

Sailboat

I saw my friend Eman before we left. I was walking home from school and passed by the mosque he and his family went to. He was outside, planting saplings in the green lawn. He turned around and stood up; a smile beamed across his face and he walked forward to meet me.

“*Salam,*” he said—*peace*, the only word I knew in Arabic, and something I’d had trouble finding lately. I talked to him for a bit, but couldn’t get my mind off the saplings. I tried to think of a way to ask him, without sounding harsh. Eman had a way of reading faces, and he must have read mine.

“It seems pointless, doesn’t it?” he said. He turned and looked at the saplings, “When doomsday comes, if someone has a palm shoot in his hand, he should plant it,” he said to me and smiled, “Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, said that.”

I looked at those saplings and I wanted Eman’s words to comfort me, I wanted to feel the same way he did, but I couldn’t. I was afraid to ask. We said our last goodbyes and I walked home, envying him, and hating myself for doing so. What was the point of planting trees if their roots would never even break the dirt?

We sat in the airport, waiting for the plane to arrive. I was playing a video game, trying to ignore the morning news blaring from the television above us. Mom was reading a book, probably a comedy—something to escape with. Dad was reading *The New York Times* and on the front cover were the words “THE END” in large bold letters; it was something you would expect to see on a cheap street-tabloid.

Except that it was true.

Ironically, the only time that all of humanity agreed on something was that we were about to become extinct. The optimists said it would happen in a few weeks, the pessimists said a few days, and the realists said any time. Every day we were bombarded with pictures of riots, fires, explosions, and newscasters who had long since given up all pretensions of faked, forced smiles.

I was like Mom: I just wanted to bury my face in something to forget about it all. But Dad— he just accepted it. He would always wake up in the morning, have his cup of tea, read the paper, shave the stubble off his face, and then go to work. “There’s no point worrying about things you can’t control,” he would say to me. It was too late for me to believe that. Nothing had a purpose anymore. When I learned the world was going to end, I stopped doing anything. I just merely *existed*, and soon even that wouldn’t be worth anything.

The plane arrived. The announcer’s stale voice called over the intercom.

“Last flight departing for Ontario.”

Eighteen of us silently stood around Grandpa’s casket.

Three weeks ago, Grandpa had passed away in his sleep; a simple, quiet death. Our family scrambled to get arrangements made for everyone to fly to Ontario for the funeral. Finding a funeral home that hadn’t boarded up its doors was a challenge too. But here we were, our entire family together for the first time in ten years—for the last time.

“And so the soul of Gregory Laurie is put to rest,” the preacher said, closing the casket.

I heard my older cousin Ingrid scoff beside me loud enough so people around her could hear her. “Not like anyone’s gonna give *us* a ceremony.”

Although I wouldn't admit it openly, part of me agreed with Ingrid. Why were we even having a funeral? I saw on the news that people were just leaving bodies where they fell, or burying them in empty fields without so much as a headstone. Practical, I guess, but humanity was built on ceremony.

I lined up with my family and shook the hands of the guests and friends who bothered to come out, everyone trying to feign sincerity. "Sorry for your loss," each of them said, and then left as soon as I said thanks. I couldn't blame them for being brief; they had living to do.

I stood beside Dad, who somehow managed to keep a conversation going with anyone, no matter how long it had been since he had seen them--and if he hadn't ever met them, he made them feel as if he had.

"Pretty soon we'll all be joinin' him, eh? Guess he just got a head start." an older man with saggy jowls and droopy eyes, like a bulldog, said to Dad as he shook his hand.

"Well, hey, no point in worrying about how much time you got left, just what you spend it on," Dad replied. The bulldog-man seemed irritated by his response, so he grumbled his condolences to me and shuffled away. That was Dad; he could take a remark about death and give a reply about life.

Occasionally, when someone finished talking to him, they would come to me and remark how we looked exactly alike. I had always been shy, and I admired Dad for his ability to keep any conversation going with anyone. I was fifteen now, and just accepted that I inherited my social skills from Mom, who was about as talkative as wood.

