

He Waits

The 15th of May. The day Mom died. Funerals. I hate them. I hate them a lot. All it is is a chance for men to dress up in monkey suits and for women to wear pretty dresses. At least that's what Dad says. They all sit around, talk, cry a bit, and then everyone eats. It's a terrible way to remember someone. I hate it. My aunt, who I don't even like, forced me into a blazer, nice dress pants and a tie that made me see dots. As soon as the funeral was over, I ripped off my jacket and flung myself onto the couch. I could hear Dad thanking the last few people as they headed out the door. Damien sat on the recliner across from me, staring intensely at a single point on the wall. I heard the door shut, the metallic click of the lock and felt the heave of the couch as Dad sat down beside me. A minute? An hour? I don't remember how long we sat there. But I do remember Damien suddenly jerking to life, jumping onto his feet and, with fists clenched and face red, started to scream at Dad. "How could you let her die?!" Damien yelled, on the verge of tears.

I ran. It was the only thing I could think of. I ran up the stairs, the stairs I had slipped, played and sat on so many times. I ran past all that and into my room. I slammed the door and laid down on my bed, hugging Paws tight. Mom had given it to me. I could still hear Damien, but not Dad. I heard stomping, a fist hitting the wall, cursing. Damien had never done something like this before. It went on for a while and the entire time, it was Damien. I crushed Paws so hard my hands hurt. I nuzzled my face into his mane. I loved this lion so much. It was my reminder of Mom.

After an eternity of yelling, I heard the door opening and closing. I scampered to my window and I saw Damien's car pulling out of the driveway. I raced downstairs and there was Dad, still sitting on the couch, staring at the recliner. He looked as though nothing had happened. I yelled at him, " He left! We have to go after him! Dad! DAD!" He said nothing. Just kept looking at the wall. At that moment, I hated him. Almost as much as I hate funerals. Or lightning storms. Or scary movies. He did nothing. I screamed at him. I begged him, " We have to go! Damien needs us!" Still, he just looked at the recliner. I cried. How could he sit there, looking so stupid, not realizing what he had to do?! My eyes red. I could barely see as I climbed back up those wretched stairs and onto my bed. I threw my Batman covers over my head and squeezed Paws. I don't remember sleeping.

Life went on. I had to get up for school, which was something I was fearing. Dad got me up, just like he usually did. He made me a bowl of Honey Nut Cheerios, like he usually did. It was too much 'usual'. He acted as if Damien had never existed. We didn't talk about Mom, or Damien, or the funeral. No, instead the drive to school was filled with deep silence. He kissed me on the head as I opened the door of the car and whispered, "I love you Sam. No matter what, I love you." That day sucked. School sucked. Not that I like it usually anyway. Fourth grade is hard. I couldn't think of anything but Damien, Mom, the funeral. All the things Dad wouldn't speak of. He picked me up after, and again, the car was silent. We both basically did nothing after that. I sat in my room, hugging Paws and crying about Mom. When bedtime rolled around, I got up, brushed my teeth, slipped on my Superman pyjamas (I had a small superhero obsession), and crept down the stairs to say goodnight. Dad was probably doing a crossword or something

smart. I wish I was that smart. I plan to be. But instead, Dad sat on our old rocking chair in front of the door, slowly rocking back and forth. I hadn't seen that chair for a long time. I used to love it. I would curl up in it, cocoon myself in a blanket and read a book. Mom said she got rid of it because it was a safety hazard. She was always like that. Too protective of me. And Damien. And Dad. I walked over to Dad and tapped him on the shoulder. He turned around and a small smile appeared on his lips.

“ What's up Sam?”

“ Dad, what are you doing?”

“ Waiting.”

“ Waiting for what?”

“ Just waiting. Good night Sam.”

He kissed me on the forehead. As confused as I still was, I decided to let him sit. I crawled into my bed and pulled the covers up to my chin.

This kept on for a long time. Everyday, I would come down to say goodnight and Dad would be there, rocking back and forth. It was mesmerizing and one of my favorite sounds in the whole

wide world. I would let him kiss me on the forehead in the same place and I would ask him the same question.

“Why?”

He would always reply with the same answer.

“I’m just waiting. Good night Sam.”

I was mad at him. Why was he wasting his time, sitting there, staring into nothing? I would always walk away, ticked off. Life still happened. I got an A on my math quiz. My friend ripped his pants at school and we all laughed. My soccer team made it to regionals. This all happened and Dad was enthusiastic and happy for me. And yet, still, every night, he sat in that chair, waiting. I missed Damien. I wished he would come home. He never called or sent an email. I was lonely. With Damien gone, Mom really gone and Dad still quiet, I spent most of my time in my room.

