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“Tell Me I Did Well” And Other Things Left Unsaid

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“Tell Me I Did Well”
And Other Things Left Unsaid

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Language and Literature
of Bard College
By Shirley Cheng

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York May 2020

I'd like to say thank you to Dinaw and Ben for all the help they had given me as I

stubbornly insisted that I could be a double major

Thank you to the friends that have stayed by my side

Thank you to me

Thank you to J, the brightest star in my sky, I miss you

I hope that to those struggling out there

If you happen to read this

“You did well”

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Sunflowers

The sky was bright and sunny so I didn't rush back as fast as I usually needed to. It was a safe day, one that didn't come easy ever since the season changed to spring. I probably could have spent a couple of hours hanging out with my friends, I heard that everyone was planning to go to one of those drive-through movie theaters. I shook away the thought as soon as it entered my mind. There was somewhere I needed to be, the sunlight only meant that I could take my time and not have to rush out as fast as I usually needed to. It did not mean that I could do what I wanted. I had placed the umbrella I always kept on me inside my dark blue backpack and I swung my arms back and forth not quite sure what to do with them. I walked past multiple pristine finely kept houses and tried my best not to look through the windows.

I came upon the building that I called home. The outside used to be white but with the year of neglect, it developed into a grainy shade of grey. What was supposed to be a garden out front was more of a sad overgrown mess with nothing anywhere near where it was meant to be planted. I meant to do something about it but I knew that Eli would never let me do the work, no... she'd want to wait for him to come back so we could fix it together. Eli would laugh and claim that something of that caliber would be considered a family project.

I pushed open the rickety gate and locked it behind me. The gate had looked the same as when I left it in the morning which could only mean that Eli hadn't left the house all day. I let out a quick sigh of relief as I unlocked the front door and walked in.

"Eli? I'm back," I called out as I kicked my shoes off and dropped my backpack off at the immaculately clean table. I could smell cinnamon and followed the smell into the kitchen. From

the doorway of the kitchen, I saw Eli's back as she seemed to be washing something. Much more quietly I ran behind her and hugged her with as much strength as I had.

"Woah Thea! Stop scaring me like that," Eli scolded lightly as I let go, I didn't see her face yet but I knew that there would be a smile on her face. She could never be mad at me. "Now I've gotten soap all over the counter," she said lightly as she continued with her washing.

"I'll clean your mess up," I said as I grabbed the yellow dishrag and started to wipe the counters.

"It's unfair for you to call it my mess you know. Honestly, I swear you're getting too old to be scaring me all the time," Eli said as she finally turned to with a slight pout on her face.

"Just consider it an aggressive display of my affection."

"Alright sure whatever, go and do your homework, dinner is going to be ready in another couple of hours," Eli said as she turned toward the oven.

"Yes ma'am," I said as I dropped the dishrag back in its place and scrambled to get my bag and headed toward my room.

I collapsed onto my bed as soon as I was sure that the door shut behind me. A large sigh left my body and I felt the energy leave my body with the air in my lungs. Days like these were great. We'd talk and laugh as we ate dinner that she worked very hard on making, she'd set an extra place by accident but it was alright as long as I didn't say anything about it. We'd giggle at her mistake as if it was the first time she had made it. Dinner usually consisted of a large roast meat dish that we would never finish with just the two of us and some sort of vegetable casserole. There would be enough that I would end up having leftovers to make breakfast and the next day's packed lunch with. We would argue over who had to wash the dishes (I would every

time) and we'd eat cinnamon cookies by on the kitchen table. I would do my homework while she reread her favorite books. After that, we'd talk until it was time for me to head to bed. She mostly would want to hear about things that happened at school and how my friends were, I would end telling her some made-up things and she'd wonder why they haven't been over in a long time. I always managed to make up some excuse about wanting to spend more time with her and she'd laugh and call me silly before noticing how late it was and rush me off to bed. I still remember her laugh, light, and warm. Everything would be perfect and just fine. Just fine.

I woke up to a clap of thunder loud enough to shake my soul. I got up as quickly as I could while taking a peek at my bedside clock. The 3:46 AM glared at me in red as if to mock my pitiful attempts to get up. I looked at my window and saw the heavy rain hitting against it. I had checked the forecast from my hidden radio before bed, it wasn't supposed to be like this. I grabbed the sweater I kept lying around and rushed out of the room as fast as I could in my half-asleep state. I knew that it could have been raining for a few hours before the thunder woke me up and so I tried to increase my pace even more.

The door leading outside was wide open and raindrops fell in leaving a large puddle by the doorway. From the size of the puddle, I could tell that it had been raining for longer than I had originally thought. I grabbed the large yellow umbrella from its usual spot and stormed out the door in my slippers.

I ran my way up the familiar hill, past my neighbors who were probably sound asleep in their homes, without a worry in the world. The house next to ours lived a normal family, they had just had a little baby girl, Eli and I had been over for the girls second birthday, we weren't close but she couldn't say no to being a part of someone else's happiness. The little girl

sometimes played in their front yard and I couldn't bear to look at the disgustingly happy grin on her face. Or maybe I just saw her as disgustingly happy in my mind. I'm not even sure I could tell the difference.

I had the route to Eli memorized in my head and I could find my way even in the dark with the rain clouding my vision. I had walked the way in the rain so many times that I could have probably walked completely blindfolded and still have made it. Right, then straight for two blocks, another right, the houses became more and more spread out and I arrived at the familiar park. Running into the park I ran past the jungle gym that I had spent countless hours of my childhood at, ran past the water fountain that only worked if you pressed the button hard enough to feel like you were hurting yourself and there at the park bench she sat.

She was in her nightgown, no shoes, no expression on her face. I stood right in front of her but she didn't see me. She was completely drenched and I knew that the umbrella was pointless but I still held it over her in hopes of easing the feeling in my chest. It never helped but I still liked to pretend that it did. I felt rain drip along my back, and I held back every urge to shiver. If only I had stayed up a little later, I could have tried something that would have prevented Eli from leaving the house.

I tugged at her arm but as always she didn't budge, she didn't acknowledge my tug but she stayed firm at the bench, faced ahead with no almost no sign that she was alive, except for the occasional rise and fall of her chest. I tugged a little harder and still, there was nothing. I wanted to use my full strength but I didn't want to hurt her. From the hug earlier in the day I could tell that she had lost more weight. Her cheeks used to be fuller but they looked more and more flat as time passed. I once tried to carry her away but she had struggled hard enough that I

ended up dropping her. Before I had time to react, she had already climbed her way back to the bench and sat there as if nothing had happened. The day after that Eli walked with a limp but she didn't seem to remember what had happened. She didn't remember the time she spent in the rain. As long as I got her back home and in her bed, she'd wake up a little tired but otherwise unfazed.

There was nothing that I could do when it rained, she'd always find a way out and to the bench. The days where I knew that it would rain I would prepare myself and walk with her to the bench, holding up the umbrella so she could at least stay dry. On days when the rain caught me off guard, I could only run to her side and try my best to shield her from the rest of the rain. It was probably pointless but I had to try something.

I sat down next to her, holding the umbrella over both of us, not minding how wet the bench was. This specific bench faced the jungle gym and it reminded me of simpler times when I was young enough to just play and not care about the outside world.

I was six and Eli was fourteen when mama and papa died in a car crash. I don't remember much about our parents besides the fact that they were probably very nice. The last memory I had of our parents was the feeling of holding both Mama and Papa's hand as we walked to someplace. Eli told me that I cried for a straight week and then stopped completely stopped. If I thought hard I could remember the feeling of being scared whenever Eli would leave my sight. She would step away for a moment and I would curl up in a ball not moving until I saw her again. I don't remember if Eli cried. She told me that everything happened so suddenly and she wasn't prepared, I still don't quite understand what she meant.

I don't a lot of what happened after our parents died was a blur to me but I remember that we went to live with Aunt Becca. Aunt Becca was the younger sister of our mama who we didn't

see that much except for during the holidays. She was really pretty and acted nice around mama and papa but I don't remember her ever smiling at or even talking to me and Eli. Once we got ourselves settled in her house, she told us that she didn't want us around. She claimed that she worked from home and she was sure that we would mess with her work and so I and Eli would go to the park, Eli would study at the bench and I'd play at the jungle gym with the local kids. We stayed out until it was dark which was when Aunt Becca would allow us to come back. The streets would be empty and I would always hold Eli's hand as we walked back. It wasn't until recently that I realized how unsafe we were but back then the thought didn't even cross my mind back then. We'd even be outside when it rained, I was young enough not to care and still play in the rain while Eli held an umbrella and continued to study. When Eli turned sixteen she got herself a job. Every day I'd be at the jungle gym until Eli would come and pick me up, most of the other kids would have already left but it was fine because I knew that Eli would come for me. Sometimes their moms would look at me kind of funny and ask me if I wanted to go with them but I always told them that I was waiting for Eli. The moms would take a worried glance at the sky and quickly usher their children away. When Eli turned eighteen, Aunt Becca, gave her most of the money that mama and papa left her and told her that she was old enough to find her own place to live.

"I don't understand," Eli said as she cried. I hid behind her and clutched on to her hand as hard as I could. We had just come back to Aunt Becca's house when she suddenly sprang the idea of Eli needing to move out on us.

"It's simple, I'm your guardian until you turn eighteen and after that, you're a grown adult who is responsible for yourself. You need to move out and find your own place to live. I

haven't touched much of your portion of the money your parents left so you should be fine. I'll be nice and give you until you graduate high school," Aunt Becca always spoke to us rather emotionlessly as if she couldn't even pretend to give a damn about us.

I wanted to move forward and yell and scream at her but Eli held me back and kept me behind her.

"I understand," Eli said with much more confidence in her voice than the way she looked. "I'll move out before I graduate but I want to take Thea with me."

I went from angry to happier than I had ever felt since moving in with Aunt Becca. Eli and I had spoken about having our own little home. It had been a dream that we shared under the covers when I had been too scared of the noise the planes in the sky made to sleep. Eli would tell me that they were only there to watch over us and that when we got our own house we'd make sure to find one with walls extra thick so we couldn't hear the noises.

"Absolutely not," the two words from Aunt Becca shattered my daydream of the perfect life Eli and I would have after we moved out.

"Why not," I asked barely louder than a whisper.

"Until Thea turns eighteen she is legally my responsibility so if anything were to happen to her under your care, I'd be the one in trouble." Aunt Becca left the living room after she spoke, not looking back to see Eli and me collapsed on the floor holding each other as we cried.

