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## **Mama**

We were at this church thing, supposed to save people, they say. They asked her to tell her story, and she did. Mom spoke first from somewhere between the living and the gone, and I listened like I didn't live all of it.

“My name was Clara before it became Mama, before it became nothing, before it became a bruise men left on the inside of things,” she started. The room was silent, still, and I could hear her screams. I tried so hard to forget. “I liked drugs because cocaine smelled like freedom, and freedom was the only perfume I could afford. I liked sex because sometimes a body pressed against yours feels like being held, and I had been dropped so many times, I guess I confused the two.” She let go of a little laugh, more for herself than others, because that’s how she was coping. For a moment, she paused, trying to determine if people were judging or bored, but their eyes kept diverting, trying to avoid her gaze. They were ashamed of her, and that was too much.

“Do you know how it feels?! The men who hurt me left fingerprints on my bones,” she shouted, and her pain echoed in the church ballroom. “I scrubbed and scrubbed in the shower until the hot water ran cold, and still I could feel them there, indentations, permanent, like initials carved into bark.” She stood up and showed the scars on her arms. If she could, she would take off her clothes like they did way too many times to show the extent of her swelling, she would, but still she had a bit of self- respect left.

“I tried, once, to end it the clean way, one bullet, one second, done. But they called me insane and gave me a white room and pills the color of sunsets I didn't want to see

anymore. So I came home. I hung my black heart on the kitchen hook beside my coat and pretended to live. Some nights the ghosts came and sat on the foot of my bed, and we just looked at each other, exhausted.”

I remember her telling me the stories when I was little because my grandma thought her love for me would save her. Really? I didn't know the whole inner workings of her heart, but when I looked into her eyes, I felt it; the rage, the scorched-earth grief of a woman who had said no and been ignored, who had been robbed of the one thing a person is supposed to own entirely: herself. My mother's life was so bitter it flavored everything: the food she cooked, the air in the apartment, the way she exhaled cigarette smoke toward the ceiling like she was returning something to God. She didn't want to be there anymore, and probably she didn't want me either. *As the fruit of her evil*, I always closed my eyes and tried to pray her pain away. She spoke again.

“The mornings were the worst. The light through the venetian blinds cut the bedroom into strips, and I lay there feeling sliced. The apartment smelled of last night: stale weed, sweet as decay, the grease of takeout containers, my own unwashed skin. I had stopped cleaning. Trash collected in the kitchen the way memories collect; quietly, until you can't move without stepping on something that cuts you. I thought about Hope, my daughter.” She looked at me, and all I could do was avoid her translucent blue gaze. “Her name was a joke I played on myself when she was born, and I still believed in jokes, still she deserved better than a mother who was mostly a smoker and an apology.” When I met her eyes again, they were red, and tears were at their borders. “I want her to understand: I’m not choosing to leave her. I chose to stop drowning slowly and take her with me. There is a difference. I hope someday she will understand that I still love her.”

She said that, and the only thing I could focus on was the fact that in my 22 years of life, that was the first time she ever said these three little words. My mouth was half open and people looked at us and the same silence as heavy as it filled the room.

When I came home that same day, the silence hit me even harder before I reached the door; a thick, specific silence, the kind that has weight and texture, like walking into a room packed with wool. No screams. No television. No, Mama singing off-key to old records. I stepped over the trash piling on the kitchen floor, plastic bags exhaling sourness, an overturned ashtray spreading gray powder across the linoleum like ash from a small fire. The weed smell had gone stale and sweet, clinging to the walls, to my clothes, to the back of my throat. The bedroom door was open.

She hung in the amber light like something sacred and ruined. The sun came through the blinds in long gold bars and lay across her crystalline skin, her bare feet, the rope that had taken what was left of her. She was so still. She looked like a painting I didn't want to understand. I shed one tear, just one, because the rest of me had gone somewhere wordless. I climbed on the chair, and I held her weight with both arms and worked the knot loose with my fingers. I brought her down slowly, slowly, like something fragile, like something that mattered. Which she did. God, she did.

I laid her on the bed and straightened her hair with my hand. Her skin was cooling, and it smelled faintly of the rose soap she used when she was having a good stretch, those rare weeks when she showered and opened windows and almost stayed. I sat on the edge of the mattress, and I said the only poem I knew how to say:

*"Mama, fly away and flutter your wings upon a cloud —  
You're a golden eagle, not a caged bird."*

Finally, she was liberated, I finally understood that. As the child born from her abuse, I couldn't wish better for her, but at the same time, I couldn't refrain from my selfish thoughts:

*What about me? Were these twenty-two years nothing? Couldn't I have saved you?  
Why did you name me Hope if you were going to leave anyway?*

The scream came out in silence. The best screams always do, I guess, she just decided to embrace it another way. She wanted me to see that she was better. Still, nothing could bring her back, and that was the last memory I had of my mother.

Resigned, I called the morgue. I organized the funeral. I picked a white casket because she had never had anything white and clean in her life, and I wanted to give her that at least, one white thing, all her own, untouched. I stood at the grave in the thin November cold, the ground hard beneath my shoes, the air tasting of frost and turned earth, and I thought: *I am the fruit of evil and the daughter of sorrow, and my name is Hope.*

I have to figure out what to do with that.