

Tilly's Testimonies

The possessions became a problem when she was twelve. The spirits never liked puberty, something about how hormones made the body feel inside out. But Tilly, a puppet for the dead still missing adult teeth, knew the truth. *The dead are stuck*, she'd think, and the souls would whine in protest. A cacophony of complaints, many scrambling for the microphone in her mind. ***Silly Tilly, if we are stuck, then so are you.***

Tilly used a pair of safety scissors. ***What an oxymoron***, Meredith would groan. She's a fifth-grade English teacher, or at least she was before her 2003 beige Suburu went hydroplaning into an old maple tree. Tilly didn't mind the company, not usually. Meredith made book reports fun and phonics quizzes easy. Before the stabbing, Mr. Gallagher would always compliment her on her comma placements. *"Excellent work, Natalia."* Now Mr. Gallagher hides all sharp objects in his desk drawer and has a nervous eye twitch.

It was in geography class, just after lunch, and Bernard was still chasing the high of his first-ever peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The disgruntled banker died years before its creation, only finding out about the classic spread through a commercial on TV, ***a glowing box that talks!*** while Tilly was finishing up some homework at the cluttered dining room table. ***Natalie, we must try the buttery peanut spread.*** Tilly was never a peanut butter fan, more of a grape jelly-on-toast girl herself, but Bernie never liked the word no, dead or alive.

Bernie jumped in just in time for his first bite. Tilly's eyes, or rather Bernie's at the time, glowed with excitement at the combining of flavors. He attacked the sandwich, splatters of peanut butter and jelly painting her lips, cheeks, and somehow forehead. **"Brilliant! What a magnificent creation!"** And although they were Bernard's words, it was Tilly's voice that echoed throughout the cafeteria. Always Tilly who caused heads to turn, teachers to shush, and

glares to sharpen. Miles, Tilly's soon-to-be scissor-stabbing victim, nibbled on goldfish crackers and watched in wary silence.

They were coloring maps and filling in capitals. Eduardo prided himself on memorizing which city matched each state and he liked to jump in if only to bask in the awe of Tilly's classmates. The warmth of the spotlight felt welcoming, similar to the rays of the Arizona sun he'd grown up in, the same rays that killed him with heatstroke when he was fourteen.

"How do you know where they all go without looking it up?"

"No necesito 'mirar hacia arriba'. Mi mamá y yo solíamos estudiar mapas."

Tilly was not supposed to know how to speak Spanish. Tilly was not supposed to do many things, but the spirits were never the ones who had to deal with the consequences. This applied to speaking different languages and stabbing.

Miles, shyly shading in Indiana with a macaroni-and-cheese crayola, reached across the table to grab a blue-colored pencil. Unfortunately for Miles, his arm bumped Tilly's, causing her current labeling of Dallas, Texas, in marker to swerve sideways. A harsh black line streaked across her states.

"Oh no, I'm sorry, Tilly. It was an accident, I swear."

Tilly deflated on her stool, her face drooping in disappointment. But Miles was always kind to her. It was an innocent mistake, and Tilly knew it, even if the souls inside her didn't want to believe it. They like to treat everything as a tragedy. It helped them mask their own.

"It's okay, Miles." Tilly's voice was glum but laced with understanding, and Miles managed a weak smile in response. She looked down at the map again, feeling Bernard banging on the bars in her mind. ***Our map is ruined! What a day of toil wasted! We should make him pay! Make the boy suffer! He will know sorrow, and we will not know mercy!***

Tilly grumbled and grabbed the Witeout with a sigh. Her map lay before her on the wooden table, ruined and all of a sudden ugly. A flare of anger roared through Tilly, enough for it to blend with the fury of the spirits inside her. She hummed to herself to block out the nasal twinge in Bernard's insistent nagging, the way it made her ears ring without her ears hearing anything at all. *No, Bernie, it was a mistake. We're going to be nice about it, yeah?*

Tilly blinked and she was no longer Tilly. In a flurry of fingers, she gripped the purple-handled safety scissors and plunged the blades into Miles's hand. A scream erupted from his throat and the classroom was filled with frantic wails and wide-eyed classmates. Mr. Gallagher's complexion blanched. His old hazel eyes darted between Bernard's vicious grin plastered on the face of a fourth grader, and the oxymoron scissors lodged between squirting blood and the breaking of bone.

