

Legacy

Our story is a tragic one. There are no happy endings here. On top of death, suffering, and disease, there's the perpetual heartache -- the worst of them all, of course. I say this upfront so that no one gets too emotionally invested. Now one should shed a tear. Not for the baby. Not for any of us.

Not one of us is worth it, after all.

I imagine the frenetic rolling, tumbling, spinning of my grandmother in her grave hearing me tell a story like this. How her little fists -- little but *strong* fists -- must be pounding on that sorry excuse of a coffin we buried her in. Her frustration whispers to me in the wind -- without curses, though. As disappointed as we made her, she never did curse about it. And starting a story off with the ending would surely disappoint her. This is the woman, after all, who would reprimand me if she caught me daring to peek at the final pages of a new book I'd brought home from the library, scolding me for disrespecting the craft. Like there was some magic to stories, to how they are told. Like the ending wouldn't be the same. Like I had ruined it. *Well, Grandma, I'd say to her now as her voice haunts me, floating as an icy breeze all around me, there's no magic in our family's story regardless of the order it's told.*

I'm sure, too, she'd remind me of our ancestry; of the kitchens full of Irish women spinning tales with as much practice as they had chopping vegetables and soothing hip-loads of babies. As though it were instinct. As though the flowery words and penchant for hyperbole were gifted, packaged in a box with perfumed tissue paper, wrapped in seamless primrose paper, and presented anew to each generation, each girl child born. And here I was, disgracing that beautiful lineage. She might have even brought out the photo albums, too, to make me look in the eyes that stare fixedly back, to see the faces of these

women that look like me, standing sturdy on the banks of the water; women in black and white, fading a bit now, women who fished and hauled, strong and unbending, and telling stories as they did.

Stories are legacy.

And I think about legacy often; what mark we will make for others to see; the traces of us left in our wake. Will we leave scars or skyscrapers? Will our stories be proclaimed in front of crowds or whispered as warning? I don't expect my family to have impact; truly, I can only hope we finish even par, maybe not leaving greatness behind, but causing no harm, either.

Stories are legacy and the craft is meant to be in my blood.

But did you ever imagine, Grandma, what happens when that package is given to the wrong person?

What if the gift is good and real but the storyteller, herself, is broken?

Anyway, I don't think I've ever received a present like that in my life.

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On the subject of presents, one of my earliest memories is of Meghan. I must have been three years old because we were celebrating her birthday and she was turning six. I remember this specifically because of the sign, handmade by Mom who had scripted out the curly letters herself., shooing away my suggestion that we buy one instead. Her letters were meant to look fancy but were just downright sloppy instead. Some letters bigger than the others; the words lopsided; the marker steadily running

out of ink, so the last letters were not only squeezed tight together because she was about to run off the page, but noticeably faded. Happy 6th Birthday. Jesus, that sign. That sign is Mom in a nutshell, isn't it? Trying so hard, intentions so good, but, oh, so damn far from how it's supposed to be. How it could be. Or should be. Forever wrong, broken, imperfect. Forever not-even-close to good enough.

Anyway, it's Meghan's birthday and we're all there, outside in the front where someone has set up a card table and chairs across the balding, browning grass. All of us are there. Mom and Dad. Grandma's there. Meghan and I. And if I look deep enough into that memory, I can find the subtle stretch of Mom's shirt across her belly. Leah was already growing, the size of a bean by that time in her. Just a bean size and already causing so much ache. "It wasn't morning sickness with Leah," Mom was always fond of saying, "It was 9 months of 24/7 all-hours-of-the-day sickness with her!" We'd all silently finish what Mom never acknowledged aloud after that, but what we all knew to be true: That that was only the start of Leah making her presence known, of the burn she'd bring to all of our hearts long after.

In this memory, Meghan is wearing a tiara but that hardly seems right. In fact, I know damn well that never happened. More likely it was some cardboard cut-out crown from the fast food joint in town recycled amongst us, passed from head to head to head, for these celebratory occasions. But somehow, today, in the memory, the cardboard has morphed into a tiara -- one that actually glitters and sits sturdy on the top of her red curls -- and I'm of the mind to let it stay that way; to give that to Meghan now. She's wearing her tiara and she's in a dress that Grandma has sewn for her. One of the straps of the dress keeps sliding off her shoulder but that doesn't stop Meghan from twirling around and around and around in it. She likes the way it splays out in front of her, ballooning wide. Her eyes follow a little rabbit sewn into the pattern of the fabric who sits near the bottom hem and as she twirls, she imagines the rabbit running. She twirls faster and faster, as fast as she can, as though she is hoping to rocket the

rabbit right off of the fabric. To set him free. No one tells her the dress is a tablecloth. A tablecloth from one of the houses Grandma cleans that was to be thrown away because of a stain.

