

IN THE FOLD

by

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Serenity Way, a sweeping Victorian, could easily pass for a historic southern hotel if it didn't stand on the outskirts of New York City, surrounded not by bucolic fields but by cement walkways, strip malls, and supermarkets. Built to hearken back to a time and place that never existed here, it merely possesses the pristine sterility of new construction. No amount of paint, décor, and saccharin greetings can hide the sadness etched in the faces of those visiting loved ones.

The porch, littered with mumbling patients, oxygen tanks, and wheelchairs in the summertime, is quiet now. Scarecrows and bales of hay signal the gradual shift to early fall, but the rocking chairs are still out in the hopes of capturing the last remaining warm days. The bright sun is no match for the forty-degree cold snap that snuck in last night. After a weeklong string of seventy-five-degree days, the change feels as welcoming as a backhand to the face. I shove my hands deep into the pouch of my fleece hoodie and hug my waist.

The wooden rockers offer their curved backs to the street, leaning to face the cheerful, yellow aluminum siding—except for one chair. My grandfather sits, bundled in a red-and-black plaid flannel jacket, slamming his feet against the floor, causing the substantial chair to hiccup. Every time he stomps down harder, as if he is trying to take flight. Marta stands next to him in

her nurse's whites, rubbing her arms and shivering. Her curls tremble with every quiver.

"Here she comes, Mr. Barrick. Let's go inside."

He shakes her hand from his arm and continues stamping his feet. "I need air. What, are you trying to kill me?" he growls.

I catch Marta's eye and mouth *sorry*. My grandfather's good manners are just one more casualty when the fog of dementia rolls in. Her tepid smile and weak nod make me wonder what it costs her to endure the wrath of patients as they sink into a pit of confusion.

"I'll stay with him," I offer.

"Now don't be out here too long, Mr. Barrick. You don't want her to catch her death!"

Her mouth opens slightly as if the word *death* is a bubble she released and should catch and swallow. Even if she could take back her words, nothing would change. I would still twitch under her silent but pitying gaze.

She stammers, "I'll come back when it's time for lunch."

Off my nod, she scampers inside while my fingers dig around the pouch of my hoodie. I exhale when I locate the lone, silky rose petal tucked into the fold of the seam. The remains of the flower, which I plucked from my Aunt Corrine's bleeding-heart arrangement, lie pressed in a book she bought me for my last birthday: *Hope is the Thing with Feathers: The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Unfortunately, hope was not enough to help Corrine survive the brain bleed that stole her life suddenly at age forty. Since that day, two weeks ago, one title—one line of poetry—reverberates in my head: "Our share of night to bear." And I wonder how long it will be before morning will come.

My grandfather rocks in place, oblivious to the fact that his daughter is dead. Yet concentration lines crease his forehead and his eyes shift, leaving me to wonder if he can feel

something is amiss. I stand, swallowing my own pain along with the guilt of keeping secrets from him. It is bad enough that my grandfather is old and confused; now he's been refused the basic right to know about the well-being of his youngest child.

“Please, Lia,” my mother begged, “the news would kill him. He deserves some peace.”

Though his body is healthy, Alzheimer's has been nibbling at his brain for three years. In a sense, he is well on his way to being dead as we know him. But does this give us the right to treat him as an irrelevant bystander in his own life? In those rare moments of clarity, will he believe that Corrine has forgotten him, that she is too busy or selfish to visit him? Is the best solution to make excuses for Corrine's absence, should he ask for her? My mother seems to think so; therefore, it has been decided. Any attempt to challenge this reasoning results in her popping a handful of migraine meds.

I'm left carrying an awful wish: that he stays confused enough not to notice or miss my aunt's presence and all the joy she brought. A sickening thought quickly follows: Will that make my mother happy?

From her conception, Corrine upset the balance. My grandmother viewed pregnancy as a burden at age forty-five; and as a fifteen-year-old, my mother was mortified to discover that her parents still had sex. My grandfather, however, saw Corrine as a last testament to his youth and set about making this chapter of life active. This was made easier by their shared love for adventure. It was Corrine who kept up alongside him, whether on a fishing boat, hiking trail, or dance floor. When she was fifteen, I was born. And when I was finally old enough to join her and my grandfather on their excursions, a truth emerged: I was more like Corrine than my own mother.

