

JULIA'S ROOM

Mel didn't need to turn the lights on. Her feet knew their way to her mom's room in the dark. She slipped inside and inhaled Julia's fragrance, a faded combination of shampoo, make-up, and cologne. It was the reason Mel never opened this door. She didn't want the room to air out. She was saving it for just such a moment. When she needed clarity. When she needed answers.

Not that her mom ever told her what to do. She just listened and asked questions, trusting that Mel would figure things out if she got them out of her head. It's how Julia was with her second graders, too. She looked them in the eye, really listened to them, and they loved her for it. The closest Julia ever came to feeling glum was the last day of school every year.

Mel turned on the light and sat on the bed, imagining her mom standing by the closet, getting ready for work. Mel would often bring her coffee while she got ready, and they would chat.

She always looked so put together. She didn't dress in vintage togs like Mel, but her wardrobe was whimsical, to amuse the kids and make them think. She liked to say, "My little charges have to stare at me all day long. I might as well give them something interesting to look at." Lots of bright colors, stripes, and pithy sayings to amuse the children.

What would Julia say to her now? To go for it? To live for today? To follow her heart and love a man who might not be capable of fidelity? As much as she loved Henry, he probably wasn't going to be able to change, and why should he? He would always be attractive to women, forever tempted. Even if there was nothing going on with Trisha, there would be others.

She was such a hypocrite. Who was she to be making demands for a future she wasn't even going to be around for? After her doctor appointment, she would figure out what to do, when she found out how long she had. If it was only a couple of months, she would have to end

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it with Henry right away, so he could move on. If she had a year, well, that was another matter. Was it fair for her to keep the relationship going, knowing there was no such thing as 'forever' for them?

But to end the relationship felt wrong. Why did she have to be the one to decide?

What a silly, stupid fool. She deserved everything that was going to happen.

Mel took in the room, surrounded by her mother's things. Photographs and paintings on the wall. Her vanity mirror decorated with thank-you and get-well notes from her students. Familiar trinkets and keepsakes everywhere. A closet full of clothes. Most of it should be given away. Nice things, plenty of use left in them. Although she would never again be able to shop in a thrift store in the same way. What if she saw something she recognized?

Next to the vanity was a framed poem, Julia's favorite. It was Mel's favorite, too, as soon as she was old enough to understand it. It was all about living life fearlessly. That's just how Julia was.

Mel was a weird kid. Undersized and mouthy. She was never going to fit in, but the poem encouraged her to resist peer pressure and living up to other people's expectations. And the fact that the poet, Mark Ford, died when he was eighteen years old affected Mel deeply. It took some of the sting out of her own situation. Knowing your warranty is going to run out at some point can be a good thing if you make the most of it. Probably this young poet, a boy really, assumed he would grow up, get wisdom, get old, but he wasn't waiting around to find out. He used his precious time to write brilliantly. And he gave death a poke in the eye while he was at it.

Her favorite line was:

I clench life in my fists and scorn the balm

That caution, by deception, seems to share.

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As a kid, she thought the most important word in the line was 'life,' but later, when she learned about iambic pentameter, she realized the poet didn't emphasize that word at all. He wrote 'life' on the upbeat; the words he chose to emphasize were 'clench' and 'fists.' It reads like a drumbeat. A call to action. *I clench life in my fists.* He was saying that life is not a passive thing, it's something we should fight for.

It had been a good while since she really thought about the poem. When was the last time she clenched life in her fists? Not lately.

She sat down at the vanity. The urn containing Julia's ashes was there. Mel had intended to put it into the garden, where Julia had spent so many happy hours, rather than some cold, marble mausoleum, but she couldn't face that at first.

Today. She would do it today, in the glorious sunshine. Julia would like that.

Julia's wig sat on a stand. It really was a beautiful thing. She'd bought it when she was diagnosed the second time. She found out about a place that made wigs from human hair. She'd provided them with photographs, so they even got the color right; medium brown, but with a tinge of red. Unlike Mel's hair, which was darker and almost completely straight, Julia's was thick and wavy. A perfect representation of who she was.

She'd bought the wig when she knew she was going to lose her hair again. She wore it all the time, even if she was just puttering in the yard. Even when it was hot out, or it irritated her scalp. It wasn't out of vanity. For Julia, losing her hair was the worst thing about having cancer. Worse than the chemo, the radiation, feeling sick all the time. But the wig gave her courage. A reminder of what she was fighting for. Julia told Mel she was going to keep wearing it after the treatment, after she was cured. Then on Halloween, she could come to school with wild, spiky hair, and show up the next day looking perfectly normal.

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When she went into the coma, a nurse tried to take it off, but Mel wouldn't let her. What if her mom woke up, and found out they'd taken it away? But at the mortuary, they asked if it should be cremated with her mom's remains. For some reason, Mel said no. It seemed to have a life of its own, imbued with Julia's personality. So now what? Should Mel keep it in a box? That would be creepy. Should she bury it with Julia's ashes? No. She should give it away to someone who needs it. Someone fighting cancer who knew how important it was to feel like herself again.

Mel lifted the wig from its stand and put it on her head. Did she look like her mom? Maybe a bit. But where was Julia's fearlessness? She remembered how much her mom loved to ride those rides at Seattle Center. As a kid, Mel only went on them with her to make her happy, even though as soon as the ride started, Mel wanted it to stop.

It might not have been the life her mom chose; the man she loved walking out on her, raising a child on her own, fighting cancer not once, but twice, but Julia was undaunted. She stepped up, took responsibility, and danced through it all.

No whining, no complaining. No tying herself up in knots.

No indecision.

Mel returned the wig to its stand. She gave herself a long, uncompromising look. Biting her lip, she took her mom's scissors out of the drawer and proceeded to cut off her hair.