Meghan spins so much that afternoon she makes herself sick. She lets her final twirl decelerate slowly before collapsing to the ground, landing in a spot that's more dirt than grass. She holds her head with one hand and her stomach with the other and she groans. She announces to everyone that she's quite certain she is about to throw up. And then mom is there suddenly. And I mean suddenly. Like with a few clicks of the magic shoes and *poof!* she appeared. And like a fairy godmother, she has the magic words. "Oh no! Don't throw up! You haven't even opened your present yet!" Magic. The nausea is gone and Meghan is enchanted. Mom was still able to fix things then.

Dad is holding a box -- a regular, old, brown box with a red bow stuck to the top of it. The red bow shines in a such a way that it looks afire. I expect it to be hot and I reach out my hand to feel its heat between my little fingers but my dad slaps my hand away. "This present is for your sister," he says, not knowing, not understanding that I wasn't trying to *take* the present, I just wanted to feel the burn of that bow. I just wanted to *feel*.

The box is in Meghan's hands now and she's tearing it open greedily, hungrily. She's got the top folds of the box open now and she's reaching down into that gaping mouth. I don't know what her hand fishes out. I don't know what her gift was that day, I can't finish that part of the memory, because my attention now is on that bow that she has cast aside, discarded haphazardly. It's laying upside down nearly a yard away from Meghan, away from the focus of attention, and no one sees it. No one cares. No one wants it. But it's still burning. I go, unnoticed, too, and collect it. I hold it in the palms of my cupped hands as though it was something fragile, as though it was something sacred, as though it could

scald me. And I feel its heat, I really do. I run it, still cupped like that in my hands, inside, into the trailer to the room I share with Meghan. Opening a dresser drawer -- my one, designated dresser drawer -- I lay the bow inside, gently, nestled up between my two t-shirts.

When Mom had her first episode nearly a year later, when she raged and yelled at people and at things that weren't there and as she tossed things about our home, making things shatter and slam, she knocked that dresser over, cracking it across the front, splintering it in such a way that the drawers could never close again. I suppose the red bow must have fallen out then and Dad, cleaning up the mess, putting things back as they were to the best of his ability, trying to make it all look like this never ever happened and would never ever happen again, threw it away.

But a bow is just a bow and memories are for shit anyway.

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Yeah, memories are for shit.

I read a story once about a man, some famous, accomplished man, had the whole world in front of him for the taking when he got a virus, a virus that nibbled away at the circuitry in his brain until it was all unconnected. Currents and pulses with nowhere to go; just dead ends. The man couldn't make new memories anymore. Nothing would stick in his mind. He couldn't recall anything past half a minute. Think about that. Count it out and imagine everything inside of that span gone. And you've got to start counting again.

All of his past, too, was impenetrable. All of it. Everything behind him was gone, as though a huge boulder were rolling slowly behind him, forcing him forward little by little but crushing the tracks he has left. His life, his awareness, was only what was NOW; a now of thirty second intervals.

And you know what I say to that? I say what a damn lucky fool.

His living was not muddied by the past, tainted with regrets that now pulled at him or pushed at him; no past could leave him gasping for air as he fought against the weight of it. He was unburdened of the generations of expectations that Nature required of him and that Nurture had cultivated. There's freedom without dragging that ever-growing load around with you. There's lightness. And, oh, possibilities, too.

So, I say to my dad now, memories are for shit. I say that as he looks at me blankly, struggling to remember my name, to place my face with any traces that still remain in the stores of his own mind. Don't fight it, I want to yell at him. Embrace it. Find the peace there. The peace that comes with not remembering that Leah is gone, long gone; that Meghan is off the wagon again, and now swimming in the harder stuff, the much harder stuff (I think trying to chemically fabricate her own memory loss, if you ask me); bask serenely in the oblivion that another bill arrived yesterday for mom's care, threatening to release her -- send her out wild and ranting and all hell-broke-loose on the public -- should we not pay IMMEDIATELY; or that all those aches and pains you feel, dad, and the reason your body is just so damn tired is from the cancer that's encroaching on you, laying claim to all of your insides. Let all of those memories go. Wade in the now where it is shallow and lukewarm.