Eli wanted to go off to college but she also wanted to be with me, so she gave up on college and got a fulltime job at the local library. When the library closed she would come to sit at the bench to watch me play with my friend, she would then walk me to Aunt Becca's house. I wanted to go over to Eli's house but she lived in a cheap apartment shared with four other girls

and the landlord didn't like it whenever I came over. He'd stop us at the door and talk for a whole hour about how I better behave and not damage anything because I was young and obviously going to cause some sort of trouble and how he already had enough trouble renting out rooms with all the young men being drafted away.

We both couldn't stand the landlord so the bench was where Eli stayed as she waited until I could go back to Aunt Becca's house. The bench had always been important to me because Eli would be there but it became more important to Eli because it was where she met Albert. He'd appear on rainy days and come over to talk to Eli. At first, I thought it was a little weird that he'd only show up on rainy days but Eli looked so damn happy talking to him that I didn't say anything. She'd tell me everything about him while she walked me to Aunt Becca's house, how he worked on the local construction site and his only real break was when it rained, how he had been on a walk when he saw Eli and thought that she was really pretty, how it took him a month to work up the courage to talk to her.

"He's originally a college student but he dropped out to help out with all the construction and other jobs that the men who were drafted did," Eli said as she walked beside me back the familiar way to Aunt Becca's house.

"Cool," I said back, not sure what I was supposed to say back.

"He was going to study history and wanted to write about everything that's happening now because it's all going to be important history. He said we're living in history right this moment."

"Wow."

"I really can't believe he's only two years than me..."

Eli would continue rattling off about Albert all the way back. I was never sure how to respond, it had been a while since Eli and I spoke about anyone other than the two of us. I was a little scared about how much she seemed to like being around him but she was always smiling and laughing with him. I didn't want to ruin their moment.

Eli and Albert met at the bench whenever it rained for half a year before they started dating. I didn't talk to Albert too much but he was nice to me and he was nice to Eli. Sometimes he would carry me on his shoulders and we'd all walk together to Aunt Becca's house. He always had on a blue checked shirt that smelled like sawdust and a little bit of paint.

"How's that project your working on?" Albert asked as he picked me up, I was a little embarrassed by being picked up at my age but there was no one else around besides the three of us. I used to wonder how the other kids felt when their dad picked them up, I guess they felt something like the way I felt at that moment, safe and calm.

"Fine, it's not due until Wednesday but I just want to be done with it already," I said as I picked at a piece of paint stuck on his shoulder.

"Honestly I think you should put her down, she's a little too old for this stuff," Eli said with a smile in my direction. She knew most of the things I was thinking so she probably knew that I enjoyed being up where I was. I pouted at her and she silently laughed.

"It's fine, this makes it easier to hold the umbrella over all of us," Albert said as he looked at Eli and she smiled at him so radiantly that I had to look away.

Eli asked me what I thought of him and I told her that he was great. They got married at the end of the year when Eli turned twenty. It was a small little event at the local church and Eli looked beautiful in a simple white dress she bought on sale. Her golden blonde hair done up in a

bun that I had helped with and a smile that lit up the whole room. Her green eyes sparkled as she looked at Albert and I had to pinch myself to keep from crying. I stood at her side the whole time as we interacted with Albert's small family. They seemed nice, Eli invited Aunt Becca but she didn't come. A week after the 'wedding' I moved in with Eli and Albert. Eli went to Aunt Becca with some legal papers and I was finally free to live with my sister.

Eli held onto my hand the whole time presented she Aunt Becca with the legal documents, Aunt Becca took a careful look through them and signed everything without too much of a thus. I left to pack my things. When I came back Eli took my hand again and we walked with Albert to our new home.

The house was in a nice neighborhood only a couple of blocks away from Aunt Becca's house and the jungle gym. We painted a fresh layer of paint together and it became home to the three of us. Eli quit her job to focus on taking care of me and the house, she promised that we'd do all the things that we couldn't do when we were younger. Albert supported her with a smile on his face. We did a lot of things together the three of us but I also got a home where I could finally bring friends over. I stopped going to the jungle gym and enveloped myself in the feeling of having a home. The feeling lasted for a year.

Albert had been drafted as a soldier, Eli cried, I was confused. I, of course, knew about the war, we talked about it in class and we heard about it on the news but neither Eli nor I expected Albert to have to go off to fight. He hugged us and told us that everything was going to be okay. We listened to the news reports that claimed the war was almost over and that leaders of countries promised to come together to talk things out. Everyone we spoke to about it told us that things would be fine since this was just a precaution, there shouldn't be any more active fighting.

There was nothing we could do, Albert had already made up his mind and we could only help him pack up his things. We shaved his head together the night before he had to leave.

I sat at the table as I watched Eli shakingly hold the razor.

“You promise that you’ll be back?” I asked, my voice being the only sound other than the constant buzz of the razor Eli was holding.

“I promise,” Albert said not really looking at me, we all knew that he couldn’t make any promises but it helped a little to hear him try and sound confident.

“You promise,” Eli said as tufts of Albert's hair fell on the floor, her voice barely heard over the sound of the razor. “You promise.”

We received a letter from Albert every month after he left, the letter boy had on an army uniform but he looked about my age and the clothes didn’t fit him quite right. Every month I’d see him, he’d salute and say, “letter from Officer Albert.” I’d take the letter and he’d run off probably to the next house along the road.

I’d read the letter to Eli as she made dinner, Albert would never write too much about the war but he’d write about how much he missed us and what things would remind him of us. Eli and I would write a letter back and I’d carry it to the post office the next day. I’d keep him updated on my studies and how Eli was doing, Eli never told me what she wrote about and I never asked. Eli seemed to be holding up fine when Albert left, she’d always accidentally set an extra place during dinner and we’d laugh about it without taking the extra place away.

“There’s a boy from my hometown whose in the same unit as I am. He and his wife got married around the same time we did. We sit together and talk about our wives so much that the other men have taken to calling us a love fools.” I read from the letter as Eli chuckled from the

kitchen. “I miss your cooking, we eat nothing but stale crackers and something from a can that might have been meat. From what animal I’m not sure but we’ve narrowed it down to either pork, chicken, or beef.” Eli laughed loudly at that part and I paused until she stopped.

“Honestly what are they feeding them,” she would say, more to herself than to me. I continue when she didn’t say anything else.

“I really miss you and Thea. Sarg says that things seem to be calming down and everything should be over in another couple of weeks. They have us patrolling back and forth but I haven’t seen even a hint of the enemy. I really can’t wait to be back home. From Albert with love,” as I read out the last line I could see that Eli had stopped moving, her shoulders shook a little bit but she suddenly cleared her throat and said nothing. I would put the letter away in the cabinet with the others and make some small jokes to clear the air, it was never funny but Eli pretended to laugh anyway.

Half a year after Albert left, the war still hadn’t ended even though every news station had predicted that it would. We stopped getting letters from Albert, the letter boy wouldn’t drop by our house anymore. I often went over to the post office to check in case things were held there but I found nothing. We’d sit together every night by the radio hoping to hear something useful but we never did. Every station was just more talks about how the war was going to be over soon. Eli would always look out the window trying to spot the letter boy, she ate less and less as she stared at the empty spot on the table.

Two months after the letters stopped coming, there was a knock at our door just before dinner. I ran to open the door, everything in me hoping that it would be the letter boy. I opened the door and was immediately met with relief when I saw his face. He looked different, a little

taller, a little skinner, and without the usual smile on his face. He didn't look at me as he handed me the letter and ran off. Before I could even say anything he disappeared into the distance as if he was never there, to begin with.

I looked down at the letter in my hands, it wasn't from Albert. I knew then and there that it couldn't be good news. Part of me wanted to throw the letter as far as I could so that I didn't need to show Eli so that I could walk into the kitchen and pretend that everything was still alright. Before I could do anything Eli had already walked up behind me. She took the letter from me and opened it before I could stop her. She read through it was I stood there frozen not sure whether I should stop her. She dropped the letter and collapsed into a heap on the floor. She screamed and I could only stand there watching unable to do anything for her.

Eli got a fever after that, it was high enough for me to feel more scared than I'd ever felt in my life. I called the doctor, a nice man that used to live next door to us. We met him after we moved in and he and his wife told us to come over whenever we needed something. They had recently gotten married and sometimes the wife would come over while he was at work and she and Eli would gush over being married. He told me Eli was going to be fine as long as she got some rest and took the medicine he wrote down for me to get. I wondered why he was able to stay with his wife.

Eli got better after a week of being sick, neither of us brought up the letter. I had taken it and hidden it in my room, not wanting her to look at it again. She seemed relatively normal after she recovered, almost too normal. She would smile and joke with me as she made dinner for us just as she usually did. Sometimes she'd set an extra place at dinner but I never said anything

about it. One day I happened to bring up the question of what to do with Albert's things and she asked me what I meant.

“Why would we be moving Albert's things?” She asked with a sincere quizzical look on her face.

I wasn't sure how to answer her but she continued before I had a chance to formulate my thoughts.

“We should keep everything the same until he returns, then it will feel more like home for him.”

She had forgotten about the letter. Or perhaps pushed the thought out of her mind so that she could pretend that everything was still fine. That nothing had changed, that we were still just waiting for him to come back.

I should have called the doctor for her again. I should have taken her to the special center that opened up for people grieving from the war. I should have done something other than just smile at her and pretend that she was right.

The weeks after Eli got better, people on the radio started talking about how the war was over and the exact number of people that died were coming in. I think they said something about us winning the war but I was more focused on the families of the people that died. Some wife or sister would come on and start crying as they talked about how they had to admit themselves to institutes to help come to terms with everything. I had begun to think that maybe it was better that Eli didn't remember. She didn't have to feel the pain at that moment, she could eventually come to terms with everything. I hid the radio in my room and told her that it broke. She kept

asking me if the school told us anything new about what was going on with the war. Each time she asked I told her a lie.

The first week of spring after the war, it rained for the first time in a while. That was when Eli started walking out. It was right as she was making dinner, suddenly a hazy look came across her face and she dropped everything in her hands.

“Eli?” I asked as she started walking toward the door, “where are you going?” She walked by me and didn’t say anything. “Eli?” I grabbed her hand, she kept trying to walk. Afraid to hurt her I let go, she opened the door and walked out into the rain as if she didn’t feel it. I grabbed the umbrella and walked beside her, trying to talk to her and getting no response. We walked the familiar way to the park, everything was still the same even though it had been ages since we’ve last been there. Ever since we got our own home we stopped needing the park but still in the rain, Eli walked toward the bench. She sat down and looked straight ahead. No matter what I said or did she didn’t move. I shouted at her, I pulled at her and still, she didn’t react at all.

