

Your Mother Died

Nox Nackman '27

I hate doctors, they're never as qualified as they say they are.

Unfortunately, today my daughter, Claire, forced me to come to a therapy session, to “help me with my dementia.”

“You good, Dad?” Claire asked as we sat in the waiting room.

“I'm fine!” I grumbled.

She sighed. There was a long silence between us.

“Daniel wants us to go to his house this weekend. This could be your chance to talk to him again!”

She smiled, trying to grab my hand.

I quickly swatted her hand away. I didn't want to meet her new fiancé. He wasn't good enough for her, but I didn't get a say in it.

“Look, Dad, you can't just ignore him forever. He's trying to talk to you. You have to make an effort back.”

“Well, I'm going to end up dead in the next few years, so what's the point?!” I said, now stepping into the doctor's office.

As Claire closed the door behind me, I looked around the room, feeling the weight of its emptiness.

“Come sit,” the doctor said, leading me patiently to my seat.

The lights blinded my eyes a bit, and I could hear my doctor talking in front of me. The out-of-place window next to our chairs was unpleasant, like it belonged in a factory or prison.

“Let's start from the beginning,” the doctor said calmly.

“My Doctor, Dr. D- something. Her name is... Dr. Davis?” I began. I looked down at my hands in front of me. Suddenly, I don't remember what was happening.

“What?” I heard myself say. My tone was angered.

The doctor gave me that same blank stare and looked down at the paper. I saw her writing some notes and let out a long sigh. I thought, I need to ask Claire for a new therapist

“Your mother?” the doctor said to me. “What was she like to you as a child?”

Oh boy, here we go, the big question that these liberal doctors think will cure everything.

“My mother was like a mother to me. She was, well... You know, she was like, uh... I can’t, well no, I just...” I felt frustrated again and clenched my fists. How could I have forgotten about my mother? I wondered.

“Her name was Marie Higgins, correct?”

“Well, I called her Mama.” I chuckled; my doctor’s face went blank. She didn’t seem to think that was funny. I wondered, does she have thoughts behind her eyes or not?

“I was informed by your daughter, Claire, that she died from cancer when you were a little boy. Can you describe the emotions you felt during this time?”

I couldn’t speak and felt a sharp stab in my chest. I couldn’t breathe. My mother died?

The doctor tried to get my attention and finally said, “Mr. Higgins, I believe we’re done for today.”

She stood and opened the door. Claire was there. “Ms. Higgins, do you mind if we talk for a moment?”

I knew that wasn’t good. Claire had that strained look she often has around me these days. She nodded at the doctor.

“Mr. Higgins, please remain seated, we’ll be back soon,” the doctor said and then the door shut.

“Little monkey, little monkey? Are you gonna help?” I recognized my older sister, Anita.

Often when Mama wasn't home, she'd be the one to watch over me. I smiled, as she tickled me and then kissed me on the forehead. Anita liked to say, I was her little monkey.

I felt something in my hands. They were cut up. I was holding a little elephant. I remembered it was for Mama. I had made it from some soft scraps of tin. The hours I'd spent curling the pieces to make its body came back to me. Eventually, those hours turned into dinner time.

I was always excited when Anita was cooking. Today she wanted me to help. I could barely reach the counter. I slid a chair over and put the elephant on it, pulling myself up to see what she was doing.

I found it entertaining to be in the kitchen full of furniture we'd collected on the roadside, mismatched stuff that other people didn't want. The house was worn and crumbly, an old woodcutter's cabin. But I didn't mind, it was home.

“What's his name?” Anita said, pointing to the elephant.

“Oliver! Oliver the Elephant!” I giggled at my own joke. “It's for Mama.”

A mournful expression flashed across her face. Then she said, “Well, hello, Oliver!” Smiling again, picking it up and holding it in her palm.

“Mama would have loved this,” she said, handing it back to me. I didn't know what she meant, but Anita had her hands full.

“Can you and Oliver fetch me the salt?” she asked.

I nodded. When I went to the cupboard, I tripped and sent Oliver flying.

The bow of salt shattered on the floor. Anita rushed to clean up the mess I made.

“I ruined it,” I cried.

Anita looked at me, her expression still slightly scattered. “Hey little monkey, it’s okay.” She touched my crossed arms.

I ran to my bed and held my blanket close, though I didn’t know why I was upset. Mama would never be mad at such a little thing anyway. I had only wanted her to see my gift and know I made it for her.

Time must have passed because the house turned silent and dark. I realized that I didn’t have Oliver. I rushed back to the kitchen in search of him. I threw open cabinet doors. My palms were sweaty as I searched.

I ran to Mama’s room. On her bedside table, in the dim glow of a lamp, there was Oliver. I was relieved, but found it strange that Anita lay on a cot nearby. I felt confused and scared. I crawled in next to her. Sadness filled me and then released.

She said, “I know it still hurts. I miss her too.”

And then I remembered.

“Mr. Higgins? Mr. Higgins, are you alright?” Dr. Davis said, her face coming into focus. Her thin fingers felt my neck and cheeks. We were on the floor. Claire was crying over me.

“Yes, yes, I’m alright,” I said, though I wasn’t sure if it was true.

“Here let me help,” the doctor said.

“I can do it!” I said, annoyed and as I pushed her hands away. I tried to stand up on my own.

Claire put her arms around me to help me up. “We called an ambulance, Dad.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Why?” I asked.

“You were out a long time,” she said, her voice cracking.

I wondered why she bothered with me. She deserved a better father. Maybe if I tried harder and did things better, I could be different. Maybe I should give Daniel a chance.

I put my arms around her and squeezed. Her tears wet my shirt like they did when she was a small girl.

“I’m still here, Claire. I’m here.”