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Frayed Threads of Their Grief

Standing over the grave of her father, tears well up in Blake's eyes as the teenager stares at the stone in front of her. The wind blows, whipping through the air, while she wraps her mauve coat tightly around her. It's been almost 3 days since Louisiana has been in the grips of a storm. The trees surrounding the cemetery seem to be dancing, and the rain is nothing less than torrential. She hates storms. The raindrops are cold and icy.

The young girl sighs and admires Mother Nature's rampage around her. The cemetery aisles are littered with garbage and fluorescent green moss, forming muddy puddles that stain her once-white Converses with an amber hue. The water is getting into them, and the discomfort is growing even more. Completely empty, her green eyes return to the stone, and she notices that, for once, the grave is not pristine. The once-fresh flowers are wilted from days of rain, the mound of dirt has turned to slush, and dark-green moss seems to nibble at the sides of the granite.

A while ago, she would have smiled at the situation, but today she finds herself cleaning the tombstone. Her knees scrape against the gravel as she kneels by the stone. Her brown hair is soaking, the water is dripping and burning her eyes as she moves forward to remove each piece of leaf as best she can. However, despite her efforts, her hands fall into the mound of dirt. Raindrops fiercely collect in the depression, and she stands up abruptly, ignoring the pebbles sticking to her knees. She takes a step back to look at what she's done.

Instead of being perfectly shaped, a hole is placed in the middle of this “sacred ground.” She brings her hand to her mouth and nervously attacks her nails, heedless of the ghastly taste of dirt underneath her skin.

“You know you should stop doing that, sweetie. After a while, you won't have a single finger anymore,” raises a voice she knows.

“Mom?” Blake exclaims as she turns to look at her. Dressed in the same coat as her, but in beige, her mother's silhouette stands proud in the gray haze of the storm. With her black umbrella in her hand, the middle-aged woman, as is her wont, is dressed with class and care. Her white heels sank into the mud, but she walked firmly towards Blake with a bouquet of lilies in hand. As she approaches, the teenager steps back and gives her space. She watches her mother kneel down and reform the pile of mud with her perfect red manicure.

Then, serenely as if the wind wasn't about to tear every petal from her flowers, she places them in the middle of the grave. Silence echoes between the two women, and only the gusts of wind whistle and sing the torments of the world. It has been almost 4 months since his death, and this same silence has inhabited their daily lives. As she gets to her feet, Blake's mother caresses her daughter's face and gaps before saying, “I've always appreciated your freckles in all circumstances; they bring joy and comfort.”

“What are you doing here, Mom?” replies Blake, breaking free of her grip.

“I could ask you the same question, dear, the rain is going to ruin the blow-dry we did last week. You know that prom is tomorrow, your father would have liked everything to be perfect for that day,” she says as she arranges her coat, not the least bit bothered by her daughter's behavior.

“Don't put him in this; he has no right, and I don't want to be like you,” Blake replies with disgust in her tone.

“He's your father, Blake.”

“Yes, and he's also the one who threw me the punch that gave me a black eye for three weeks, remember?” Trembling hands and tightness in her throat, the teenager wishes to forget what he had done. She can see flashbacks of his eyes devoid of tears, while hers were burning. She remembers that same expression. The same as when he used to hit her mother so many times. Unable to shake the feeling of dread that has engulfed her, she has to get out of there. She starts walking quickly.

“You can't hold a grudge for the rest of your life.” She hears her mother shout behind her. Blake shudders with hatred and turns around as quickly as she left. The water is still there, slapping her face as she confronts her maternal figure. With her finger pointing at her mom's chest, Blake lets it all out.

“You weren't there, Mom! You weren't there when my lunch tray clattered to the ground, as his fist dug into my right eye. You weren't there when the shards of glass scattered and echoed across the floor and I just glanced at the ruins of my meal. Lentils, rice, and pork chop, one of my favorites, a dish that you prepared,” she yells. Blake looks right into her mom's gaze. The woman hasn't said anything, but her eyes betray her as she stares at her daughter with confusion. Blake resumes, “You knew about it. You knew how it was, but still you've let me hope.”

“That is bullshit!” her mother shouts. The rain amplifies as if her emotions were displayed.

“You told me not to worry that this does not happen often!” Blake shouts back. “You acted like it was normal...” The wind carries away these last words, and she bites her lips to avoid crying. The two of them stare at each other blankly. Yet Blake can see the tears forming under her mother's eyes. “I don't care about Prom and his expectations. I stayed for hours behind the opaque gray curtains of my room. I continued watching my show, even though I could hear the joyful sound of the Mardi Gras down the street, even though the rumbling of

my empty stomach added to the soundtrack. I was hiding when you found me, remember ?” she says breathlessly. This time, Blake sees real tears welling up in the eyes of her unreachable mother. Her make-up, always perfect, this time gives way to long streaks of mascara staining her ebony skin.