“Eli please snap out of it.” I cried over and over again but she stared straight ahead, just like a doll. I wanted to run and get the doctor but I stood rooted at the spot, there was only one thought on my mind, what if he took Eli away? I couldn’t lose Eli, she was the only person I had left. With that thought in my mind, I remember suddenly calming down. Even if Eli was going to sit there forever, she was still with me. I could still be by her side, we would be together. I sat down next to her and held the umbrella over both of us.

The two of us sat there until the rain stopped, Eli stood and walked back still not reacting to me in any way. We reached the house and she walked all the way into her bedroom as if

nothing had even happened. I checked and she simply looked asleep, I stayed in her room and tried to watch over her but at some point, I also fell asleep.

“Thea? What are you doing in my room,” Eli woke me up the next morning. I had fallen asleep at the corner of her bed where I sat the whole night. I looked over at the clock to see that it was 6 AM the next day. I looked at Eli and she looked completely normal albeit a tiny bit confused at my presence. I had two conflicting voices in my head, one telling me to tell her everything so that we could get her help and the other telling me that as soon as I said anything Eli would be taken away.

“I think I just missed you.”

Every time it rained, no matter the time, Eli would walk to and sit at the bench. I’d try my best to be there and carry an umbrella so that she would at least be dry. As soon as the rain stopped, Eli would walk back home and go to sleep. The next morning she wouldn’t remember a thing and everything would be normal. She’d sometimes be a little more tired but she’d say that she didn’t sleep well and I didn’t correct her. The hardest thing to do was pretend that I had slept well when I hadn’t, I told everyone that I was quite sick and even forged Eli’s signature so that I could either be absent or leave school early. I knew that I didn’t look my best and all the teachers seemed to believe me without any trouble.

I was finally in my senior year when things started to really fall apart.

“I think you should apply to college,” Eli said from where she was peeling potatoes. We’ve had the discussion a couple of times but each time I told her that I just wanted to find a local job and continue to live with her. She never really argued with me but from her expression, I could tell that she wasn’t completely happy with my choice. “I mean you’re doing well at your

studies and I'm sure you could get into somewhere nice," Eli continued not giving me a chance to interject. "I'm pretty sure that you could even get into a top college."

"I'd rather work, the manager at the local market said that he's willing to give me a job as soon as I graduate," I said wanting the conversation to end as quickly as possible. The nearest college was nowhere near where we lived and so there was no way I could go there, I could not leave Eli by herself. I wouldn't say that I hadn't thought about experiencing college but being with Eli was much more important. Normally the conversation would have ended but for some reason, Eli would not give it up.

"But if you went to college you could get an even nicer job, maybe even end up moving to the city. Wouldn't you like that?"

"Not really, I just want to stay here with you."

"Oh Thea, you don't need to worry about leaving me alone, I'm sure that I can manage, especially with Albert coming back soon. Well, I sure hope he comes back soon, it feels like this war is dragging on forever."

I was silent, a lump in my throat came up as it always did when she mentioned Albert or the war. I really couldn't leave Eli alone, especially since she suddenly stopped leaving the house unless it rained. She didn't notice but I did, I was the one that did all the shopping and interacting with the neighbors. I was the one who went to the local army office to collect the money that we got each month as compensation for Albert's life. She had lost connection with the outside world and I couldn't say anything about it. I stayed quiet and hoped that everything would turn out alright.

“I wish that you would at least consider it,” Eli said with a small sigh as she put down the potato and looked over at me.

“I will,” I said not meeting her eyes.

I thought that everything would turn out okay, I did, but I should have known better. In a special class, we had when the war was over where we went over how to cope with losing someone to the war the teacher had briefly mentioned a couple of things that could happen, I wrote a couple of notes on them and then stuck them far back into my brain sure that I wouldn't need to worry about it. As long as Eli didn't know that she lost Albert, she wouldn't have any of the symptoms. I was wrong.

“Thea could you take a look at my hand, my fingers seem to be a little bit numb.” I rushed over to Eli's room as fast as I could, the picture that the teacher showed suddenly popped into my head. I took Eli's right hand and stared hard at it, the very tips had turned slightly grey.

“No,” I squeezed her hand harder than I meant to.

“Ow, stop,” Eli yanked her hand out of my grip. “What is it?” She asked, rubbing her hand.

I only shook my head. “Maybe you should get some rest,” I said before running back to my room, or maybe I calmly walked in order for Eli to not notice my panic, I don't remember. In my room I looked through all the papers I collected from school searching for the handout from that specific lesson. I found it, a one-sided piece of paper of just a list of things that could happen and what to do. As I scanned down the list I found myself crying because I already knew what would be written.

Skeleton Flower Syndrome- When the body slowly starts to turn grey and harden. When the body has fully hardened it becomes stone-like. No more life can be detected and as time goes on the stone chips away to reveal a stone flower. There are no known direct causes and no known cures.

My teacher had only glossed over this one in class because she told us that there was so little that was known about it. A couple of cases would pop up every year but no one knew what exactly caused it because there were no real links between the cases. She told us how a couple of studies were being done on it and a couple of cases were popping up after the war so she had to include it on the list.

“What are we supposed to do if there are no known cures?” Someone had asked in the class after the teacher finished explaining all the things that could happen.

“There’s not much that can be done, maybe make sure that the person is very comfortable as they spend their last days.” The teacher said as they quickly moved on to the next item without a second thought.

There had to be something that I could do I thought as the days went by and more grey started to appear on Eli’s body. I went to the library and looked through as many medical books as I could, I found nothing. The doctor next door had moved away after his wife was pregnant and so there wasn’t even a doctor that was willing to come to our house to take a look at Eli. I went to a few medical offices in hopes of finding someone that could help but they all told me the same thing.

“I’m sorry but I can’t help you, there just isn’t a known cure.”

A month passed and Eli's right arm had become grey all the way up to her shoulder and she could barely move it much anymore. It was something that she noticed but she didn't seem to think much of it. She would still try her best to do things around the house but she couldn't do things the way she wanted anymore.

"Could you help me with this jar? I can't seem to get it open."

I opened the jar and handed it back to her. She tried to grab it with her right hand and the jar fell straight to the floor before I could catch it. It smashed to a couple of thousand pieces and strawberry jam splattered onto the floor and counters.

"I'm sorry Thea," Eli said as I went to get the dustpan and mop. "I don't know what's wrong with me lately." I heard her say as I walked away.

As the days passed and more of Eli was turning grey I could only think of my teacher's voice in my head, make sure that the person is very comfortable as they spend their last days. I tried my best to make her as comfortable as she could be, I stopped going to school and stayed at home so that I could take care of everything for her but I knew that it wasn't enough. She still walked out when it rained and so I knew that there was one thing that she wanted and I couldn't give it to her. I couldn't bring Albert back for her and so the only thing I could do was finally tell her about everything.

She sat in bed that day, most of her legs were already very stone-like and she would only walk around when it rained as if pulled by some invisible force. She didn't know exactly why she was bedridden but she just associated it with a bad cold. I entered her room and I held the letter we received that day behind my back.

"There's something that you need to know."

“What is it?” Eli asked me with a soft smile directed toward me as I was going to give her a pleasant surprise. She patted the side of the bed and I sat down still holding the letter behind my back with one hand.

“It’s about Albert,” I said, no longer able to look her in the eyes.

“Oh did we finally get a letter from him?”

“No.”

“It’s been so long since he last sent a letter, but he must be awfully busy.”

“Eli...”

“So what was it that you wanted to tell me?”

I had two thoughts in my head, I could either tell her and finally reveal everything that I had been hiding from her or continue hiding everything as she slowly turned to stone without having to know that she had been waiting for absolutely nothing. Maybe it was better to not tell her I sincerely thought but before I could say anything Eli suddenly spoke up.

“I really do hope that I get better before Albert comes back,” she said quite suddenly as if she just thought of it. “I wouldn’t want him to see me all bedridden like this.”

I couldn’t not tell her anymore, she needed to know so that she didn’t need to wait for him anymore and could spend the rest of her days for herself.

“Albert isn’t coming back.”

“What do you mean?”

I handed her the letter, “he can’t come back.”

She took the letter from me and I saw her eyes as she scanned through it. She dropped the letter on the bed her expression blank.

“I’m so sorry,” I said as I waited for her to cry or scream or do anything but she continued to stare blankly. “Eli?”

“No,” Eli said barely louder than a whisper. “No he’s coming back and I need to wait for him.” She said as she started to struggle out of bed.

“He’s not coming back anymore.” I cried as I tried to get her to stay. She pushed me off the bed with more strength than she had been showing the past few days.

“No, I need to wait for him.” She struggled to stand up and started to stumble her way to the door.

“Don’t do this,” I tried to hold on to her but she shook me off and continue to stumble her way toward the doorway. It wasn’t raining but still, there was nothing that I could do to keep her from reaching the park that day. As she walked, I could hear the sound of stone scratching against each other. I finally stopped trying to hold her back and just walked at her side. I thought that I could finally free her but in the end, I couldn’t do anything. She wanted to believe that Albert would still come back for her as long as she waited for him. No matter what I said or did nothing would change that.

We reached the park bench and she sat down once again back to the state where she didn’t see or hear me. It seemed that as soon as she sat it started to rain once again. I stood in front of her, not sure what to do anymore. There was nothing I could do to help her and there was nothing I could do to save her.

I did the only thing I could think of, I sat down next to her and held her stone hand in my own. If she wanted to wait then no matter rain or shine I would wait with her.

Dandelion

I locked the door behind me as I entered the room. The studio was the exact same as I left it. One of the first things that Alvin promised me was that I could have my own private room to write my music in. I called it my studio but it only really had a couple of chairs, a large desk, a few instruments, a small kitchenette, and a bathroom. Just comfortable enough to shut myself in for a week whenever I needed to write.

Why do you choose to keep yourself so isolated?

Her voice popped into my head and I clutched the edge of the table as I willed myself to calm down. This was happening more and more often after I stopped going to see her. I would hear her voice but I knew she wasn't actually in front of me. She wasn't there sitting in her red sofa chair. I wasn't at her office. She was no longer my Doctor. It was all in my head, another one of her favorite sayings. It was as if she planted herself in there to remind me of how broken I truly was. I could almost see the way she would tilt her head to stare at me until I spoke again.

Tell me more.

I slumped into the seat closest to the table and grabbed a fresh sheet of paper after I felt calm enough to work. I jotted down a couple of lines that had been swimming in my head during the long drive back to the company. I didn't get too far before I crumpled up the paper and threw it in the trash can. It wasn't good enough but I wasn't surprised. This was only the first day, I had a month before I really needed to present something to Alvin. I don't think I could have asked for a better agent. Alvin always tried to give me enough time, he understood how I worked. He understood how much effort I needed to put in before I could create something that I was happy with.