The doctors tell us -- well, tell *me* because who else is there to listen? -- that they can't know for certain if Dad's dementia was somehow triggered by his cancer or if he's just that unlucky of a bastard to get both at once. As though competing with each other, which could bring the most devastation, the most ache and damage, both diseases made their appearance like damn wrecking balls. An onslaught. A one-two punch that has knocked him to the mat and the count has begun.

1 . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4 . . . 5 . . . 6 . . . 7 . . .

I'd say we're right around the 7 count now. The point in the count where hope is sizzling away, turning a deep, dark orange in color, barely a flicker in an ungraspable distance and you know the smoky gray then pitch black are coming soon, especially if you're a realist and understand miracles are just as for shit as memories. Dad's down and he's not getting up but he's still got to endure a little longer. It's a humiliating point in the count to be at. It's restless and groaning; it's sips of broth and shitting yourself; it's dignity packed up and gone. All while you are still aware. Scheduled doses of morphine offer the only solace, but that's fleeting and growing ever more so as the pain comes faster than the next round of medicine.

So as he lays there, as it's all he is able to do, his breathing a raspy, dry sound as though sandpaper is being dragged slowly up the length of his throat again and then again, I say a little prayer that he's not remembering any of it, not any of us. May he please, God, have that one gift of mercy. Because, dammit, I still have my memories intact and heavy, and I remember enough for the both of us.

I'm holding his hand now, the hand that used to feel so strong and large as it engulfed my own but now sits limp and light in my palm, and I am remembering . . .

I had been awoken early one morning about a year ago to the day by his shouts, big, guttural, bass bellows that echoed across the sky in some disturbed, tormented opera. I found my father outside the trailer, pacing the ground. The sight of him and the icy air that struck me in a harsh slap, together, caused me to gasp aloud. He paid no mind, not hearing or seeing me there. Catching my breath, orienting myself to this surrealism, I took in the sight of him from top to bottom. At the top, he was wearing my grandmother's old gardening hat, the kind with the big, wide brim that juts out long to shade a face, encircled at the crown with a pink and white polka dot ribbon that once had affixed neatly in a perfect little knot in the front but now hung loose, the edges of the ribbon fraying, drooping, dirty. He looked like he had two, long polka-dotted ears. He was not wearing a shirt. His tattoos -- including the ones with each of our names, his three girls -- were visible; the blue color dull and lifeless on Meghan's and mine; Leah's just a hint brighter. The skin of his torso was splotchy white and red, both, as it struggled to acclimate to the freezing temperatures and he looked so thin. I remember standing there and that being my very thought: "Jesus, he looks so thin. When did that happen?" His boxer shorts that hung loose around his middle were a pair Grandma had gifted to him about a year ago when she noticed he was running low on both basic necessities and the fortitude to do something about it. A parting gift, as it would be, to wrap up her own loose ends, to give the last ounces of care left in her aging body, as she was gone soon after, quickly, in her sleep one night. Her legacy of caring for us all symbolized by those final pair of underwear. Jeez, what fucking luck we have. But at the bottom of my father, past his spindly legs, and at his feet -- that's where my eyes fixated and began to feel with tears.

At the very bottom of him, covering just the tips of his feet were my old, childhood rain boots. A hand-me-down gift from the Salvation Army, they were my pride fifteen years ago when I strutted in them to my 5th grade class all year long, in every weather. Even though then the glossy green plastic already

revealed years of weathering, cut all over with lightning bolt-shaped tears and cracks. The yellow small ducks that paraded across the design would seemingly quack with each step as air seeped in and out of the broken sole. But I didn't see the cracks, didn't hear the embarrassing squeaks. I strutted in those damn boots. I felt *strong* in those damn boots – someone else's discard as they were.

