

## Peace

The daisy on the kitchen side is wilting, despite our best efforts. Millie had found it last week, insisting it was 'the most perfectest in all the world!' and it had taken its place in a jam jar by the sink. I haven't told her yet, sweeping up the petals discretely and waiting for the day it will inevitably kick the bucket. But, not today it seems. "Grub's up." They both look up, a synchronized Pavlovian response. I laugh, turning back to the stove as she shoos Mil off her lap, awkwardly shifting papers and dried breadcrumbs from the table. A single sheaf floats to the floor despite her best efforts. "Sorry, I'll grab it-"

"Don't!"

She pauses, looks up at me. Something glints in her eyes as she weakly straightens herself again, righting her position on the old chair. "Ok. You can do all my heavy lifting for me."

I huff a laugh, smirking. "What? I'm just the pack mule now?"

"What else is my wonderful wife for?" Her laughter grows my smile wider, even as I catch a glance at the letters dotting the page. "It is malignant-" I set it aside. Somewhere safe, out of reach of grubby little hands. Speaking of which...

"Mil, have you washed your hands yet?"

"I'll do it now, Mam!"

I watch her face, drinking it in. I savor each and every twitch, the little crinkles in the corner of her eye, the dimples on her cheeks, the halfhearted glare when she notices I'm staring. "What? I have something on my face?"

"No, no... just uh... enjoying the view." Even after all these years, her cheeks still darken with a single comment. I smile; mark that rosy dusting across her cheeks as a success, more so than the pasta. It goes down a storm, with both of my girls. If only pasta could cure everything. I voice this, and she laughs, shaking her head.

"Be a whole nicer place if that was true." I can hear her pause, piling the plates together. "Come on, leave that for after. Let's go sit outside, enjoy the good weather for a bit, yeah?"

She tries to stand. I'm at her side in a heartbeat, holding her in my arms. As light as a ghost, with as much grace. Still the most beautiful woman in the world, even with the fluorescent fuzzy socks that Mil insisted would make Mummy feel better. She huffs, but is thankful regardless. Her breathing hurts the most, I think, a once tempestuous storm weakened to a breeze. We make it outside with little fanfare, thankfully, and I sit. She was right, it's a lovely evening. The warmth flushes my face, making me squint in the brightness, though the sensation is marred when I feel her trembling. We take a seat in the usual spot, lying on the grass and facing the wildflower patches, the old cedar tree, the bee hives, the rusted wheelbarrow. Mil's made it her playground, in our absence. It has become haggard and disorganized, as interrupted by this whole incident as we are. Her hand shakes as she cards it through my hair. I can't wait anymore.

"When are we gonna tell Mil about all this?"

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She sighs, her hand stilling. When I take it in mine, it feels strange. The skin is clammy from sweat, pale with chemicals and stripped of its pretty hue, but it's hers. Each sinewy finger, no matter how white or bonelike, is hers. Has been hers. Was hers. I still press a kiss against it, ignoring the dead fish reaction. It's only when it cups my cheek that I realize I'm crying. Her smile looks wobbly, like a mirage in the desert. Though whether it's due to my tears or hers, I don't know.

"Hey now... what are you crying for? I'm the one dying."

And don't I know it. My own trembling smile responds in kind, trying, trying so bloody hard to be there for her. If I can just keep all this in, bury my head in the sand, pretend that the love of my life wasn't lying in my arms, dying. Maybe, I can strike up my guitar, burst into the depths of the underworld and steal my Eurydice from Death's clutches. Maybe if I prayed, maybe if I sobbed, maybe if I screamed till my lungs were bloody and my throat was bruised. Maybe, maybe, maybe, bounces around in my head. A hundred different scenarios, all of them fruitless. It takes biting down on my inner lip to keep back the sobs, hold fast the floodgates and show her I can be strong for her. For Millie. I don't want her last days to be in agony, or worry, or even sadness. She doesn't either. She's trying to be strong too, even as she wilts, day by day. The daisy on the kitchen side loses another petal. I'll sweep it up afterwards.

It can wait.

"It can wait for now. We'll tell her when it feels right."

She nods, her pretty eyes stolen away behind their shutters. I return to running my hand over her bald head again, feeling the peach fuzz trying so desperately to grow. It's nothing like her old curls, but it will do. It's still part of her, the only parts I can touch. If I listen closely, and hug tight enough, I swear I can almost feel her soul.

"It can all wait. Don't stress over it, please? Let's just...be..."

So I nod. A stern disciple to my dying goddess. I'll honor her every whim, if only it made some impact. There is so much to do, so little time to do it. But that can wait. We can sit in the grass and watch the wind rake through the daisies and close our eyes. And pretend, just for a moment. That there is peace.