Before I could help it I stared at the pen in my hand and wondered if there even was a point.

“We could hire someone to write your music for you if you’re finding it too hard,” Alvin had told me time and time again. “Although I scouted you for your music, the fans don’t really care that much as long as your singing abilities are good enough.” Alvin had said to me in his office right after my first album came out. He stood leaning against his desk in his typical blue suit, this one a dark midnight blue. He smiled at me as he talked but I don’t remember if the smile ever reached his eyes. He was taller than me and so I always had to look up at him. His dark brown eyes looked so dark that they almost seemed pitch black.

“But I want to write my own music.”

“Sure, I’m not going to stop you but you better work twice as hard to make up for the time that you spend locked away in your little studio.”

Alvin was right, of course, he was. The fans and the reporters didn’t care if I wrote my own music or not. No matter how many interviews I went to no one ever asked me about my music. It was always questions about how I style myself, who my friends were, and if I was seeing anyone. Alvin prepared answers for those questions so I had to memorize what I needed to say. No one seemed to really pay attention to my melodies or my lyrics but I still wanted to write my own music.

Now, why is that?

Please, please shut up.

I noticed that the hand that held the pen was shaking and I once again closed my eyes and counted ten deep breaths. It was a method that Doctor Sarah told me would help, I found it a

little funny how it was her voice that made me like this but it was her method that sometimes helped me out of it.

Funny? But you're not laughing Lucis.

Maybe you should have been funnier? If only I had been able to say that to her face.

James had been the one that suggested I should see someone for help. He had noticed how tired and “out of it” I looked and talked to Alvin about it. Doctor Sarah was supposedly an expert in the field and worked with a lot of people in our industry. After a few sessions with her, I realized that maybe she was the reason so many people in the industry were fucked up like I was. Or no, no one was as fucked up as I was.

My hand had stopped shaking and I was left with a feeling of numbness. I looked over at my hand, it looked a little grey? I blinked and it seemed like it was back to normal. I probably just needed some sleep. I closed my eyes and leaned back into the chair, humming a soft tone that maybe I could turn into a song when I woke up.

The crowd for my last show cheered loudly loud enough that it was almost painful. They knew that it was the last show before I once again locked myself away to write another album. Someone was crying in the front row, I kneeled down at the edge of the stage and reached for her hand and kissed it. She screamed loudly through the tears and for a second I wonder if I've managed to make her happier than she had been. The crowd got even louder and then everyone suddenly started to shout words that all mixed together to form a loud mess. A combination of “ENCORE”, “LUCIS” and “ I LOVE YOU” swirled together until it all ended up sounding like absolutely nothing. I said my final ‘thank you’ and bowed deeply to try and show how thankful I actually was. I got tugged off stage by a security guard who clearly seemed to be impatient with

how long I stayed on. He nonchalantly handed me over to a stagehand who looked at me nervously. The stagehand handed me a bottle of water and scurried off once we reached the backstage area. I didn't get to say anything to him before he disappeared from my view. My manager Alvin came forward to hug me like he always did.

“Lucis, that was amazing, but I expect nothing less from you.” He said as he pulled me in and hugged me again. He was wearing another one of his blue suits, this time in a slightly lighter shade almost like a robins’ egg. He patted my back twice and handed me off to my assistant James who led me back to the dressing room.

On the way there we pass by a blur of people and I try to stop and talk to them but James tugged on my hand as if to remind me that Alvin was still there watching.

“It’s better for Lucis to put a little distance between himself and the staff members,” is apparently what James had been told.

You could have said something but you didn’t. Doesn’t that still make it your fault?

I spent a full two days in the studio and the numbness in my right hand was still there. The more I looked at my hand the more I realized that they had indeed turned greyish. When I held my fingers I could tell that they felt a little cooler and harder than they usually did. I had a suspicion in my mind that I knew what was happening to me. James had taken a pamphlet from Doctor Sarah’s office back when I told him that I didn’t want to go see anyone, that I didn’t need to see anyone.

“She’s really famous in the entertainment circle for helping people you know.”

“I see.”

On the top in big bold letters it wrote:

Do you get lonely?

Are you sick with anxiety?

Do you have trouble sleeping?

Come to DOCTOR SARAH to find out what's wrong with you.

Then following that it listed a number of things that could happen to someone if they didn't go see her to "talk out your issues". One thing on the list had caught my eye and I actually took the pamphlet. One of the things on the list were words the Skeleton Flower Syndrome with Rare Case in parentheses next to it. It had sounded so poetic that I wanted to write a song about it. I spent one or two weeks researching everything I could, there wasn't much out there, only a few cases were ever documented. I stopped trying to write about it because it sounded just a little unimaginable. To turn completely into stone, no cure, no warning, in the end, the stone chipped away to reveal a stone flower. As if it had been a flower that turned into stone instead of a living breathing human being. I had even asked Doctor Sarah about it but she only shook her head to tell me that she didn't know much about it either.

"Why are you so curious about something like that," she had asked me.

I couldn't give her an answer at the time but it seemed almost ironic that all that pointless research actually would be useful to me. I wasn't sure that I had the syndrome yet but a slight part of me was almost happy thinking that I did. An easy solution for someone like me who wanted to go, but was too scared to take myself out.

Isn't that enough of a reason to go on living? That it's just too hard to end everything yourself?

Then what am I supposed to do with the pain? She couldn't give me an answer...she couldn't at the time either.

“Completely sold out again, I'm sure the positive reviews are going to come flooding in tomorrow. A wonderful finish to a long year of work.” James started showering me with compliments as soon as we were alone in the room. He didn't really talk to me unless we were alone because Alvin had scolded him once for acting too familiar.

James took the rest of the stage equipment off me as I discarded the glittery jacket and gulped down the water as fast as I could. He moved around trying to get me everything that I needed while I just sat on the couch as I tried to breathe and hydrate myself. I managed to get myself changed into sweatpants and a green hoodie as he told me about the after party and when exactly I had to show up. He encouraged me by telling me that I didn't need to stay for the whole thing, I only needed to show my face and say a few words.

“You worry too much about me you know,” I said to him as he used a towel to wipe the sweat out from my hair.

He was silent for a while, maybe only a couple of seconds but it had felt like a long time.

He picked up the conversation again just by telling me that, “really you don't have to stay it's fine Alvin already said so”.

The fifth day in the studio, I've written a couple of short lines here and there but nothing quite felt right. In my mind, I was already sure that I had skeleton flower syndrome. There was no point in going to the doctor. My hands had stopped turning grey at just the tips which made the hand feel heavy but still usable as if the disease was giving me a chance to get any last words out before it took me completely. I knew that my feet were starting to turn by how I was losing

feeling in them. I didn't know how much time I had left but a part of me felt that it couldn't belong. I mostly stayed seated in the studio, hoping that before I left I could leave something behind.

I knew that my third album was already almost finished but that album... it was too hollow...too happy... too rushed. I tried writing down some of my true feelings before but in the end, no one understood it. They'd listen to it thinking it was just a new style I was trying...not realizing that it was me crying out. The fear of disappointing them made me try to write only happier things and here I ended up, not knowing who I was writing for anymore.

What about your childhood? Were there any events that led you to this feeling?

I started out just a normal kid that loved music. There was nothing more than that. I was a kid with too much time on my hands so I learned to deal with the time through music. I wrote music for myself... sometimes sharing it with my music teacher.

“Lucis this is amazing,” she told me as she patted me on the head.

Maybe I used her image to replace my father who had never quite been a part of my life? Or perhaps it was to replace the mother who loved me but couldn't often be there because she was working to support me and my sister? I didn't know but I was happy that I had someone to share my music with. I spent lunchtime in her office as we talked about each of my songs and how I could improve. She let me borrow the music room's guitar and I honestly really enjoyed myself.

What about the other children?

Please let me finish telling my own story.

“Lucis I really think that you should put these together in an album,” she said one day just a month away from graduation.

“Are you sure other people would want to hear it?” I was suspicious, my sister had also told me that she liked my songs but she was family...she had to say that she liked it. I tried singing for my mother but it was better to let her sleep during the times that she could finally be at home and rest. I was sure that the music teacher just wanted to make me happy. The me who did not know what the future held. The me that only knew music.

“Are you sure other people would want to hear my songs?”

“Of course! I’m sure that you would be so popular you’d be a superstar!”

Was that what I wanted back then? I wasn’t sure anymore, things moved too fast before I was signing the contract with Alvin. My mom, my sister, and the music teacher were all very happy and proud of me.

But were you happy?

I don’t remember.

Every time I saw that teacher after I debuted she would tell me that she always knew that I would be famous.

“You should thank me for pushing Lucis.”

It wasn’t what I had asked for but it allowed me a chance to get my music out there. It gave me the thrill of living on the stage. Yet it came with so many eyes looking at me, so many mouths saying whatever they wanted about me. It brought me the idea that I couldn’t disappoint anyone, the people who worked hard to make sure I succeed, or the fans who were there for me either cheering me on.

What was her name?

Why did that matter?

I threw another piece of paper on the floor. Again it wasn't good enough.

The rest of the night after the concert was a blur as I headed back to the hotel, dressed up for the afterparty, and attended it. Alvin and James both came up to me again to say "you don't have to stay" but staff member after staff member latched onto me to ask for an autograph or a handshake. They all worked harder than I did to ensure that I shined on stage so there wasn't any chance I was going to say no. In a moment of peace, James led me to a corner table at the loud club that we rented out and stood in front of me to hide me from the rest of the room.

"You alright?" He asked me, I couldn't see the look on his face due to the flashing lights but I know that he probably looked very concerned like he always did.

"It's a little hard to breathe, but I'm fine," I told James, he wouldn't believe me but he seemed to nod his head as he continued to stand in front of me so that I couldn't see anything other than the lights and his dark purple hoodie.

The rest of the night passed without anything too crazy happening and I ended up back in my hotel room just as the party finished. The room was very luxurious and spacious with a separate little room that just had a bathtub. I smelled like cigarette smoke, sweet cocktails, and sweat. James offered to spend the night with me but I sent him back to his own room. There was a time where I asked James to stay with me every night but he had just gotten himself a girlfriend and I knew that this is the only time he could call her in peace. James first insisted on staying with me to make sure that I actually slept but I convinced him that I was tired enough to sleep soundly.

“Promise you’re going to get enough rest?” He asked me as he dropped me off in front of my room.

“Yes sir!” I answered with what I thought was a reassuring smile.

James stood outside my room right until I closed the door. He was my age but often acted like he was much older. I felt really bad for him for all the times he had to deal with my insomnia. How he had to sit on the edge of the bed and watch over me to make sure that I was making an effort to fall asleep.