By the following year, I had lamentingly outgrown them in size and, having worn them so often, I had acquired a nickname from my classmates that I was determined to shake in 6th grade. With a half-hearted, hesitating muster – a *kind-of-sort-of* resolve – I tucked them deep under my bed; unable to completely part with them, but putting them out of sight. And I grieved for them. As silly as that may sound. I grieved having grown apart from them, for moving on to where they could not come. And I felt trepidation for the future ahead, too; the future that offered no certainty, no consistency; a future that would bring to me what it was fated to deliver that I had no control over. Not even the assuredness of a pair of boots.

These boots that were then too small for my ten-year-old feet were now dwarfed by my father's as he stood outside that morning, too blanketed in his mania to shiver. He had inserted his feet so that they rested in the open mouth of the boots; half in, half out. The toes of the boots pointed upwards at the sky, his bare heels pressing into the mud, leaving circular indents as he clomped out each awkward, unbalanced step. He was jabbering and stomping, first in lines back and forth and then in circles. And then he stopped to howl into the open, gray air, a primal, ancient sort of noise. From the door of the trailer I watched. He was fierce in his madness and a gravity of time held us firm in that moment.

The tears that began to spill that day, I can't pinpoint their source. Perhaps it was the emotion upon seeing those boots, my old friends returned. Perhaps it was my father's movements -- like the dance of

a native -- beautiful but overwhelming; scary and otherworldly and somehow all-knowing, as he seemed to be channeling spirits? an energy? gods? beyond us both. Or perhaps it was the realization that I was alone. Utterly and officially. I knew it at that very moment, there on the step of the trailer even though it would be another week yet before the doctor offered her diagnoses: I was alone.

That day, as I wrapped an old coat across his bare shoulders and guided him back inside, my mind was racing. I knew the count had started but, on that day, I was determined to stop it; I was prepared to fight it, to pull him back up again, if only so that I wouldn't have to be alone. Even early on, I'd ask the doctors, surely there's something, SOMETHING to be done. Medicines? Surgeries? Medical trials? Surely something, Doc, to pull him back up again? to slow the clock? Surely, we will fight.

But now, as his hand rests in mine, as it twitches each time the pain stabs at him, as his eyes -- that he can't muster the energy to open -- wince and his face contorts, I find myself wishing the count to speed up and be done with already. I want to take his pain away; of course, not just the physical pain but all of it. The morphine sits on the rickety coffee table next to him, next to his untouched cup of tea, long since gone tepid. It's only an arm's length away from me and it beckons, offering itself up, the solution, the mercy, the answer. I'm going to ruin the story again and say this: I don't. I won't. Though the love and the intention were there, yelling, SCREAMING at me to act, I couldn't harness them together and allow them to lead me. I didn't act. Instead, I will sit with him, day after day for weeks more, as our pain fills the room like a densening fog until it is so thick between us, only by holding his hand do I know he's there. I will wait for the count to finish and hate myself for it, knowing I am scripting for him, from my own cowardice, a legacy that ends in shame.

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I don't think about Leah much, and not only because there's just no time to give her mind as I cope with all that she has left behind. It's not out of spite, I'm not being resentful. I just don't think of her much. Simple as that.

Except when I go to the playground. She seems to always be with me there.

The playground is attached to an elementary school. Its fixtures are all painted in bright colors, colors so vibrant, they pull your eyes away from the wear on the slides and swings. I come here, sit on a park bench opposite the playground, to see life, to see exuberance and energy. I seek warmth here. This is where I came after Mom's first arrest and then again after Dad's diagnosis. I sit on the bench and I wait for the bell, because at the sound of the bell, all of the school children come storming out in a roaring torrent. They are like bees that swarm and track and then scatter out wide in a beautiful, fiery choreography. And I sit, like Pavlov's dogs, salivating at the sound of that bell, readying for the food that will feed my spirit, offer me heat. I take in the life that is there.

And, yes, I remember, too. As I sit here, I remember walking to this school with my mom, my hand in hers in a grip that was the perfect balance of protective and loving, and we'd wait for the bell to sound and Leah would come rushing out of the doors, her smile wide and gaping, uncontrollably genuine, and then we'd walk home, now the three of us with hands linked, until she'd eventually break free and run ahead, taunting us to keep up. All that at a time when Mom's legacy wasn't double bolted in a small, square padded room and Leah's wasn't racing, completely uncatchable.