Tilly likes to pretend she doesn't remember it. In all the books she's read and movies she's watched, possessions swallowed the minds of their hosts and ate away at their memory. Violent acts were distant nightmares. There was a clear difference between you and them, the living and the dead, and blame was the passing of a hat. *It wasn't me. Bernard did it.* But the smell of blood isn't something the dead can remember. And the bitter taste of guilt was something the living never allowed her to forget.

"Natalia wasn't born violent. But she was born hungry."

~ Meredith Green, (1968 - 2013)

Christina liked to blame Tilly's imaginary friends on her father, as if possessions were the result of unfair genes or some catastrophic trading of chromosomes. The God of Death, she

would call him. *“He killed our marriage. Maybe the spirits haunting you are his last victims.”*

But Peter didn’t know about death. He knew about envelopes, specifically ones made from 100% biodegradable paper. Peter could navigate a Staples better than an apology and the only blade he ever wielded was a letter opener. Sometimes when Christina hits her fourth or fifth glass of wine she wonders if he’s crafting invitations for their divorce. *“Or maybe condolence cards. For a funeral. That way your spirits can come too.”*

Tilly didn’t know much about Peter, but she liked to think she did. Smiles Stationary was more of a child to him than Tilly ever was. She used to send him letters, one without stamps because Peter, the God of Envelopes, didn’t need stamps to receive objects from his own domain. Tilly didn’t know much about the United States Postage system and Christina, too busy scrubbing Mr. Sketch cherry scented Satanic symbols off the walls, never bothered to teach her.

It was cute, at first. Tilly would blink, her jade eyes flickering with the layering of life, and something sharp-witted and strange would spring from her tongue. Teachers before Mr. Gallagher would call her bright, intelligent, a little emotional but she’ll grow out of it. Dramatic, but she’ll grow out of it. Temperamental but she’ll-

“Natalie. Don’t make me do this.”

Tilly sat at the dining room table. The necks of a dozen half wilted roses craned downwards, petals peeled open to reveal pits of black bulbs inside. Dead. Tilly wondered if they knew her name too.

“Natalie, are you listening to me?”

Tilly tore her gaze away from the roses to look at her mother. Christina’s coffee colored irises poured into her daughter’s, dark and milkless. When Tilly blinked she saw purple scissor

handles, bone and blood, and a macaroni and cheese crayon, cracked and forgotten on the ground. *Stupid Bernard. Stupid Peanut Butter. And stupid me, for thinking I ever had a choice.*

“I’m sorry, Mama.”

“No more sorries. Give me a reason not to send you away. Tell me you’re going to stop with this spirit nonsense.”

Outside, a bird sang. Or screamed. Tilly couldn’t tell the difference, but it didn’t matter. It had ocean drowned wings, speckled spots of inky black night, and a pure white underbelly. But that didn’t matter either. The bird was alive and free. Therefore, Tilly wanted to become it.

Gasoline waterfell onto glowing hot coals. Tilly’s heart was running, far from her school, her house, past the graveyards that seemed to follow her everywhere. She wanted to be done with puppet strings and mouths that aren’t hers. But even then, when staring down miles across the table at her mother, eyes begging for her own daughter to come back to her, the spirits stretched their greedy arms for Tilly’s steering wheel.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because they won’t let me.” Tilly’s voice was a hunted animal, a deer crying before the barrel between its eyes.

Christina peered into her daughter. Still nothing. She leaned back in her chair, silent and decided, her tired form rigid. Unmoving. A spirit crawled its way up Tilly’s throat and she tried to swallow it down. It felt like razors skimming the inside of her throat, like drummers using her skull for band practice. *Please, just this once.*

“Maybe it’s because you won’t let them.”