When the last of the guests left the funeral home we all gathered at Grandpa's house. It was outside of town, and was a large two-storey brick house with yellow panelling along the base. The front door faced an old wheat field, a harvest that would never come. The entire family agreed we would all spend one more night here; one last night together.

As I walked in the door the homey, dusty smell brought on a wave of nostalgia, a bombardment of warm memories that nearly overwhelmed me. Grandma's cooking. Sleep-overs with my cousins. Blue Jays singing in the tree outside. The tractor in the field. I choked it all down, telling myself *just mere memories*.

The adults mostly condensed in the kitchen, some talking idly with each other, some preparing dinner. I tried to make conversation with my cousins, all who were older than me, but despite having not seen each other for ten years we had surprisingly little to say. We all ended up going off and doing our own thing.

Except for Ingrid. She had always followed me around, and now was no different. It baffled me how we got along. She lived in Ontario, a short ways away from Grandpa's place, and we only saw each other once every few years; neither of us had changed much. She was a tense ball of raging high-school angst, and I, half-way through middle school, couldn't be bothered to be angry at anyone except myself.

"I don't see the point in all this," she said as we shuffled through our parents' old toys, comics, books, and records. "Everyone's just sitting around, doing nothing. It's so damn boring here."

"Why don't you grab that board game we used to play?"

"*Risk*? God, I haven't played that in years," she said—and not in a reminiscent way, "it takes too damn long. I got better things to do with my time."

"Like what?" I asked.

"The only sensible thing to do: get plastered and stoned and just keep drinking until I pass out, make out, or trip out. Whatever the hell comes first."

Such was Ingrid.

I left her to rummage through Aunt Elisa's old things, and I wandered about Dad's old room in a half-daze. It was a lot like my room back home: posters of favourite movies; a small, cheap ship-in-a-bottle on the dresser; an old bookshelf with more toys than books.

I opened the old door of my Dad's closet, and sitting on the top shelf, leaning against the wall, was a small wooden sailboat, painted rose-red along the hull with a single blue stripe around it. I stood on my toes and gingerly lifted it down from the shelf.

"It's broken," Ingrid said blatantly.

She was right; the mast had snapped, the rudder was splintered and crooked, and the bowsprit was completely missing. Other than that, the ship was fine.

Aunt Elisa's voice called us down for supper. Ingrid sighed heavily.

"Look, I'm going drinking tonight. I know some friends who are coming to pick me up. You should come with us, it'll be fun—much better than spending the night in *this* place."

Music, lights, dancing, drinking—a storm of sensations that, for a moment, all seemed appealing. But before we knew that the world was going to end, I never had any desire to go out and get drunk and make an ass out of myself like Ingrid did. I wasn't about to start now.

"Nah, I'll pass. It's not my thing."

Ingrid rolled her eyes.

"If you say so," she said condescendingly.

I carried the sailboat downstairs into the kitchen. I found Dad and handed it to him. His eyes widened as he held it; it must have been a long time since he had seen it.

“Dad—Grandpa— made this for me for my birthday,” Dad said, “Me and him used to sail this thing down the creek all the time. See this?” he pointed to the eyescrew on the deck, “We tied a string to that so it wouldn’t get away. I don’t think it’ll do much sailing anymore, though.” I wanted to say something, but I didn’t know what. Dad looked over the broken mast, the broken rudder, the broken bowsprit, and for a moment his face seemed to grow a little darker.

“I’ll fix it up tomorrow,” I said. Dad looked at me, surprised. “Bright and early,” I added. Suddenly I remembered that I had absolutely no skill in carpentry whatsoever. “Could you help me out?”

Dad smiled. “Sure thing.”

