping both of yours around mine— I feel you twist my wedding band and engagement ring a few times, playing with it like you used to do when you drove.

Our hands break apart as I start to walk, crossing the road and making it to the sliding door entrance.

I turn and see you waving from afar, you start blowing kisses at me. I laugh and smile through the copious amounts of blood and tears now on my face. I walk through the doors and see multiple eyes go wide. Then everything goes black.

I hear the beeping and soft chattering when I wake, probably a few minutes later. My eyes don't want to open, but finally they do.

The glare as the sun lets me know it has not been a few minutes later, I look up and see my mom asleep in the chair cross from me, and my dad asleep on my bedside. The sight of them makes my eyes well up with tears, before I can wipe them away, I feel something cold against my palm.

I look down at what I am holding in my hand, a necklace?

"They found it in your hand when you came in," your mother says, scaring the shit out of me. She notices my face when I realize what it is.

Your ring, the one we couldn't find after the accident. In my hand on the chain I got you so long ago. I start laughing and crying, your mom sits on the bed with me, sobbing just as hard.

Our sounds wake up my parents, who quickly join in on the orchestra of tears when they see me awake. They look so different; they look like the care.

"Alaine? How the hell did you make it all the way here?" I hear your brother ask, everyone staring at my mummified self, showing pity with a side of confusion.

I look down at the necklace and your ring, closing my eyes and remembering it all. But instead of telling them, I decide to keep it between us.

"Well, I had to make it. For those goddamn cats."