“The next day, I had to tell my classmates that I walked into a bay window!” Blake screams as her voice breaks. In the immensity of the Garden District's Lafayette Cemetery, her words propel themselves across the cruciform walls of this place. So much so that Blake hopes that from where he is, her father is listening to her now.

“I'm sorry, but your Prom has nothing to-”

“I can't sleep at night, Mom,” Blake cuts her off. “I wrote him poems over the past couple of nights. The only solution to my insomnias the black ink accumulating on the pages of my diary over and over. I have been waking up every night around 3am with my clothes soaked and without the ability to breathe or move. Drops of sweat dripping down my face, while I'm looking for my inhaler in the dark.”

“Why ? You don't even need one,” reacts her mother.

“Oh, good point, mother, finally you realize that I exist! It's been months since I've been using it, since I've been hiding my panic attacks at school or at home behind this.” Blake responds, annoyed. “Every night as I try to get out of my bed, the spasms are getting worse. I sweep across my desk, the only thing on my mind, dad's voice saying that I will die without it as he did. The crash of my desk lamp hitting the floor barely registers in my panicked state as I grab for my inhaler. I know there is nothing inside, but it's the only way I have left to not turn crazy,” she says as she takes a break before continuing. “Maybe if you weren't so preoccupied with being perfect and maintaining this fake life of a healthy widow, you would have seen me. You would have seen that I don't care about Prom and what people think about me, but just to take this awful feeling off my chest!” The teenager's breathing is

getting harder, and the lump in her throat is getting bigger. The pain is there. Her attempts to confront her emotions are like trying to grasp at smoke. The rain has stopped, but their faces are still wet with tears.

“He has beaten you too, and it wasn't the only time, for me, he only did it once, and look how I am. How can you live with that? Pretending and smiling while knowing everything he did to you?” Blake asks her voice, nothing more than a broken whisper. Her mother looks down at the gravel, and Blake does the same, admiring their shoes, both stained by mud.

“I guess I just didn't want to live with it, so I ignored it as best I could,” her mother replies, with a neutral, emotionless voice. Slowly, her heels start moving, and the gravel crunches under her shoes. She starts walking, and Blake follows. “You know, I don't want to mourn him. That's the last thing that I would like to do right now.” Her mother says as she closes her black umbrella. “To tell the truth, if I could forget everything, I would.” The two women walk on without any particular direction, while some of the sun's rays begin to warm the space.

“Why the flowers then?” Blake can't help asking. Her mother's eyes appear vacant, her thoughts seemingly drifting elsewhere, but she clears her throat and regains her composure, bringing her attention back to her daughter's question.

“I want to forget all about this story, yet I can't help but see the episode of his death again. The shouting, the crisis, the crying. That morning, nothing was right. He was looking for his inhaler when you found him on the floor. And despite everything he'd done to us, I could see in your eyes that you still loved him. You had your little-girl eyes. And I don't know if it's the fact of having witnessed his death or the smile that I mustered that haunts me now. So, as a good conscience, as you young people will say, I'm bringing him these famous flowers he always brought me as an excuse.” She feigns a thin smile before turning her head

to admire the monuments around her. Blake does the same and realizes the beauty that nature creates even in the most lugubrious places, like a cemetery. In fact, on the ancient rocks of the tombs, many marble chips appear, reflecting the sunlight. Even the neon green moss on them harmonizes with the freshly wet grass.

Blake sighs and remembers that time when her father used to buy lilies for her mother as an apology. Something purely ironic, knowing the numerous vases that filled their house as bruises accumulated on her skin, she thinks. Her mom's eyes are still watery, but she tries to keep it together, so Blake doesn't add anything else. Slowly, they keep walking until they find a bench under the shade of a cypress. Since it is wet, her mom quickly takes a tissue out of her bag and wipes it clean. Blake smiles and realizes that she'll never change.

The two of them sit down as the birds come out to stretch their wings and throats. Their singing resounds, and Blake takes a deep breath. She doesn't know if she found some release from the anger and hurt that consumed her, but already her mind feels lighter. One only has to look at her converse and her mother's heels to understand that it's never black or white, it's always a mix of the two.

While the girl is thinking, her mother stands up, phone in hand. Blake observes the middle-aged woman and sighs fiercely, bored by the situation. The same thing happens again. Her mother steps back and, like the good businesswoman she'd like to pretend she is, turns her back on her so she can talk quietly. Yet Blake stands up and moves closer to listen to the conversation.

"Yes, Mrs Lee. Yes, I'm calling to ask you a favor. I know I said I'd be there as part of the parent committee tomorrow to chaperone the kids, but would it be possible to cancel, please?" There's a blank for a few seconds as Blake tries to put things together. "Yes, yes, unfortunately, Blake is ill and won't be able to attend either. Thank you, have a lovely day," she says as she finishes her talk. She turns back to her daughter, looking triumphant. "It

looks like the Prom is off for you, sweetie.” A smile spreads across her face, and Blake's face lights up, too. Her hands are trembling uncontrollably, and her legs feel numb, until finally she collapses into her mother's arms.

“I’m sorry.”