Aunt Elisa called everyone to dinner again. Most of us sat around the old wooden table Grandpa made, and the rest either sat on the counter or stood to eat. We ate, talked, and laughed, trying to keep our minds from wandering. And with each fresh joke, humorous anecdote, or snappy remark, the apocalypse faded farther and farther into the recesses of our minds until all that mattered in the world was us, our family, here and now. We laughed until we cried, and for the first time in a long time, my tears didn’t make me sad.

We all helped clean up as Aunt Elanor heated up a few pies she brought; we all had a piece and surprisingly there were leftovers, which she decided to save for later.

Everyone moved into the living room, lighting a fire in the old hearth. I sat by the kitchen window in Grandma’s old rocking chair, hoping for a few quiet moments by myself. As I gently rocked back and forward, I looked out the window at the stars and the moon and I found myself looking forward to tomorrow. I thought about me and Dad and the sailboat and why I suddenly wanted to fix it. I hoped that the world would last until then, at least until then.

Maybe it’s not too late, I thought.

“Last chance,” Ingrid said to me, breaking my private moment, “You’re gonna miss out on a sweet-ass underground rave. It’s gonna be all black-lighted so everyone’ll glow.”

Again, the temptation crossed my mind; again, I let it pass.

“Nah,” I declined, “why don’t you stay here? This’ll be the last time we’ll all be together.”

I could sense her hesitation. She looked over at our family, sitting in the living room. Uncle Randy was once again telling the story about how he and my Dad baked a cow-pie and convinced Aunt Judy to eat it – “Enough sugar can make shit taste sweet,” Uncle Randy said –but everyone listened and laughed as though it were new.

“I’ve spent my entire life with them,” Ingrid said ruefully, “I want something different. If we’re only gonna be here for a while longer, I may as well experience everything I can before it’s over. You know,” she paused, then added, “before it doesn’t matter anymore.”

I wondered why I couldn’t bring myself to think the same way. Music, lights, dancing, drinking—and who knows what else. These were things I had never experienced, and never would unless I went with her right now. It was a world I secretly wanted to enter, but was afraid to live in. Ingrid’s words echoed through my mind: *Last chance*.

“Fine, I’ll come with you,” I *almost* said, but it halted in my throat; I couldn’t bring myself to say it. “I’m staying here,” I finally said. She stared at me for a long time, almost pleading for me to go. I remained silent.

“Suit yourself,” she said coldly. She opened the door and then disappeared into the night.

That night I was kept awake by the symphony of snores produced by my uncles (and Aunt Judy). Dad planned ahead and brought a few air-mattresses. Whoever didn’t get an air-mattress found a cot, couch, or lounge chair to sleep in. While Ingrid was, no doubt, indulging in God-knows-what at her black-lighted rave where everyone would glow, I was laying on Grandpa’s ancient loveseat, looking at the shadowy silhouettes of my family who were sleeping, and for the first time in many months understanding the word “peace”—*salam*. I don’t know how long I stayed awake. I never thought I would love the smell of dust, the sound of snoring, the dark outlines of sleeping bodies. Eventually, I

succumbed to my tiredness. When I woke up again, I saw the sky was dark purple with orange on the horizon. I smiled at the simple fact that everyone was here around me, and that this was another day. For a while I just stared out the window, watching the colour slowly return to the sky.

Just as the sun started peeking above the horizon there was a knock on the door. I rushed to it, not wanting anyone to be disturbed. I opened the door and there stood Ingrid, overshadowed by a police officer. Her black hair was messy, as though it had been rained on, her eyes were glassy, there was a cut on her lower lip, and one of her eyes was blackened.

“The rave became a riot,” the officer said, “she was trying to get away but got caught up in the mob. We pulled her out. Make sure she rests, gets plenty of fluids. You may want to take her to a clinic later—God knows what she got into last night.”

I thanked the officer and he left. Ingrid was silent. I led her to the loveseat and had her lay down on it, though I could tell she had no intention of falling asleep. I knelt on the floor and looked at Ingrid; she was looking past me.