“Hi, Grandpa.” I flip a rocker away from its resting position and pull it next to him. His

eyes stare straight out to the street, as if he is an animal trying to blend into its surroundings when there is an imminent threat.

I slip into the chair beside him, and he stares at the package and my outstretched hand like I'm offering him rat poison.

"I brought you black licorice. You like it, don't you?"

"Who told you? Who are you? I don't know you."

Every Easter, he and I would sit together picking the black jelly beans from my basket, eating as many as we could, and then comparing to see whose tongue turned darker. I'm stupid to think this little detail, this shared experience from our past could lift the haze that encircles his world.

"I'm Lia," I say it calmly even though I want to scream: *How can you forget me? Me! Your only grandchild.*

"Lia?" He smiles, taking a long look at me. A tide of warmth rushes in, flooding me with hope. He is coming around. But then he adds, "I have a granddaughter named Lia. She's prettier than you, though." And like that, the tide recedes, and I'm left with the sludge it washed up.

I draw in a deep breath and force myself to take away whatever glimmer of good I can. He smiled when he thought of me. And he's right. The Lia he remembers is prettier. She doesn't have pasty skin and dark circles under her eyes. She bothers to put on makeup and style her hair.

Grief clings to me, wears me like an ugly outfit.

"Why doesn't she come?"

I flinch. At some point, these periods of failing to recognize me might become permanent, which leaves me wondering if today is that day. Does he even know who he is anymore? For him, time might pass the way it does for a child. That is how I justify a fifteen-

minute visit as being enough. I always come near lunchtime so there is a clear end to the visit.

He rips into the package and grabs at the jelly beans, which glisten like shiny, black stones in his hand.

“One at a time,” I tell him. “I don’t want you to choke.”

He munches away before stopping abruptly and handing me one. Is this familiar to him on some level? Does he remember sharing candy with me?

“Thanks.” I look him in the eye and take a bean from him, hoping to see a glimmer of recognition across his face, but he’s already moved on.

“They’re trying to kill me. They put poison in the food. It makes me sleepy, and then I can’t remember anything. When the hell am I going home?”

This is home, I want to say. “They’re trying to make you stronger; they’re trying to help you.”

“These sons of bitches are gonna kill me!” He bites down and chews like he is tearing at someone’s flesh.

I wonder if, on some level, he knows that his daughter is gone, and this is how it bubbles out of him.

“And where the hell is your mother? She just disappeared. Doesn’t she care?” He seems near tears, and my insides tremble. I’ve never seen my grandfather cry, not even when my grandmother died. I can’t see him like this, not when I’ve been pushing down my own tears since Corrine died.

“She’ll be by later today,” I say this with certainty. My mother never misses her visits with him.

“Hanging out with that busybody Marie! That’s what she’s doing!”

I catch myself before I react. Marie was my grandmother's best friend. Even though my grandmother has been dead for five years, for now, he's blissfully unaware of that fact. There is no point in correcting him and forcing him to relive that loss. But the question is: Who have I become to him suddenly? My mother? My aunt? This is the part of the dance with him that I dread. I can't tell what the right move is, and it leaves me feeling clumsy like I will come down the wrong way and break his toe. Years of living with my mother has prepared me to adapt when it preserves the peace. But sometimes I'm not sure who I need to be.

He lifts a trembling hand like he is about to make a point. His mouth opens, but no words follow. With eyebrows drawn together, his face tightens. For a moment, I fear he's choking, but I can hear him breathing, almost panting. Then, just as quickly, his expression melts the worry off his face. The lines on his forehead ease and his knit brows flatten.

"I'm tired," he sighs.

"You're crashing from the sugar." I point to the licorice.

"How did that get there?" He turns his head from side to side, looking for whoever put the candy there.

Why can't you remember? Don't you know who I am anymore?

"Someone who loves you brought it, I suppose."

His eyes are flat buttons staring at me. But then, I see a small flicker as subtle as a pilot light. He reaches out tentatively and touches my hand.

"Are you real?" He taps his fingers against the bones in my hand. "They said you died. God can't be that cruel. That would kill your mother."

I don't know which is more painful to bear: the fact that my aunt's life was cruelly cut short or that my grandfather will live the rest of his days imprisoned in his own mind.