As I entered the light beige room, it spun a little as I walked to the bed and plopped myself down not caring about my clothes or how the smell on me might embed itself into the covers. I didn’t have to leave the room until late in the afternoon the next day so I could take my time to shower then. The loud music from the club still buzzed its beats in my ears and even though I knew there was no music playing, I could still hear it. I heard the rhythm that has made its way to my bones and it almost feels like my body is vibrating on the still bed. The lights in the room are turned all the way up but the room still felt rather dark or maybe I was dark because I compared it to the extra-bright lights of the club.

As the buzzing of my body calmed down my mind began to buzz as it usually did whenever it got too quiet.

Why are you always worried about what other people think?

I covered my face with a pillow in hopes that somehow it could take the pressure away from my brain but it did nothing. Nothing did anything but that was how it was like every night. I sat up to stare at myself in the mirror right next to the large dresser. I looked pale even with the layer of makeup still on my face. I had the urge to scratch my face but instead, I walked

unsteadily to the bathtub in hopes that maybe a bath was enough to calm down my head. The silence in the room was loud and the sound of the water wasn't enough to drown it out.

It was the tenth day and the amount of paper on the floor was quite appalling but everything I wrote just didn't feel like it was enough. My legs had become stone right up until my knees. It happened so quickly that I hadn't even noticed at first. Moving around the room was getting quite tough but I only really moved when I needed to. Every moment I was able to I wanted to try writing something, yet nothing came out of it. I tried thinking that maybe James or Alvin would come to knock at the door and ask me how I was and I could finally tell them that I thought that all of this was a mistake. It is really funny because I was the one that told them not to bother me while I was at the studio. Everything was my own fault yet I still tried to blame it on others. Even getting this disease was just a chance for me to run away from solving any of my issues.

When did you first have these thoughts?

Oh, how many times I wanted to end everything with my own hands. To write my final goodbye and escape somewhere far enough where I wouldn't have to face anyone ever again, where I wouldn't have to face myself ever again. I opened the drawer at the desk where I was sitting to take out the bottle of sleep medication. It was something that Doctor Sarah had prescribed to me in hopes that I could feel better with some rest. I really wondered if anyone could become a doctor if all they had to do was blame things on lack of sleep or bad eating habits. James had been the one to get the medication and he had been the one to convince me to take some when all other methods failed.. I pretended to take the medication and pretended that I was feeling better enough for James to leave me alone.

How many times I had thought of taking all those pills. Taking enough of them that everything could stop and I wouldn't need to wake up ever again. Yet in the end, I was too scared. Now with my disease, I was forcibly pushed forward down a direction I could not control. Even my ending was something that I played no part in.

“Lucis over here!”

“Lucis can we get a smile?”

I smiled in as many directions as I could in hopes of satisfying all the reporters in front of me. I was at a press conference right before the release of my second album. My first real press conference since Alvin had mainly been in charge during the release of my first album. It wasn't something that was hard, I just had to smile for pictures and answer a few questions. I had already practiced plenty of times with Alvin and James to know roughly how to answer the questions they might ask. I turned slightly to the right and gave the reporters another smile. I tried to smile in the way that Alvin told me to, a smile that was pleasant but not overbearing. Alvin wasn't happy with the way that I had smiled before.

“I don't like the way you smile at people, especially the fans” Alvin had said, he was rather blunt with his words and that was the first thing he said to me after I greeted him that morning.

I wasn't sure how to reply to him but he didn't need me to say anything. He kept talking after a slight pause that might have been my mind needing a few seconds to digest what he had said.

“You always look too happy when you smile at people. Like you're a puppy seeing your master after a long absence.”

“I see...” except of course I had no idea what he was talking about.

“You have to learn to not be so...what's the word...eager when you smile. Show that you are happy but not too happy.”

“I’m not sure I understand.” Nothing he said made sense to me at the time. Why was there an issue if I was happy? And what did it mean to not smile too happily?

“You can’t look more eager than your fans, they’ll think it’s cute for a while but eventually they’re going to lose interest if you seem too happy to see them. You have to make it look like they’re reliant on you rather than you’re reliant on them.” Alvin sat behind his desk with his arms crossed as if he were giving me a life lesson. I guessed in his eyes that was how it seemed.

“But surely the fans...they’re interested in the music?” I asked naively back then, that was when I had just released my first album. When I still believed or wanted to believe that music was everything.

“Oh, Lucis...the music is only part of the deal. The fans need to be interested in everything, your music, your looks, your thoughts, even what you ate for dinner last night. Only then can you truly be a star.”

I wanted to retort. I really did. I wanted to tell him that I didn’t want to be a star. I just wanted to make music because that was what made me happy. I wanted to scream at him but in the end, I just nodded and agreed to practice smiling in the mirror because I just wanted to do what I needed in order to keep making music.

So in your mind, you’re once again at fault?

But isn’t it always my fault?

“So, what theme are you going for in this album?”

“I wanted something a little more fun and lighthearted for this album. There’s no solid theme but I hope that those listening can get a spring-like feeling from this album.”

Question after question I answered as well as I could while I kept an eye on Alvin who stood in the back of the room. He nodded at me and I knew that things were going alright.

“Many of your fans look up to you as a role model, do you think of yourself as a role model figure?”

Of course not. But I couldn’t say that so I could only answer it the best way I could think of.

“I try my best to be a good person and I hope that my fans can see that and do what they can to be good people.” And not like me because I knew that my fans were much better than I was.

Why is everything so negative?

That’s just how it always is.

“For the last question, do you have any words for your fans?”

“I know this is a hard time for everyone but please know that I truly see all the good that everyone is doing. Please take care of yourselves and thank each and every one of you for loving and supporting me. I love you.”

Later Alvin would scold me and tell me that I shouldn’t have said “I love you” unless I was actually talking to the fans.

“It’s not the same impact if they read it in the paper rather than hearing it from you.”

I couldn't help it. I wanted to say something to them. To the people that loved me and to the people that were out there working on something bigger than themselves.

I remembered the fan that came up to me at a fan sign to tell me, "my friends and I take our radios along when we're working on rebuilding our local school so that we can listen to your songs." She looked maybe a few years younger than me and even she was working on something that was helpful.

"Thank you for your hard work", she told me back then as she clutched the autograph I gave her close to her chest. I didn't deserve her thanks, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her that.

"For people like you, it's all worth it," I had said to her.

Even my little sister was doing so much more for people than I was. She was working at a hospital as a nurse. Day in and day out caring for veterans who were still recuperating from the things they experienced in the war. The first day she came back from work she cried as she told me about how things were.

"They're in so much pain, and there's so little I can do." She cried as she held onto her. I could only hold her in my arms, not able to say anything helpful.

Alvin kept claiming that I was also helping by keeping everyone's morale high, but how much of that was the truth?

"Lucis, you need to stop thinking like that." Alvin had told me when I said I wanted to take a break and instead volunteer at the hospital. "If you want to volunteer for a day or two I wouldn't mind, in fact, it'd be great for your image but an indefinite break? You can't afford that, you're literally at the peak of your career."

“But I need to do something to help.”

“I told you many times over and over again if you want to help then keep singing and making all those people that love you happy.” Alvin sighed as he glared at his watch. This was the fifth time I went to talk to him about letting me volunteer. He looked tired of the topic but he kept trying to convince me to change my mind.

“But it’s not enough...”

“Bullshit, you never fucking think it’s enough. Look, if you take an indefinite break you’re going to make a lot of people unhappy. Do you want that? Do you want to disappoint all the people waiting for your comeback? We already had to stall this release because you won’t write while you’re throwing your little tantrums. If you really want to help then donate some money to some cause and then get back to work.”

“I’m sorry”

That was the end of the conversation. It didn’t matter how many letters I got or how many people came up to me. I was always going to be stuck with the same feeling as I felt back in Alvin’s office that day.

We arranged for me to visit the veteran’s hospital that she worked at. I had wanted it to be a private thing but Alvin called in reporters from all the newspapers. I went around with a big group of people following me as I shook hands and talked to the veterans.

I sat down next to the bedside of a man that had his entire head wrapped up so that only his mouth and the bottom half of his mouth showed.

“This is Al, he has amnesia from a head injury and recently got operated on so that’s why he’s all wrapped up. We’re working with him to figure out where he lived and where his family

is but so far we don't have much information other than his name." My sister told me as she placed his hand in mine. "Hey Al, this is my brother who came to visit today. He sings the songs you like on the radio."

"Oh, you're actually a singer?" Al asked as he tightened the grip he had on my hand.

"Yes," I said as I felt my throat tighten up. I couldn't see much of Al's face but I had a feeling that he couldn't have been much older than I was. He had risked his life and even more than that, he had risked his future.

"I thought Lydia was lying this whole time! Are you really Lucis?"

"Yes, I am," I answered after I cleared my throat. Al couldn't see but the reporters were writing everything down as photographers took our pictures. I wondered if he even knew that to Alvin and the press this was just a publicity stunt of mine. I squeezed his hand in hopes of trying to convey to him that I was sincere in being there.

"I really like the song about cloudy days."

"I'm so glad," I sang for him. I sang for everyone I visited that day. They smiled and some of them even sang along with me. That day I sang until I could feel my throat give out. We visited people who had lost their limbs, who smiled through their pain, who lost some part of their futures and all I could do was sing for them.

But wasn't that enough?

On the fourteenth day, I realized that maybe I went around this the wrong way. Instead of trying to get everything I wanted to say down, I should instead just think about what I wanted to say to my fans. To the people who love me even more than I could love myself. To let them know that I was sorry and not to cry for me. I frantically wrote down all the feelings I had at that

moment when I thought of them, and for the first time in a while, I didn't quite feel so heavy. My mind wandered for a moment and I wonder what flower I would end up chipping away into.

What flower would I end up getting represented as?

“So in three months time, we should be ready to release the next album. You should take this chance to get some rest and work on any songs you want to include in the next album.”

Alvin said as he walked back and forth around the small meeting room. He was wearing a dark blue suit this time.

“Sounds fine to me,” I said while dreading the three months before I had anything I needed to do. I had preferred the hectic schedule that came from touring because every moment I was doing something was a moment of peace.

James shot a look at me but he didn't say anything back to Alvin.

“Great, we're driving back to the company today, do you want me to drop you off at home or the studio?” Alvin asked both me and James.

“Studio please, James can go home, I wanna work alone for a few days,” I said while not quite looking at James. Alvin nodded and left the room so only James and I remained.

“Lucis you sure you don't want me with you at the studio?” James asked me as he moved to stand in front of me so that I would look at him.

“Yeah, it's been a busy couple of months, you need a rest too,” I said with a smile. I looked at James and noticed the dark circle under his eyes and his unkempt hair. “You're all skin and bones from working too hard.”