The bell rings solid and brassy. It's not a buzzer or something harsh on the ears, not something that sounds ominous or critical, but instead, it's a magnificent, strong sound. It's righteous. And I think it befits the children that it calls forward.

I sit on my bench and watch them play. I recharge if only for a little while, watching the clock so I'm not gone for too long of a time; too long to make anyone fear it was a permanent escape; that another one of us has up and run.

This is where I came, too, just hours after Meghan told me her news. She had staggered up the worn dirt path to the trailer and let herself in the door. I knew she was coming, I wasn't startled by her entrance, because her boyfriend's car announced their arrival with its sputters and clanking long before. He sat in the car, waiting. He didn't look up towards us once. The smoke from his cigarette poured out the thin crack of the window but through the cloud I could see the pocks on his face and the emptiness in his eyes.

Meghan was wobbly and through the gaps in her teeth -- there were two missing now, at last count -- I could smell all of the trouble she had been into. What's worse is she was all smiles, all excited, panting with enthusiasm, each breath punctuating her stench. She seemed damn giddy. And stoned. *Guess what, guess what, guess what, GUESS WHAT*, she had said in a feverish stream as she fidgeted in front of me, doing little hops up and down. Now, everything Meghan said these days was rubbish and my body prepared to deflect this latest shit she was about to throw. I tensed and stood tall, my own feet solid underneath me, by body in stark, stiff contrast to her movements. I'm certain I didn't respond, didn't acquiesce to her game in this scripted play of hers, taking my turn to say, "What?". She took no notice, so ramped up as she was. But as fidgety as she was, the news was slow to come. Meghan once had the

gift of a storyteller. Hers, in fact, was the shiniest gift of all. I used to be charmed by the way she could weave her words, crafting a story as though it was a tangible piece of artwork, one that I could knead between my fingers to feel each woven thread of character and detail and blanket myself in the colors and suspense she created for me. Her gift had diluted gradually, burned slowly in every drug-filled spoon, numbed with every needle. As she stood now, rambling enthusiastically, there was no art; just a smattering mess and I knew how lost she was. Then, finally: *We're pregnant! We're pregnant! We're gonna have a baby! Isn't that just the coolest thing ever?! Auntie Ciara! You'll be Auntie Ciara!*

That was the moment. Those words were my breaking point. Her fidgeting, her happiness, her fucking stupidity, all of it stirred a rage in me and I grabbed her by her wrists, squeezing them hard, forcing her still, insisting without words, that she look at me. I watched as her gap-tooth smile faded, the blackened holes in her mouth now covered by lips pursed tightly closed, a final curtain drawn. And she did, she looked at me, with anger and confusion, both. I answered her wordlessly, again, flipping her palms upward, exposing her forearms, forcing her to see where her pale white skin was streaked with bruises and lines.

I called her a fuck up. I told her to fuck off. *Some fucking parents you'll make.* There were other words in between, but those were the prevailing themes of them all. She made promises about getting clean. She begged for help for a little while, desperate and wide-eyed; she spouted with indignation more often, her wrath garbled and spitting. I didn't watch her as she left, a violent, thrashing current that *wooshed* out of my door but I imagined the dirt kicking up behind her as she stormed back to the car and struggled with its door handle.

I wouldn't see her again for the rest of her pregnancy. She didn't go far though. She was, like me, tethered to this town, so while we could avoid each other, the radius between us was never enough that we didn't feel the other present. And, of course, I'd catch the stories about her from our gossipy neighbors, those fat little hens that fed on the salacious. So I knew each time she was struck by her boyfriend, each time she was found semi-conscious, each time she failed to show up to work. I heard she came to say her goodbyes to our father and I'd like that to be true but I can't imagine that it was; I suspect the story was made up by some well-intentioned neighbor, exhausted, themselves, with my pitiful lot.

It was those old hens though that told me when Meghan was taken to the hospital, rushed in by ambulance after a public collapse in front of the main street convenience store, a spot where more sales happened outside of the business than inside. I wouldn't give those biddy neighbors of mine the satisfaction of a reaction at all, but in my head it was this, simply: *Oh shit*.

She was, after all, only 7 months along.