Something snapped. Tilly picked up the vase, the one with the roses who knew her name, and launched it at the wall beside her mother. Glass fireworked off plaster, sparks of clear, sharp light lodged into furniture, rug, and skin. A silence settled between them, one that's loud and filled with an answer neither of them like. With dancing tears, Tilly looked at Christina, her eyes green, not knowing if they ever changed.

"I guess it doesn't really matter."

Tilly had three greens, two blues, and one yellow card. No wild cards, she wasted her wild draw four on Echo seven turns ago. *A fartuous mistaketh!*

"I don't have any reds."

"Then you gotta pick up another card."

"But I already drew one from the pile. And I can't use it."

"So keep on picking up."

"That is definitely not the rule."

"It definitely is."

"Any Uno expert, such as myself, knows the rules clearly state that when a player cannot place any cards down to match their opponent, they only need to pick up one card from the draw pile. If that one card isn't applicable, the turn goes on to the next player."

Echo rolled their eyes, icy blue avalanching the empty lounge. *Lounge...* It was a cozy name for a prison. *A quaint cage forsooth.* All dressed up in paper crafts and painted rainbows and cat posters that cover old blood stains. Soldiers disguised as nurses watched with a facade of

nonchalance, their pupils darted back and forth between the two players in a dance of masked surveillance.

“Fine. But it’s more fun my way.” Echo put down a red five. Still nothing. Tilly reluctantly reached for another card from the draw pile. Finally, a red skip. Blink.

“Aye! I has’t finally best’d thee!”

Echo crosses their arms with a playful smile. “If you skip me, it’s just your turn again. So you have to pick up another card.”

Tilly’s body snapped into a stand, her chair toppling over behind her. **“What the goodyear?!”**

Echo laughed, the sound airy and almost cloud-like. But it wasn’t loud enough to drown out the storm of movement and yelling from the dressed-up soldiers. A Nurse glared at them from the door.

“Hey! Get down from there.”

Tilly, once again the pilot of her own body, looked down at her feet on the table. Uno cards lay scattered across the floor in puddles of numbers and colors, their game undeniably ruined. *Cornelius!* Grinding her teeth, Tilly internally scolded the spirit. *We were having a peaceful game. And you ruined it.* Tears welled and the other spirits scratched at the walls from the sudden spike of emotion, their thoughts like ping-pong balls.

Tilly didn’t acknowledge the Nurse, only stepping down to the ground, picking up the cards, and shooting Echo an apologetic look. Echo shrugged and bent over to help Tilly collect cards.

“Sorry.”

Echo smiled, filling the room with so much light that Tilly swore the room got eighty percent brighter. “It’s okay. But Cornelius is a sore loser.”

I doth not has't any s'res! But Tilly just rolled her eyes. “Yeah. What a baby.”

Echo always saw Tilly. Even under the layers of souls in her mind, when the world became their playground and Tilly became the one locked inside herself, Echo always had some sort of key. Friendships were complicated, practically impossible, but in such a lifeless place, he knew how to revive her.

The Nurse moved from the door with a sigh, the purple pooling under her eyes resembling dumbbells. “All right, you two. Time for bed.”

Fire erupted in Tilly, a flame already burning from Cornelius’s interference. *We’re not done.* Tilly thought, or maybe Cornelius did. Sometimes it got hard to tell and that scared Tilly more than any prison ever could.

“We has't not did finish.”

Did we say that?

“You’re done because I said you’re done. Put the cards away.”

“The game is ov'r at which hour i sayeth t is ov'r, thee logg'rhead oaf!”

Oh, we definitely said that.

The Nurse glared at Tilly with knives in her gaze. Sharp and grating but it was tinder, only feeding the already growing flame. Echo glanced between the two in silence. Still behind bars within her mind, Cornelius crossed Tilly’s arms. *No fights, Cornelius. Not tonight.*

“All right, that’s it. C’mon, let’s go.” The Nurse stomped over to Tilly with a sigh and tried to herd her towards the door. ***No more brains than a stone.*** Cornelius launched Tilly’s hand

toward the Nurse, grabbing her tightly. Night bled from Tilly's clutch. The Nurse's eyes widened with fear. Plates and bowls and bottles of it. And the spirits were hungry.

