

Tangled Strings

In a McDonald's 276 miles away, a man will die between bites of a burger. Doctors will say it was a heart attack, friends will say it was karma. His third wife will cry waterfalls on her gold-infused toilet seat with her phone in hand; a funeral home website opened in one tab, and a plane ticket to Aruba in the other. There will be a wake, and while most attendees will have practiced solemn stares, the green envy in their eyes will be emeralds in the sea of black-clothed actors. And throughout it all, three old women in rocking chairs plan their next victim with the cut of a string.

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Agatha thinks Death tastes sweet in the recreation room. There is just something about it. The lamplight feels like a warm bath from the sun, and the flower-patterned rug with crusted oatmeal stains seem almost inviting. Even Carl, who is known for storming out of bingo nights in a fit of cheating claims and flying peanuts, is somewhat approachable, maybe even at peace here. Either way, Agatha enjoys how the steady hum of her elderly peers makes the space feel alive, despite knowing that life is not something there is an abundance of at the Setting Sun Nursing Home.

So when her sisters sit on the two other rocking chairs at her side, she smiles heavily, almost guiltily, knowing that she'll have to put down her fruit punch-flavored jello cup to pick up her scissors once again.

Clara opens her bag. Inside, the strings of every life mingle, tangling into webs and knots. She picks up a string and twirls it between her fingers, feeling the pulse of a man who does not know fate is no longer in his hands.

Without a word, Lois grabs the string and squints, her eyes sharp enough to almost cut the string itself. Clara feeds it to her from the bag, the movements slow and gentle. Her wrinkled hands twirl the string like ribbon. In one swift movement, her arms stretch and the string becomes a tightrope between them.

Agatha grabs her scissors. The cold metal bites her hands. Her fingers find their way through the holes and she snaps the blades open and shut, a habit of sorts, just to hear the sound it makes without someone's life in between it. She looks at her sisters.

Slowly, Lois brings her arms together, creating slacks of string on both sides, until her fingers meet in the middle. She drops one hand and pinches the spot in the other, her face hard and unreadable.

"It's here. Cut here, Agatha."

Agatha takes the string gingerly as if it might snap without her scissors. She stares at it and as each second passes the string grows heavier, the weight of another person's life dragging down the disposition on her face. Agatha has cut more strings than she can count, and could make blankets, coats, and sweaters out of the lives she's ended. Clara supplies, Lois measures, and Agatha cuts. This routine, for centuries. The occupants of Setting Sun move in and out of life like a revolving door, while three sisters sit and snip for eternity. Their own existences, cycles of rocking chairs and jello cups feel as long as the rolls of string in Clara's bag.

"Who is it?"

Lois sighs with a roll of her eyes as her body deflates in the rocking chair. Clara frowns, her big black eyes glassy and full of disappointment.

"Agatha we've been over this—"

“I just want to know, just this one time.”

“There’s no reason to know. Knowing doesn’t change anything. Now cut the string.”

Lois’s voice is a bark, almost gathering the attention of the other, actually mortal knitters a few feet away.

For a moment, Agatha thinks she won’t do it. That she’ll stand on her wobbly wrinkled legs and march out of the Setting Sun, leaving this life, leaving death for someone else to take care of. She’ll buy a house in the mountains, maybe find some solace in the snow caps, and knit a real sweater.

It’s Clara and Lois’s stares that drag her back home, right back to that old rickety rocking chair. Agatha knows better than to dream. So, like the Fate she is, she cuts the string. And as always, someone drops dead, and for the first time, they hear the sound of the body hitting the floor.

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In a nursing home, five feet away, a nurse drops dead while she gives an old man his vitamins. Her last thought, though she does not know it, is whether or not she’ll be able to watch the last episode of her favorite soap opera after her shift. One second her brown eyes bulge and the next they are empty, almost transparent. She falls, and with her, the styrofoam cup of water she holds in her left-hand bounces off the oatmeal-stained rug. The residents of the Setting Sun Nursery Home gasp, four of them frantically grasp for their inhalers, and three sit in their rocking chairs, looking at the two pieces of string that were once one.

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In truth, Clara didn't know whose string it was. The bag speaks to her but she doesn't always understand. In some ways, none of them were Fates, just three old women too lazy to check the yarn they knit. If her sisters ask why she'll say Death chose Nurse Maya. That as Fates they don't owe anyone kindness. That the job can't be easy, has never been easy, that life isn't something you can barter.

"Oh my god, is she dead?"

"Someone get a Nurse...a live one!" Carl was never great at subtlety. Or Bingo.

When the paramedics come, Clara can't help but feel like this is her fault. She didn't use the scissors but she did pick the strings. Out of all the people, women, nurses, and occupants of the Setting Sun Recreation Room, she had to pluck the string of sweet, bright Nurse Maya. Maybe Agatha is right, maybe this job isn't worth it, not when you have to watch a woman who tucks you into bed every night fall to the floor. Just like a puppet with strings. Ones she helped cut.

"I told you, it's better not to know." Lois watches the siren-less ambulance pull out from the parking lot from the window.

"No. If we knew it was Nurse Maya we could have done something,"

"Done what, Agatha? Make friendship bracelets out of her string, out of all the strings we cut. That isn't what we do."

Agatha stiffens, her eyes avoiding the spot Nurse Maya once occupied next to the Rummy table. Clara sits solemnly, unable to look at the bag of souls at her feet. Maybe if it was Carl or Miriam, or Eloise, she wouldn't feel as bad. Their strings are coming to an end soon. That

they would have been prepared for. But was this the right string? Among the centuries she's been spinning the threads, was this the one she finally got wrong?

“We don't choose. We just thread, measure, and cut.”

Clara swallows her thoughts, picks another string from her bag, and just for a moment, wishes the string she could pick was her own.

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In a bedroom three floors up, a Fate planned a murder. Her sister Agatha thought that Death could be cheated. A dream of a life without string and the weapon she wields, a dream that died on the same rocking chair it was born on. Her sister Clara thought that Death was a mistake. A failure of fingers in a bag full of lives. Neither of them knew that the life they ended that day was not supposed to be one within the walls of the Setting Sun Nursing Home. And one Fate made sure that no one ever will.