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I once visited a psychic. She had a pretty bland looking tent – no string of lights, no other-worldly sort of frills to coax you in – towards the back corner of a traveling carnival that was visiting for the summer – one of those carnivals that sets up seemingly overnight by the practiced, callused hands of workers with equally callused hearts and restless feet. Those poor fools thinking that if they just keep moving from one town to the next, the weight can't press on them; that they can outrun it; shake free of it. But they load up their destinies right along with all of the metal bars and bucket seats and canvas coverings and popcorn kernels that they caravan from place to place.

The psychic was surprisingly young. Even more surprising, she was beautiful. She seemed out of place amongst the other travelers. A group of teenage girls, giggling, whispering fiercely about the messages they had just received, were exiting the tent as I made my way towards her. She rolled her eyes at them as she, with a graceful swoop of her hand, gestured me towards a seat across from her.

“Some people can only be told what they want to hear. Anything else would be wasted or cruel,” she said, not exactly to me but to the air around her. I couldn’t respond anyway, transfixed as I was by her eyes. I knew what a gift of the generations looked like, having seen it in the eyes of my grandmother’s photographs. Hers, now in front of me, radiated her own legacy, as true and real as if it were sealed on a certificate with a golden embossed stamp. I knew – from those eyes – I would believe anything she told me.

Did you know that if you turn a frog on its back and stroke its belly, you can practically hypnotize it? It won’t move; it will just fall immobile, transfixed by the touch. When the psychic took my hand in hers, I was a frog. Her nails were not that long so when she ran her finger across the lines of my palms, I felt both her nail and the pad of her finger. The hard and the soft, alike. She didn’t speak for a long time; her only movements coming from her finger and her eyebrows which drew together in a pained, pitying face. After some time, she exhaled and spoke and dropped my hand to the table. “Jesus. So much hurt there,” she said, pointing at it. “You’ve got valleys of it there.”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. I wanted to feel her touch on my hand again, I craved it, and it was all I could think about. The remnant electric trace of her finger was quickly fading. But she spoke again. “I can’t fix that for you, you know. I can’t change that.” After a pause, she added, “Or what’s to come.” And with that my trance was broken and I sat upright. “What is to come?” my voice so pleading I immediately wanted to pull the words back.

“You’ll take charge of the story, that’s what. Isn’t that your legacy, after all?” She shooed me with her hand towards the opening of her tent. I stood and dug in my pocket to pay her and her hand raised to stop me.

“Perhaps I should have lied,” she said and shooed one more time.

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I go. Of course I go to the hospital following the news. But it’s a few days later and Meghan has already been discharged from the hospital but the baby is still there. I go for the baby.

The nurses lift their eyes to me as I walk in. They read as much animosity as pity in those eyes -- as though I am complicit in this horror. One nurse, with no effort to conceal the sigh she emits in drudgery, in obligation, finally stands and agrees to lead me to the baby; my niece, a little girl.

Through a clear casing, I see tape and wires, tubes and suction, breathing made possible by an outlet in the wall. Amongst all of that, buried amidst all that machinery, are bits of bright rosy skin, peeking out soft and fragile in stark contrast. The nurse is talking, the tone she has taken purposely to convey that she is an authority and that she is better than me. I hear her words every so often. I catch ‘withdrawal’ and ‘detox’; I hear ‘seizures’, ‘brain damage’, and ‘critical’. But I’m not listening because I see two little feet. I see the feet and suddenly my mind is thinking this thought: *Those feet will never, never fit into plastic green boots.* And I start to cry.

In humanity or in embarrassment, the nurse offers me time alone. But as she walks away, she says something about ‘suffering’. I don’t catch it all, I don’t know in what context she had spoken them, and she’s gone before I process the word, but then the word is there, stuck, and it is repeating in my head.

Suffering. I think of my dad, of course. All of his pain, his private humiliation. I remember my cowardice; how I deserted him even more so than Leah ever did. And I think about legacy, too. Mine. And this baby's. Intertwined in our histories, connected in bloodline, there are gifts that must be passed on.

Nature and Nurture are not meant to battle but entwine in a dance, eternal partners.

And I know: This is a story I need to script. Messy though it may.

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I walked out of the hospital, its long and sterile corridor through the metal doors that stood strong and defiant as if to hold things in well. Or keep things out. I didn't hear the alarms that had begun to sound behind me, the urgent shouts or shuffling feet. I did hear bells in the distance, though. Those bells that bring me warmth. And my eyes were dry.