“Do you want me to schedule a meeting with Doctor Sarah?”

“No!” I shouted and James jumped back seemingly startled by me raising my voice.

“Did she say something wrong ?” James asked the surprise clearly showing on his face. He paused for a moment before he asked, “do you want me to talk to Alvin about finding someone else?”

I took the time while James was talking to calm myself down enough to say in a quieter voice, “it’s fine, I just want some time to work on some new songs.”

I knew that James didn't quite believe me but he just sighed and reminded me to make sure I didn't leave anything in my room before he left. I took a couple more seconds to wait for my hands to finally stop shaking before I left.

I can't help you anymore if you don't want to talk to me.

Stop acting as if you helped me at all.

On the twentieth day, I finished writing everything down but I still didn't quite feel happy with it. I've already turned to stone up till my chest and although I didn't feel any pain, I wasn't sure if the heaviness that I felt came from the stone or from my thoughts. I kept thinking back to how I was going to turn into a flower. People were going to make that flower my symbol and I won't have any say in the matter. I could already see Alvin planning some sort of special album that would be filled with the image of that flower. I couldn't choose how I was going to leave and I couldn't choose what would symbolize my existence once I left.

I thought about it for a while as I rooted in the chair. I didn't want to just be any flower. I wanted people to remember me perhaps as more of a weed. Something that looked like a flower but wasn't really. I wasn't a flower no, I was nowhere near beautiful or perfect enough to be a flower for them. I laughed, a weed rather than a flower, that truly suited me better. I already could only move my arms, I realized I didn't have much time left so I took the little recorder by

the desk and clicked record. Alvin or James would find it and they would help me get it to the people. I sang into the recorder with more feeling than I had ever felt. This time I didn't have to care about what people thought or how they would perceive the song. I just sang hoping that I could help cheer someone up even just a little.

Maybe it's just your personality?

I woke up with a start, her voice in my ear.

Maybe you should just try to change the way you think.

It took a couple of minutes of panicked breathing and me frantically looking around to remember that I was alone in the studio. There was no one there other than myself and the voice most likely, was in my head again. It was Doctor Sarah's voice in my head, repeating the words she said at our final meeting.

"Everything is internal, you know." She said as she adjusted the glasses on her face. "No one is saying that you don't matter, in fact, everything that you've told me so far has led me to believe that the people around you spend their time convincing you that you actually matter."

Part of me wanted to believe her, it really did. She was a professional, she knew what she was talking about but I couldn't trust what she said. Not when deep down I knew that if I believed her, there was nothing I could do to change. How could I decide to change my personality as she wanted me to? The only thing in this life that I couldn't change was the way I thought. That was the thing that made me who I was... if I changed that then...what did I have left?

But you would be happier, wouldn't you?

I laughed, breaking the awful silence in the room. If I could change the way I thought so easily then I would have done it a long time ago. I kept laughing, just hard enough to justify the tears that slid down my face.

“Why are you here exactly?” She had asked me that at my first meeting with her and every meeting after that. I gave her the same answer but she still asked.

“Are you even listening to me?” I asked her, the first time I had ever raised my voice at her.

“Of course, I am but you refuse to tell me why you are actually here. Why you are actually in pain.”

“I’ve told you everything, is that not enough? Do I need to present you with some dramatic story of woe for you to properly understand that I just am in pain?”

“There’s always a reason Lucis,” She had said in her usual calm voice, even though I was already screaming at her.

“And if there isn’t?”

Then it must just be your personality.

I couldn’t do it. I thought I could go peacefully, let this disease take me. But I couldn’t. I would not let it decide what my symbol should be. I wouldn’t. I took the bottle of pills with whatever strength I had left in my arm and poured as many little white pills as I could down my throat. I wondered how people would find me. Half turned to stone? Or already as a flower? How were they going to see me once they found me? For once in my life I wanted them to see me as what I truly was. Not a flower but just me. Flawed and useless as I was.

Would they still love you?

It didn't matter anymore.

My head was finally quiet as I felt a wave of drowsiness hit me.

Carnation

She cried a lot. I knew that babies cried a lot, but I never expected it to be so much.

“You’re sure that nothing is wrong with her?” I asked my husband Zachary as he was heading out the front door ready for work. It was Monday morning and he had to leave a little bit earlier than usual to get some paperwork done. It had already been a full whole week since we came back from the hospital and she just kept crying and crying and crying.

“Yes, this is just how babies are. I’m sure our little Eliza just wants more attention from her loving mommy.” Zachary gave me a quick kiss and left, once again leaving me with the sleeping noisemaker.

Mommy, that was me now, I was a mother. It still felt so unreal, I guessed that more time was needed until I truly felt like a mother. A little more than a week had passed since I became a mother, surely more time was needed? She seemed much quieter at the hospital but I guessed that was because of the nurses that took care of her as I recovered.

When I first saw her I was sure that something was wrong. When she came out of me the nurses had taken her and wrapped her up before pressing her into my chest. She was bright red, wrinkly, and frankly didn’t look like a human. I had seen babies before but none that looked quite so young. She looked both like a baby and like an old man all scrunched up the tiny feature on her tiny head. But Zachary looked at her as if she were a treasure, the smile on his face wider than I had ever seen it before. The grip he had on his hand tightened as he kissed me. He was smiling so I knew that nothing was wrong with her.

I wondered if all mothers thought there was something wrong with their baby? Was it a sort of motherly instinct? I made a mental note to ask my mother in the next letter I wrote to her and went to take a look at Eliza.

She slept quite soundly, no surprise there considering how she had been crying at ungodly hours in the morning. It had taken me forever to get her to finally sleep again but the moments when she was asleep were the best moments. She looked quite adorable as she seemed to look more human the more time passed. She expanded a bit so that she was no longer as wrinkly and the redness faded away to reveal a much more human-looking color. The nurses had said she had my eyes and Zachary's nose but I still wasn't sure if that was true. I glanced up at the mirror that we kept in our room but I quickly glanced away. I was still rather ugly. Not to say that I was beautiful before but I didn't look as bad as what I had just seen in the mirror.

When my stomach first started to expand during my first trimester, I had covered up the mirrors because I couldn't stand to see how I was changing. Zachary had taken all the covers down as he told me that I was "Always" going to be beautiful to him. I knew that he was lying, but for him not to worry I pretended to listen to him as I taught myself to just not look at the mirrors. I memorized where all the reflective surfaces were around the house and made sure to not look at them. If I ever accidentally looked I would purposely blur my vision just so I didn't have to see a clear image of myself. Everything would be fine once the baby was born, that was most of the extra weight that I had put on, I told myself.

I was still ugly, perhaps uglier I thought as I gently touched my stomach. I had wanted nothing more in the world than for it to shrink but the more it shrank the more the skin in the area started to sag. No one told me how long it would take my body to go back to how it used to.

No one ever told me if it would. Not even my mother who had told me that being a mother was the greatest thing in the world. It wouldn't always be like this right? I made another mental note to ask about sagging skin in my next letter.

Eliza let out a cry. I had to push my thoughts to the back of my mind to see what she needed.

After feeding, cleaning, and changing Eliza she stayed awake for a little bit. I held her very carefully as I waited for her to go back to sleep. Zachary had told me that it was better to be with Eliza when she was awake so she could form a better connection with me. I wasn't sure what that meant but I was also way too worried about leaving her alone when she was awake. What if she hurt herself when I looked away? There were so many things that could go wrong.

When she finally fell asleep, I laid her down and finally started to work on the things that I needed to do. I felt a slight pain in my back as I stood up but there was nothing I could do about it. If I didn't carefully use the time she was asleep to do the housework then I wouldn't have everything finished by the time Zachary got home from work. Especially since I still had to finish a lot of the unpacking and decorating that Zachary had told me not to do while pregnant. We had moved shortly after I found out I was pregnant and I wasn't allowed to do much even though we didn't quite get everything properly furnished. Zachary had spent an extra few days away from work as I directed him on how to unpack and get out the things that we immediately needed. Everything else was still stored in the room that would eventually become the nursery.

Other than the unpacking, there was also the washing, the cleaning, the cooking, and taking care of Eliza. My mother had managed to do it while taking care of me and my brothers so I should be able to handle everything while just taking care of Eliza.

“It’s the woman’s job to make sure everything in the home is perfect so the husband can come home and relax,” my mother had told me when I asked her why I had to help wash the dishes, while my brothers were playing after dinner. She was teaching me so that I could be a good wife. I didn’t understand her at the time but I listened to her because she was my mother. It was just easier to listen to her than to argue. I wondered if Eliza would listen to me in the same way as she got older.

Eliza woke up and screamed a couple more times and by the time I had to make dinner I already developed a rather painful headache. There was nothing I could do though, I had to make dinner for Zachary. I couldn’t let him come home from a hard day of work and not have dinner waiting for him, what kind of wife would I be? So I gritted my teeth and made dinner. I had yet to talk to him about the headaches but honestly, I suspected that it was just from the noise that Eliza made. How could such a tiny body produce such deafening loudness?

I finished making dinner a little later than I usually did, but still, Zachary had not come home. I debated over calling his office but I knew that he must have been busy taking care of his patients. He had taken a job at a larger hospital with higher pay just as we found out I was pregnant. The higher pay did mean that he needed to take care of more patients and with the war just ending, the time that Zachary came home went from five-thirty to sometimes ten at night. I asked him about it and he told me that the soldiers were coming back from the war and that the hospital was already understaffed even though they had thought that they prepared for it.

I covered the food up and went to wait for Zachary in the living room. I had moved Eliza to the cradle there so I could watch her while I worked. I looked over to see that she was still asleep and I finally sat down for maybe the first time that day.

“Jane, what the Fuck are you doing?”

I somehow managed to hear his scream before I heard hers. I opened my eyes and looked around confused. I barely saw Zachary standing in front of me as he held Eliza in his arms with a look I had never seen before on his face.

“What’s wrong dear?” I asked as I stood up from the sofa, shot a glance at the clock and saw that it was already just past ten. I had fallen asleep waiting for Zachary to come home.

“Maybe I should be asking you, I come home from work to find Eliza crying herself hoarse while you are asleep next to her.”

There was venom in his voice as he spoke. Zachary had never raised his voice at me before, for the first time in our marriage I had truly managed to upset him. His face was a bright red, as red as Eliza’s face was when I first saw her.

“I’m sorry...”, there was nothing else that I could say. I had fallen in such a deep sleep that I didn’t even notice my daughter crying. I felt an urge to take Eliza from him and shake her until she would stop crying. Perhaps she had planned all this, to start crying just as Zachary came in, how else would I have not been woken up? She was the one that drove this wedge between me and Zachary. As quickly as the thought entered my head I forced it to leave. “I’m so sorry...”