The Nurse's arm shriveled, skin wrinkled into folds of pale leather. Her muscles withered, muscle decayed into bone as the effect spread through her arm like a disease. Tilly's expression was slack, eyes completely white. No iris, no pupil, just a milky, cold abyss paired with a wicked grin that wasn't her own. Tilly heard the screams, the shrieks barely a knock on a door that's been sealed shut.

When it reached her shoulder, Tilly let go. The Nurse's arm, or what was left of it, fell with her. Tilly returned to herself with a blink. *Silly Tilly, you never really left.*

Distantly, as if at the end of a long tunnel, Tilly became aware of Echo still standing next to the table. Their face was a slab of concrete. Hard, cold, but something in those icy eyes understood. Guilt gnawed its way through her insides, the Nurse's blood coating the ground around her unconscious form in a crimson blanket. And yet Echo only stared at Tilly, somehow, still seeing her.

"Echo..."

They broke their gaze, only to bend over to look at the ground. For a moment Tilly assumed they were going to throw up, cry, or prepare a guttural scream for help. Surely the cameras caught the horror. Someone had to already have been on their way. Instead, Echo picked up an Uno card from the ground, the remnants from their game now feeling like artifacts. They hold it out to them, unafraid.

"Here. You win."

A red two.

Tilly took the card gingerly, her thumb gliding on the paper's edge. *I should have just kept picking up.*

"I'm sorry."

Echo nodded, and his smile faded. Already the room felt darker. "I know. Now go."

Tilly slid the Uno card into her pocket. The sound of approaching footsteps thundered through the hall. A fresh tray of toy soldiers. And the souls' stomachs growled.

"Natalia knoweth how to holdeth a bodkin. Not yond the lady hast ev'r very much did need one."

~ Cornelius Browne, (1458 - 1509)

There's a river that knows all of Tilly's secrets. She walks along the banks of the Vita, an ironic name for a river that attracts the dead. Like a lighthouse, the Vita acts as a leyline, a beacon of energy for the spirits. If Tilly wasn't so focused on finding a new favorite rock along her path, she'd notice souls flocking to the water and following its meager path through thick grass and jagged stones.

Instead, Tilly toes another beer bottle cap with her boot. The dead don't interfere much here, too distracted by the river to care much for her quest for cool rocks. The Vita is loud, so much so that Tilly's own thoughts become lost among the dead, keeping all the rooms in Tilly's mind empty. She's thankful for it, so often lost among the crowd of the dead within herself that the space feels liberating.

Tilly leans over to pick up a rock. Dirt cakes her fingers and lodges inside her black-painted nails. She rolls the rock over in her fingers, squinting at the specks of quartz and running the pad of her thumb over its rough surface.

“Excuse me. Are you Miss Tilly?”

The voice drags her gaze upwards. A young boy stands in front of her, his hair bunched into midnight curls and his skin the color of fresh soil. He smiles, hopeful, and full of life, so much so that it takes Tilly a moment to realize he’s dead.

When Tilly’s eyes linger on him for too long, she can see the death inside him. His skin shows a light blue shimmer, and the world warps through the spirit’s body. A swell of sadness encompasses her and Tilly looks away, fumbling with the rock in her brown-stained fingers. Normally the spirits don’t bother her here. Normally.

“Yeah, that’s me.” Tilly’s voice is draped with dread.

“My name is Randall.”

“Hello, Randall.” Tilly walks through him, hoping Randall will get the message that she’s unavailable for visitors. Like all the keep-out signs Tilly makes, the spirit ignores them.

“Is it true that you host souls?” Randall jogs to keep up with Tilly.

“Not if I can help it.” Tilly kicks a pebble in her path. She closes her eyes and sees a pair of purple-handled safety scissors and the Uno card, the red two, still in her pocket.

