

Jacob

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Her face is pale, so pale that I wonder if she is already a ghost. Her cheeks, once flushed cherry red like the wine she drank, are now devoid of colour, but her lips are red. They must have painted them, I think numbly, and the notion is strange to me. I imagine the funeral directors, all in black with purple shadows under their eyes, dressing her in her finest clothes and painting her face and nails like it's her birthday party.

The man behind me shifts impatiently, and the children behind him crane their necks for a look at her. Morbid curiosity, that was what it is. I was like that when I was a child. Maybe that's why I can't tear my eyes away from her, why I hold up the line for minutes just standing there, staring at her as she lies perfectly still.

I wish she would move, even just a small twitch of her fingers or a flutter of her eyelids. I wish she would sit up and put on that stern expression of hers, point her finger at me and tell me, "Jonathan, you come inside right this instant!" I wish she would speak through gritted teeth at me, in that way I used to hate, when I traipsed mud through the house, careless.

The man behind me coughs, and I tear myself away from her, taking my place in the frontmost pew. The paper blu-tacked to the end of the pew reads "RESERVED FOR FAMILY" in big blocky Times New Roman lettering.

I settle beside my father, who had been at the front of the line at the start of the viewing. He had stood there for a long time, but no one minded. People I don't know patted him on the back on his way back to his seat, eyes red as though he had been crying. I have never seen my father cry, except from laughter.

My uncle sits behind us. He'd been in jail just the day before, released temporarily for the funeral. He wears a ring around his ankle, and a policewoman sits at the back of the church, arms folded over her chest. No one told me what he's in for because no one talks about it. I don't ask. I don't think I want to know. My aunt sits beside him, with a head full of hair she likely won't retain for much longer. She wears makeup and puts on a smile but underneath all that, you can tell the treatment is hard on her. My cousins are with her, all of them older by several years, and the twins are clean-shaven for the occasion.

More and more people go up to view her body, and I watch. There are a few people from her work, and I eye them warily, recalling countless dinners where she had sat at the end of the table, frustrated and overworked, unfurling the latest tale of the plight of the hospital administrator, courtesy of her poorly run and understaffed department. We would listen, collectively thinking (and sometimes saying), “*You need a new job!*” I used to admire her work ethic and dedication. Now I just wish she spent more time with us and less at her work.

People from our church go up, then people I don’t recognise. Finally, something moves in the corner of my eye, and my brother rises from his seat.

Jacob is dressed uncharacteristically, a white collared shirt and black pants, and he shoves his hands in his pockets, posture slouched as he strides to the casket. He has our mother’s pin-straight hair; streaks run through it from when he had dyed it platinum blond a few months ago. It was around that time Mum showed me the book: *All Cats Have Aspergers*. She told me to try to understand and let me cry on her shoulder.

He looks at her for a few seconds, turns on his heel, and strides back to our pew, promptly turning away from everyone and staring out of the window. I stare at the back of his head, suddenly angry. I want to yell at him, tell him to look at her, to really *look*. I want to tell him to at least *pretend* he cared that our mother was in a box, soon to be turned to ashes in a jar, buried in the dirt of a Wellington graveyard. But he doesn’t turn around until the service is over.

I fetch a cup of coffee for my father, echoes of “I’m sorry for your loss” following me back to where he sits. Friends and family approach us, cautiously offering pats on the back and telling me what a wonderful woman she had been, as if I don’t already know what I’ve lost. I look over my shoulder at where Jacob had been sitting moments before. I can’t blame him for escaping the crowds of sympathetic strangers, but how could he leave Dad here? I run down the aisle, shoulder the door open, and inhale the freezing July air.

“Jacob?” I call, moving out from under the cover of the church. A gust of wind hits me, and my hair whips into my eyes. Typical Wellington. “Jacob, are you out here?”

The wind dies down slightly as I make my way around the church, into the little garden area where picnics were held in the summer. I remember the childish joy of sausages on bread and simple friendships on playgrounds, before my taste buds learned to crave fine dining and intellectual conversation. I remember picnic rugs and my mother’s laugh, loud and distinctive, and how we used to joke that we would never lose her in crowds, as long as she was amused.

As I continue through the garden, I find that I'm no longer hoping to find Jacob and drag him back into the church. Instead, I hope to hear that laugh and follow it to the source.

But it's the sound of ragged sobs around the corner that greets me, a tree – evergreen, fully clothed in leaves where others are naked, stripped by the winter winds – blocking my vision of him. My breath catches in my throat as I round the corner, and there he is, face turned to the sky, crying.

“Jacob?”

“Go away.” He hiccups, wiping desperately at his face, trying to erase the evidence.

I step towards him. “I...”

“You *what*, Jonathan?” He snaps, suddenly glaring at me. I can't tell if he's angry at me or if he's just ashamed that I caught him crying, like that makes him weaker, less of a man. He's old-fashioned that way. I flinch backwards, and a flash of guilt crosses his face before anger returns to take its place. “You didn't know I have feelings? Well, I do!”

My face burns because he's right. Years of silence and the metaphorical remains of burned bridges have led me to believe that he was incapable of human feelings. But I can't talk about those years. Not today. “No, that's not what I –”

“Don't lie, Jon.”

I clench my jaw. *Try to understand*, she says in my head. *I've tried*, I reply. “You barely looked at Mum. You just up and left Dad in the church. Do you even *care*?!”

Jacob flinches like I struck him. He stares at me for a long time, and I can't tell what's going on in his mind. Not that I ever could. None of us could. Mum and Dad spent so long trying – family therapy, pamphlets, that stupid cat book – that they half forgot about me. When he speaks, it is quiet, in a voice that hasn't belonged to him in a while. It's the voice of a child. It's my brother's voice.

“She looked cold, Jon,” he whispers, tears welling in his eyes once more, and my own start to sting. “She looked cold and waxy and *dead*. I didn't want to see her like that.”

"I know."

"And I miss her."

He begins to cry now, his lip wobbling like he's a little kid again. I put my arms around him, hugging him like he had never allowed me to before. He stiffens, and I wonder if he will push me away. He never hugs our grandparents, either, when we visit them in Napier every Christmas. I hold my breath, preparing myself for the rejection that comes after every bid for his affection I make, but he leans in, his arms around me too. He smells of leather, no doubt one of the colognes from his collection, and he is warm, his cheeks flushed against the cold.

That's what makes me forgive him. The flush absent on my mother's face this morning is ever present on his, and until now, I had never noticed.