Zachary walked away with a crying Eliza toward our room. I only remember slouching down onto the sofa as I tried to think of something...anything that I could say or do to redeem myself. Why was this so hard?

I woke up in the morning to the usual sound of Eliza crying but somehow it sounded closer than I had anticipated. I sat up and realized that I was in bed rather than the sofa where I last remembered being. I quickly got out of bed and rushed over to the crying Eliza to make sure

that I didn't wake Zachary who was next to me in bed. I carried her out of the room and toward the kitchen. It was still dark outside as I looked through the window and I knew that she was just crying for her usual 3 am breakfast. What I did not know was how exactly I ended up in bed when I was pretty sure that I fell asleep on the sofa.

I got my answer when Zachary had woken up to his 7 am alarm. I was already making his breakfast when he came downstairs to the kitchen. I heard him come up behind me but I was too scared to turn around to face him. He had been so angry at me and I had no idea how to fix it.

"I'm sorry my darling," he said as I felt his arms wrap around me from behind. I stiffened in surprise both at the contact and the fact that he had apologized.

"I should not have yelled at you, I know how tired you must be and it wasn't fair for me to yell at you. I was stressed out from a case at work and I never should have taken it out on you." He turned me around and held my shoulders as he looked into my eyes. "I'm sorry and I love you."

It took everything in me to not cry. To hold back all the things that I wanted to say and that didn't know what to say. Maybe it had been too long since we've properly looked at each other, or maybe it was the relief in knowing that things were fine. He wasn't mad. He still was going to love me. We kissed and for once in a long time things didn't feel as confusing or complicated as it had been.

I hadn't felt relief like that since the day we got married. It was a small ceremony with just our parents and a couple of friends each. I had just finished college and Zachary was in his final year of medical school. We had met on campus and things just felt so right that in three years Zachary had proposed and of course I said yes.

“He’s quite a catch indeed. From a pretty nice family and on track to become a doctor. Everything a girl could dream for,” my mother had told me after she and my father first met him. It was very important for her that I did my best to make sure that Zachary and I were happy together.

“A chance like this doesn’t come to every girl you know,” she said as she fixed my hair on the day of my wedding. The whole day I felt like I was holding my breath wondering if things were going to work out and if he and I were going to be happy. That all went away the moment I saw him standing there in his black suit. A deep sense of relief had filled every particle of my being and I was sure that we were going to be fine.

Eliza let out a cry as if to remind us that she was there. I pushed Zachary toward the direction of the living room so he could go check on her. I went back to making the rest of our breakfast already feeling that this was going to be an amazing Tuesday.

The whole day seemed to go extremely well as Eliza was rather quietly content, as she stared at the living room ceiling. I spent the majority of the time placing our books on the bookshelf in alphabetical order. A lot of the books were from our university classes so half the bookshelf was filled with medical journals and textbooks while the other half contained my law books. I hadn’t touched any of them since I graduated but it was hard to throw any of them away. I had bought most of them with the money I earned myself working part-time. Going to college had resulted in my mother’s constant reprimand up until I introduced her to Zachary.

“You’re wasting your time going to college, you need to hurry and find someone to settle down with before you get too old and no one will want you.” She had told me with her brows wrinkled. “Your brothers don’t even want to go to college so why are you in such a rush to go?”

It had been my father who barely ever participated in the raising of the children to speak up and support me. “Let her do what she wants, for now, there’s no need to worry too much about her future.”

The books with heavy titles such as *The Complete Understanding of the Law* became the thing that gave me momentary freedom from the expectations of my mother. And so I just couldn’t get rid of them. I grabbed a couple of the books from both sections and placed them in the bedroom and on a few other shelves to make it seem like we read them more than we did. As much as I wished that I could sit down and read right there and then I knew that I had to get dinner ready.

As if the day couldn’t be any more perfect, Zachary was only one hour late for dinner which meant we could finally eat together and talk about our days.

“I finished unpacking all the books today.”

“Is that so darling? That’s nice.”

“And how was your day?”

“We have our hand full dealing with a rather special case of Skeleton Flower Syndrome so the whole floor is rather focused on it.”

“Skeleton Flower Syndrome?”

“It’s a disease without a specific linking cause that turns a person’s whole body into stone slowly over time.”

“Why is it called Skeleton Flower then?”

“When the patient is fully turned to stone, they begin to chip away until all that’s left is a stone flower.”

“What sort of flower?”

“It varies and we don’t know what decides what type of flower is left either. We’ve had cases of roses, lavenders, and peonies before.”

“I’ve never heard you talk about it before?”

“It’s my first time seeing it up close myself. It’s quite sad really, there’s no cure for it so we just watch as someone turns to stone slowly over time.”

After that there was silence except for the clicks and clatters that we made as we ate. I had almost begun to miss the sound of Eliza crying when Zachary spoke up again.

“On Friday a couple of my coworkers are thinking of going to the pub after work. You wouldn’t mind if I join them would you?”

“A pub?”

“We won’t be out too long darling, and besides it’s healthy to deal with the stress of work.”

“I see.”

“Well if you don’t want me to go then I’ll just let them know-”

“No, I’m fine with you going.”

We ate the rest of the dinner in silence. I don’t remember if it was comfortable or uncomfortable.

We used to talk more when we had first gotten married two years ago. The first few days of our marriage weren’t easy but at the end of the when Zachary came home from work we would just cuddle at the couch and talk about our days. We never really got into any serious

arguments and things were just so very peaceful as we filled each other in with what went on with our lives when we weren't with each other.

"I had tea with Eli and Thea today," I had said as I snuggled into Zachary's chest.

"And what did you ladies talk about?" He asked as he rested his head on the top of mine. The radio on in the background with the volume turned just loud enough for us to hear the sound of a soft piano tune.

"Well Eli got another letter from her husband yesterday, she misses him dearly."

"I can't imagine the horrors that he's going through right now."

"You're not going to have to go off to war will you?"

"I don't think so, the director of the hospital said that they're trying to keep too many doctors from being sent to the army so that we would be better able to help when the war ends."

"I don't quite know what I would do to be separated from you like Eli and her husband."

"Why that would drive me crazy, crazy enough to want to bring you with me."

"That would be better than sitting alone only being able to communicate by letter. I'd go insane."

He kissed the top of my head and we spent the whole night talking about everything and nothing.

As I laid a sleeping Eliza down in her cradle for the night I tried to think of things that I could talk to Zachary about in bed. I came up with nothing. We went to sleep that night after a quick "Goodnight".

Wednesdays used to be when I would go grocery shopping but with Eliza, in the house, I couldn't anymore. All I could do was write out a list of things that we needed and hand it to Zachary while hoping that he got off work at the normal time.

Eliza was being especially awake, she kept reaching out and pulling on my dark brown hair. I pulled my hair away from her in case she tried to put it in her mouth. It had been a few days since I could properly wash my hair so I didn't want it in her mouth. I laid her down for just a minute to tie my hair and she started to cry. I did everything I could to try to get her to stop, I fed her, changed her and bounced her around but she continued to cry. The more she cried the louder she seemed to get and I could feel the pain forming in the back of my head. I felt a faint bit of pain coming from my arms but I couldn't but her down while she was still crying.

"Oh be good won't you little Eliza Jane Meadow?" I cried out as I gently rocked her in my arms hoping that she would fall asleep. By the time she settled down I was already far behind in my schedule.

I had planned to work on settling more things around the bedroom that day. While we had managed to get the summer clothes in the drawers, we had barely touched the boxes of winter clothing that needed to be taken out and refolded to go in the drawers. As I quickly worked my way in folding and hanging jackets and sweaters I found my favorite jacket. Or what was my favorite jacket? It was a light blue jacket that was styled almost like a men's suit jacket but a bit longer. I had bought it as an impulse after I saw it on the store mannequin and only managed to wear it a couple of times. I couldn't hold myself back and tried it on. The arms were a little tight and I couldn't button it but just wearing it made me feel different than how I usually was. I didn't know if I would say that it made me feel happy but it made me feel something.

Against my better judgment, I looked at the mirror and ripped the jacket off my body as fast as I could. I couldn't wear it anymore. I hate mirrors.

The first time I wore the jacket was when I had my interview at my first official full-time job. This was just before I graduated and almost right after Zachary had proposed. We had discussed what we would do in our futures and it was a huge surprise to me when he agreed to my suggestion for me to get a job. I had wrestled with the idea for days after my professor suggested a job position for me to apply to. I was so sure that he was going to say no that I had already prepared for it.

"Are you sure it's alright?" I had asked him pretty sure that he was just joking with me, that he would tell me that of course, I couldn't get a job right before our marriage.

"Darling, of course, it would be alright. Why wouldn't it be?" He asked me with a tone of voice that clearly expressed his puzzlement which in turn only made me more nervous.

"I just thought that maybe you would rather I be more of a housewife?"

"I would never in my life tell you what you could or couldn't do. If you want to be a housewife I'd support you just as much as I support you getting a job."

It was weird to me, the idea that I could do what I wanted. But Zachary had always been like that. In fact, for as long as I had known him he had never once told me to do anything. It was always a suggestion or advice but I could make all my own decisions. I didn't have to argue or fight for a choice.

Of course, my mother was not at all happy about my decision to work. I had finally told her on a short trip home and she had been livid.

“Why on earth would you be working? Especially when you’re engaged?” Whenever my mother was angry she never screamed or yelled. Her voice would get very low and every syllable that she pronounced would sound harsh.

“What does being engaged have anything to do with it, mother?”

“Women that aren’t being supported by their husbands have to work. Is Zachary already saying that he won’t let you handle the finances? That you need to make your own money. If that’s the case then you bring that boy here and I will-”

“No mother I wanted to try and work. The job sounds interesting and I could have a chance to put my degree to use.” I had to cut in because I could see her almost reach her boiling point as both her hands were clenched hard enough that her fists were shaking. I could imagine that if Zachary was in front of her she would have punched him. As soon as I finished speaking, my mother seemed to have deflated.

“Why would you do this? I agreed to this marriage because I knew that he could support you so that you didn’t have to work. So that you could be a good wife and take care of the home. If both of you are working who would take care of the house? Who would take care of the children?”

“We talked about it, mother we would handle all of that together.”

My mother laughed. Not the laugh she put on in front of Zachary but a laugh that shook her whole body. The image burned into my mind as I listened to what she said between laughs.

“Why are you so young and foolish?”