“Why not?”

“Because spirits make me do bad things.”

Randall crosses his arms. “We don’t make you do anything. We just help scratch the itch.”

Tilly stops walking and turns to Randall, her right hand squeezing the rock so hard it almost breaks the skin of her fingers.

“What do you want?”

The boy’s eyes soften and he looks toward the Vita. There’s a quiet yearning in the upturn of his lip, the crinkle of his eyebrow, and Tilly already knows what he’s going to ask.

“No.”

“I just want to dip my feet in. Or your feet in. I never got to swim while I was alive.”

“Not happening.”

“C’mon, Miss Tilly. Please? I won’t do anything bad, I promise. Just for a minute.”

The dead don’t feel, at least not in the way humans do. Walking through walls is fun but what about warmth? Or weight? It’s why the spirits push and shove for Tilly’s body, desperate for another chance at taste, scent, smell, and touch. She’s a vehicle for them, a way to relive eating their favorite food or falling into a blissful sleep. Tilly thinks of Bernard and his love for peanut butter. *And look where that got me.*

“Go find someone else’s feet to use.” Tilly groans, but there’s a pause before her refusal. No one has ever asked. Souls jump in and out, puppeteering her for their own agendas and desires, some of which Tilly would help with, if they gave her the choice. But they never did, not until now.

Tilly shows hesitancy. A crack in the wall she’s built. And that’s all Randall needs to knock it down. “You can time me. Kick me out after a minute.”

She swallows, a warm whip of wind sending her pink hair waving. The pause stretches between them, long and stringy and this time Randall is the one with the scissors. “Please?”

I’m going to regret this.

“One minute.”

Randall glows in both senses of the word. “Oh, thank you thank you, Miss Tilly!”

He steps forward, ready to grab Tilly’s reins. But before he enters, his brown eyes blink at hers in waiting. *What’s he doing?* After a second of the two just standing, she realizes. *He’s waiting for my approval.* The act makes Tilly’s nerves settle slightly. Something that sounds and tastes like trust builds inside of her. But Tilly isn’t ready to call it that, not yet.

Tilly manages a small nod. Randall smiles at her one last time. With a blink, he touches the wool of Tilly’s pink cardigan on her arms, smells the sweet scent of pervading wildflowers, and tastes the fruit punch-flavored gum Tilly was chewing on only an hour or so ago. And it feels like life.

All the while, Tilly watches. She’s a passenger now, but Randall has given her full sight of the wheel. He has them sit down beside the river, and gently peels off Tilly’s black Doc Martens and heart-patterned socks. Directly in front of them, the river splashes off stones and sprays droplets of water onto Tilly’s face. It almost tickles and Randall laughs, completely unbothered by the feminine voice that comes out of him.

“This...this is better than I remembered.”

Gently, Tilly’s feet break the surface of the stream. Cold water floods between her toes, the bed of rocks in the shallow water kissing the sole of her heel. All of it reeks of life. Rich and beautiful, and simple.

Tilly feels it too. Maybe not directly, almost as if there’s a delay, but she feels the cold, smells the flowers, and tastes the gum. She gets to share it. And maybe that’s not so bad.

The two sit in silence, four feet that are actually two, gently kicking ripples in the water and enjoying the breeze. When a minute is up, because Tilly was in fact counting, she gives him an extra thirty seconds. Eventually, Tilly gives his soul a gentle nudge.

“All right. Time’s up.” Tilly braces for a fight. She expects him to go kicking and screaming, despite their deal.

But Randall closes Tilly’s eyes and when they open, they’re truly Tilly’s again. Surprised to already be back in control of her own body, Tilly runs her fingers through the blades of grass, and takes a breath of air, feeling its freshness in her lungs. *He actually...left.* At least from her body.

Tilly turns to her side. Randall sits next to her with a smile.

“Thank you, Miss Tilly.”

They sit together in comfortable silence, watching tangerine bleed out from the horizon.

What am I, if not a puppet for spirits?

Alive.

Alive.