One quiet night, a normal night. A night with the appearance and likeness of many nights before. Dad sitting in his chair as I did my homework, listening to him rock.

“Creakkk. Creaak.”

The sudden sound of a engine roaring made me knock my lamp over. I tiptoed to the top of the stairs, and, holding onto the railing, I leaned down to see properly. Damien. Damien! He stood

there, a beard starting to form on his face, wearing his black leather jacket and jeans. I loved that jacket. I had always thought it was so cool. I could see dark rings under his eyes from many sleepless night. His hair was ruffled and stuck up in many different places. He looked terrible. He just stood there, silent. His eyes cast down, hands behind his back. Dad stood up slowly, using both of the arm rests. He brushed himself off and stared back at Damien. It felt like an eternity. Dad finally stepped forward, and wrapped his arms around my brother. Damien's arms flew up and grappled Dad's back, squeezing the life of out him. He laid his head on my father's shoulders and for the first time in my life, I saw my brother cry. My tough, cool, always chill brother. My brother. The one who taught me how to play football. My brother, the one who snuck me ice cream in the middle of the night. My brother, the one who let me sleep with him whenever a lightning storm started. I hate storms. I heard Dad patting him on the back and whispering in his ear. He wiped his eyes, and, with Dad's help, he came back into our house. The house that not months ago, he left. I scampered back into my room and threw myself under my covers. I froze and held my breath. I waited. And waited. A small knock on my door. Damien's voice.

"Sam."

"Hey, Sam."

I did my best not to move. I lay still, staring at my wall. Paws right beside me. I love Paws. He reminds me of Mom. He reminds me of the good times. He still smells like her chocolate chip cookies I used to sneak when she wasn't looking. I would eat them in my room and share one with Paws. Sometimes I would go over to Damien's room and pushed one under the door. I

would always hear a chuckle and the cookie would slide away. I would laugh to myself. I miss Mom. I miss her more than anything in the world. I wish she would come upstairs and tuck me in. I wish she would kiss me on the cheek and call me her little lion. I cried myself to sleep.

First thing in the morning. Before I brushed my teeth. Before I ate my cereal. Even before I changed my clothes. I bolted into Damien's room and jumped on top of him. He woke up quickly. We stared at each other for a while. Next thing I knew, my head was burning with a noogie. I pulled away and hit him with a pillow. We both laughed. The day went great from there. I even raised my hand in class. I didn't know the answer. But I raised my hand anyway. That night, as I was washing my face before bed, I realized something. Dad. He never told me why he sat there every night. Why he wasted so much time. I scrubbed fast. I buried my face in my nice, fluffy Flash towel. I rushed downstairs, two steps at a time. The rocking chair was gone. It was weird. I had grown so used to it being there and now "poof". Gone. I looked around the corner into the living room and there was Dad, doing a crossword on our recliner. The recliner he had found at a garage sale and begged Mom to let him keep even though she thought there were bugs in it. I smiled. This is the type of 'usual' that I like. That I want. I walked over and poked him on the nose. He looked up, chuckling.

"Ready for bed, Sam?"

"Yeah."

“ Good. You need sleep to grow tall.”

He went back to his crossword as I stood there, wondering how to say what was on my mind.

“ Hey Dad?”

He looked up. “Yes?”

“Why were you waiting all those nights? You wasted a lot of time.”

His eyes crinkled. He put his crossword on the table and looked me full in the face.

“ You know something Sam? I’m not sure I fully understood why I sat there either. But I do know something. No matter how much trouble Damien got in. No matter how much trauma he went through. No matter how far down the wrong road he went, I hoped he would come back. Sometimes it wasn’t clear if he was even coming back at all. But, since there was a chance he could, I waited. I wanted to be ready and prepared for when he returned. I wanted to be there, with open arms, welcoming my son back. Even if he completely hated me, I was there, ready for him to come home. I don’t think I wasted any time. Any one of those days, Damien could have come back. And so, I waited.”

He kissed me on the forehead. I hopped up the stairs and crept into my bed. This night seemed so much like the last few nights. But something was different. I didn’t cry this time. I didn’t feel so alone. I laughed to myself. I was finally able to do something I hadn’t done in months. I closed

my eyes and waited for it. It had finally come. A peaceful sleep. A sleep, without crying or missing Mom. Damien was home.