“Everyone is fine.” I exhale slowly to contain whatever lie I may or may not be telling. Has the staff been talking about my aunt? Did he overhear something?

“I told them I saw you and your mother waving to me from the window. They think I’m nuts, but I saw you.” He juts out his chin. “Your mother was wearing that green dress she loves. You blew me a kiss, didn’t you? Do you remember?”

My grandmother was buried in that green dress.

I smile, fighting my mouth’s twisting and shifting. I force the corners of my mouth to stay up, but my grandfather leans in, staring into my eyes.

“You’re sad. You shouldn’t be. That guy was a bum and didn’t deserve you. I chewed his ass out, after it was all over. I never told you that, did I? I hope you’re not mad at me.”

“Not at all.” My mind reels, as it often does with him. Is he telling me something of my aunt’s past? She never married, and her dedication to her law profession left her without much of a love life. Or is this all a hallucination? Fact or fiction? I never know if I am getting a glimpse into unspoken truths, regrets, or fantasies, or a hodgepodge of all these things—a pile of jigsaw pieces that may not belong to the same puzzle.

He takes my hand in his and flips up my palm. “There it is.” He drags his index finger across the inch-long scar.

My breath hitches.

“I told you to let me bait the hook, but you had to do it yourself. Good thing we were at Larney’s; the hospital was close enough.”

My pulse picks up. That is exactly how I earned my first stitches—stabbing myself with a hook, standing on Larney’s Pier. My grandfather told fishing stories, and Corrine held my good hand while the doctor sewed me up. That was the last time my mother allowed me to go fishing.

My mind floods with questions I've longed to ask him. *What should I do about my career? Should I return to school for a degree in education since life in the insurance industry is killing me molecule by molecule?* I suspect his answer (in a moment of lucidity) would contradict my parents' advice of "sticking with something to see it through." With Corrine gone, there is no one else to ask. But as he drops my hand, his face flattens like every thought has been stolen from him along with my hopes for a heart-to-heart.

A ticking at the window interrupts my thoughts. Marta taps her nail against the glass and points to her watch.

"It's time for lunch." I rise to my feet but remain. Is it wishful thinking that he might return to me for a moment?

"Oh, already?" he says. I tuck the candy in my pouch and offer my arm to him. He grabs onto me and grunts as he pulls himself up. Standing in place, he bends his knees a few times to get them working again.

"Thank you for coming," he says, as if I am a business acquaintance.

If I close my eyes and focus on the strength of his voice, I would never believe that there are times he is a frightened, angry, and confused old man.

"Care to join me for lunch? I would like that." His voice takes on a softness I haven't heard in so long that it makes my throat thicken.

That is my cue to pivot and bolt for my car. I can't expect any more from him today.

He stares at his feet; his mouth quivers. I don't know if that is a side effect of the many medicines he is on, but he looks as if he might cry if I refuse him.

I should end this visit right now; in a matter of minutes, he won't even remember I was here—if he even knows who I am. But when he gives me a shy smile and a tilt of his head, it

makes my eyes well up.

Catching a few more glimpses of the grandfather I remember, even if it is a momentary mirage, leaves my legs locked in place. I'm afraid if I move, I'll miss something big. But it's more terrifying to realize I can't expect anything at all.

He sways and clutches my arm to steady himself. "Thank you. You're most kind. Don't have my sea legs today."

"That's okay. I've got you."

He squeezes my elbow, like he did every time we crossed a busy road with cars buzzing past us. That was his way of telling me I was safe; he wouldn't let me go.

"Ready?" Face beaming, the thrill of adventure rings in his voice.

I grab his hand, still smooth and strong despite his many frailties, and kiss it as he guides me through the door. But when we cross the threshold, his eyes dart side-to-side, ensnared by the parade of shuffling feet, creaking walkers, and whirring wheelchairs. My stomach sinks as his smile dissolves.

In the fold of confusion, he slides off my arm and glides onto Marta's without ever looking back. I remain, elbow bent, hoping to be reclaimed. Instead, he clutches her arm and swivels his head, like they are navigating oncoming traffic.

Goodbye, I whisper, as he totters away oblivious to what he's left behind.

With every step he heads deeper into a strange and unfamiliar world. And as he turns a corner, disappearing from view, I realize he's left me cold, standing in mine.

THE END