I held Eliza in my arms and gently rocked her. The pain in my arm had spread to my shoulder but the feeling of her breath calmed my mind down more than I imagined. I placed her

gently down in her bed and just looked at her. I wasn't even sure of what I was feeling as I looked at her. She was so small that a part of me wanted to just stay and look at her, protecting her from everything that could hurt her. But I couldn't do that, I tore my eyes away as I went back to lie down in bed. Next to me was Zachary who was sound asleep. I laid on my side as I watched his chest rise and fall a few times just as Eliza's chest had. I fell asleep listening to the sound of both of their breathing.

I woke up later than I usually did and I had to rush as I woke Zachary. I checked on Eliza and even though she had her eyes open she didn't seem to make any fuss as I carried her to her cradle in the living room. I made a very rushed scrambled eggs and toast. Zachary left the house with a quick kiss for both me and Eliza. He made a comment about how I looked a little pale but I pushed him out the door before he ended up late. Once the morning rush was over it started to seem like a very normal Thursday. I quickly left the house for a few minutes for the mail as well as my weekly magazine. I usually kept the housework light on Thursdays so that I would have time to read the latest edition of *The Housewife's Weekly Guide*. My mother had gotten me a prescription as a gift and at first, I didn't want to read it but I once flipped through it and found many good cleaning tips and recipes. It had become a chance for me to learn new things on my journey as a housewife.

Zachary and I had moved in together right after I graduated college. It was more precise to say that I moved in with him as he had his own house at the time. I had a couple of days to settle myself in before I had to start my job. Zachary had already been working for a year after he finished his training so he hadn't been around the house much. The house was small but rather neat so all I had to do was place my things around. Zachary had someone that would come clean

a few times but he called off their services when we started to live together because we said that we would handle the chores ourselves. Even after I started working we could mostly handle things on our own. I mostly made the food because Zachary couldn't cook and we split some of the cleaning. It was fairly obvious that Zachary wasn't very familiar with housework so we mostly tried to work together.

"I'll wash the dishes and you can dry them," I said as I handed him a dry dish towel.

"Dry them?"

"It is literally as easy as it sounds, I'll wash the dishes and then you use the towel to wipe them dry."

"No, I understand drying but why do we need to dry them? Aren't they clean already after we wash them? So shouldn't any water left on them be fine if we just left them to dry naturally?"

I had to explain to him basic housework things but he tried his best at it. That is until the war was announced and he suddenly had to spend much more time at the hospital. In the first few months, he had to work on inspecting healthy men to see if they were fit to enlist. Even if he managed to come home early he looked ragged and I could not bear to make him do any of the housework anymore. He complained once or twice but he did not have even enough spare energy to do more than that.

I was slowly getting overwhelmed with the work at home and my actual work. I was only assisting a more senior member of staff but it still meant that I was expected to keep on my knowledge on cases and the newest amendments to the law.

Three months after I started working I quit to become more of a fulltime housewife.

“But that’s not what you want is it?” Zachary had asked me when I told him that I was quitting.

“It is because it’s the best decision for both of us.”

Life was simpler when I only had to take care of the house. I made sure that when Zachary came home, the house would be spotless, there would be a meal and all he had to do was snuggle with me on the couch.

The calmness that Eliza displayed in the morning seemed like a complete myth as she seemed to throw multiple fits in the afternoon. It seemed that every moment that I wanted to take a break and read my magazine, Eliza would start screaming. It almost seemed like she knew what she was doing. My feet felt especially heavy as I walked over to her.

“Please just let me take a quick break,” I said myself more than to her as I rocked her in my arms to try and get her to quiet down.

There were so few things a baby as young as Eliza needed. Food, burping, diaper change, and sleep. Yet why was it so difficult to please her?

By the time Zachary came home, she was quiet again.

“How was my little angel?” He asked as he picked her up, she seemed to make a noise that sounded like a giggle and Zachary smiled. “Look our angel is laughing cause she missed her papa didn’t she?”

“She’s not an angel when she’s with me,” I whispered underneath my breath but Zachary still caught it.

“What’s that darling?” He asked me as he set Eliza down.

“It’s just she cried all day again.”

“Well that’s how babies are, they cry when they need something.”

“Yes but even when she didn’t need anything she still would cry.”

“Well, maybe our little darling just needs some fresh air? Why don’t you take her out to the park tomorrow?”

“Don’t call her that,” I said before I could stop myself.

“Pardon?”

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s not nothing, don’t call her what? Our little darling?”

I didn’t want the conversation to go on any longer because I knew that I was being unreasonable. It had generally made me feel unwell whenever Zachary referred to Eliza as “our little darling” but I didn’t want him to know the reason.

“Please just disregard that I didn’t mean it. Anyway, I’d love to be able to take her to the park but I still haven’t managed to get the baby carriage and all the stuff needed for her to travel put together.

“I see... well, why don’t we have a family trip to the park on Saturday? You can take tomorrow to get everything together and we can take a day to go to the bigger park with the petting zoo.”

“Yes, that’d be lovely.”

I spent the Friday mostly putting together the baby stroller getting everything that Eliza might need, packed up. I had a list from the magazine in front of me as I packed. She needed an extra set of clothes, water, food, extra diapers, and some toys just in case she didn’t like animals. A towel for accidents and wet tissues for the same reason. I wasn’t nervous for her first outing

because I knew that there wasn't much that she could do anyway. I was excited for our first outing together as a family. When I was in the last few months of my pregnancy I wasn't allowed to move too much and so I stayed at the house in bed for most of it. The last time I took a trip with Zachary was to the store to pick out cradles and bedding for Eliza.

Eliza was planned and she wasn't. I knew that Zachary wanted kids and I wasn't completely against it so we decided that we would start our family after the war ended. This was to ensure that I wouldn't end up giving birth alone in case Zachary was drafted. We didn't know when the war was going to end so we tried to be careful. Yet the unexpected still happened. I was pregnant and there was no way that I was going to try and get an illegal abortion. So we crossed our fingers and prayed for Zachary to stay with me. I was constantly thinking about what I would do if I had to give birth and raise the child on my own. At night I would clutch onto Zachary in my sleep.

Zachary didn't get drafted and the war ended. I safely gave birth and life seemed to be going back to normal.

Zachary came home near midnight and I could smell the beer on his breath. He wasn't completely drunk; he could still walk almost fine. He hugged me very tightly as I tried to get his clothes off for bed.

"I love you, darling."

"I know, now lift your arm for me," I said as I tried to get his shirt off.

"I really really really love you."

"I know, please just lift your arm."

"I love you and our little darling Eliza."

“I know.”

The next morning we both woke up a little later than usual. Eliza had been very good and slept the whole night through so I was even feeling quite refreshed.

We ate breakfast and talked about our plan for the day. We would drive to the park and we'd try to get there early so that there would be fewer people. That would make it less overwhelming for Eliza.

Just as we were ready to leave the phone rang. Zachary went to pick it up as I put Eliza down into her new stroller. A few minutes later Zachary came back but he no longer had the smile on his face.

“I'm sorry but I have to go to the hospital,” he said as he grabbed his bag and a few papers from his desk.

“But it's the weekend?”

“I know darling but the patient with Skeleton Flower Syndrome seems to have taken a turn for the worst and is turning to stone at a much faster rate than normal.”

“Why do you need to go then? I thought you said that there was no cure?”

“There isn't but the chief wants everyone who knows the patient there to make sure that his last moments are comfortable.”

I wasn't sure what face I was making but I knew that it probably wasn't pretty because Zachary actually paused what he was doing to stare at me.

“You really are looking paler and paler these days, have you not been feeling well? If you want I can tell the chief that I can't make it?” He asked as he held my hands in his. “Your hands feel colder than usual too.”

“I’m fine, you should go,” I said as I stepped away to unpack things from Eliza’s stroller.

“I’m sorry we can’t go to the park today, I’ll make sure that we can go tomorrow. You should spend more time resting today.” Zachary said as he walked out the door after I convince him to go.

I wanted to tell him no to go but in the end, it was his job. I couldn’t be selfish. Eliza didn’t cry at all as she just stared at me after Zachary left. I sat down on the couch the strength suddenly gone from my legs. I looked at Eliza in her cradle, her eyes still looked straight at me.

“What is it?” I couldn’t hold myself back as I asked her. She couldn’t answer me and just continued to stare at me without making a sound. “Are you upset because we can’t take you to the park?” Deep down I knew that if she was upset she would be crying but I wasn’t feeling particularly rational. “Are you sad that we can’t go because your father has a job right now that’s more important than a family trip? Or maybe you’re upset that you have to be here with me instead of at the park. You’re here at the house just like every other day.” I realized I was yelling at Eliza instead of just talking to her.

I quieted myself as I thought about what I was doing. I was yelling at my own baby about something that she couldn’t even control. It wasn’t her fault that Albert had to go to work. But it wasn’t Albert’s fault either. Nobody could be blamed that’s just how things were. Eliza didn’t do anything, Albert didn’t do anything...so why was I crying?

I wasn’t sure when I had started to cry but I couldn’t stop it no matter how hard I tried. The tears flowed from my face down on the yellow sundress that I decided to wear because today was supposed to be a special day. All of a sudden I found it hard to breathe. The walls of the living room seemed to get closer and closer to me as the air in the room was disappearing. I

needed more air and all I could think about was trying to breathe and not get crushed by the walls of the room. I looked up and saw the door in front of me. I ran out the door with all the energy I had left. I was outside, the walls were gone and I filled my lungs with air as I took deep breathes. I was running but in no particular direction. Just running and breathing and crying.

I fell over and landed on grass I felt the pain sear through my body. That was when my brain finally seemed to work again and I could start to process what was happening. I ran out of my house to fall flat on my face in the front yard. I wanted to laugh but that only made me want to cry. I tried to get up but I couldn't move my arms or my legs anymore.

I felt the panic set as a numbness started to climb up my body. I could only really move my head and so I tried to see what was wrong with my body. All I saw was my arm that looked grey. Since when had it looked like that? My body was beginning to feel colder and colder as the numbness seemed to spread to all parts of my body. So this was my punishment? To lie here while my baby was alone in the house. Punishment for me not being able to provide love to the baby. To not being able to be a mother and a wife as I should have been.

A part of me was happy. I didn't want to admit that part existed but it was there. I was happy to just lie there. It was so peaceful so serene, to not feel anything anymore. I wasn't crying anymore as I felt the numbness reach my neck. I closed my eyes and I knew that I would finally be able to sleep well.

"Why do you keep calling me darling?" I had asked Zachary the first month we were dating. He had a habit of always calling me darling rather than my name.

"Well, it's because you are my darling."

Did you call all of your girlfriend's darling?"

“No, you’re my one and only darling!”

“That’s so cheesy.”

“But it’s the truth you know, you’re my only darling from now till forever.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”