“What happened?” I whispered. Ingrid’s eyes shifted over slightly so they were looking at me. I could see her take a few deep breaths and hold them, and her mouth opened slightly, but she refused to say anything. Whatever happened, it was beyond a black eye and a cut lip. “Aunt Judy saved you some pie.”

That didn’t seem to bring any relief to her, and still she said nothing. She turned around, facing the cushions of the loveseat, practically burying her face in it.

I stood up, grabbed the old red sailboat, and woke up Dad.

“Can we go fix the sailboat?” I asked and he blinked widely several times to wake himself up.

“Yeah, sure thing,” he said, sitting up slowly from the air mattress on the kitchen floor so as not to wake up Mom.

We quietly put on our boots and jacket and walked outside to Grandpa's old workshop.

From the dying leaves to the frost-kissed grass illuminated by the rising sun, the world outside was painted orange. Fall was always my favourite season; it was that last burst of colour before the winter.

We walked along the dirt path to Grandpa's workshop, our breath coming out like clouds and disappearing into the air. I opened the door and stepped into the small shack, which smelled of sawdust and metal and paint. I placed the wooden boat on the workbench.

"Ready?" I asked Dad.

"Ready," he said, patting me on the back.

We gathered a saw, a chisel, and a hammer, along with some scrap wood and a small can of red paint. What may have been a few hours passed by as together we fashioned a new bowsprit, mast, and rudder onto the boat. I made the new mast, Dad jiggled the sail, and we both meticulously set the rudder in place so that the boat could cut straight through the water. Dad explained each piece to me, and even though I already knew I listened anyway. I applied a generous amount of paint to the new pieces, and decided that the hull could do with a little touching up as well. My hands were apple-red, both from the paint and the cold. We finished the boat just as Mom came knocking on the door, asking if we were in there, and telling us that breakfast was ready.

"We'll be there in a bit," Dad said. He held the boat and we both examined it; he smiled and ruffled my hair.

"Very fine job you did," he said.

"You helped a little bit," I said playfully. Dad gave me a light shove as he laughed. We stood silent for a moment, staring at the wooden boat which, to us in that moment, may as well have been life-sized. "Do you want to sail it down the creek?" Dad asked.

“Sure, but what about breakfast?” I asked, having realized the smell of bacon and eggs wafting in from Grandpa’s house.

“It’ll still be there when we get back,” Dad said.

We stepped out and I saw Ingrid sitting on the porch in Grandma’s old swing-chair, arms crossed around her thick black hoodie, her breath visible in the crisp morning air.

“You should see if Ingrid wants to come,” Dad said, “She looks like she could use the company.”

No, I immediately thought. I didn’t want Ingrid there with us. This was for me and Dad only. But I bit my tongue and walked up to her, holding the boat in my hands.

“We’re going to sail this down the creek. Want to come?” I asked. She looked over at me, her face was cold and remorseful. We stared at each other for a moment. “Well?” I prodded. She went back to staring out at the old wheat field.

“I don’t want to. It’ll just sink,” she said.

“It’s made of wood. Wood doesn’t sink. Last chance, Ingrid,” I said, mimicking her tone from yesterday.

“I don’t want to play with your stupid fucking boat,” she snapped, not even lifting her eyes. I stood there silently, staring at Ingrid the same way she was staring at the wheat field.

“Fine, then. Suit yourself,” I said. I turned and left Ingrid, miserable little Ingrid, to herself on the old swinging chair that she refused to rock.

Dad and I walked through the empty field near Grandpa’s barn, and then along the dirt path that went through the woods. Dad pointed out a Blue Jay in the trees, building a nest out of twigs and moss.

Finally, we reached the small bank along the path where the creek came down and went around the corner, disappearing into the woods. We stood there for a moment, silent, as I held the boat in my hands.

“We forgot the string,” I said.

“I think this’ll be a one-way trip,” Dad said after a pause. We continued to stare at the running water, listening to it as it trickled. Neither of us wanted to say anything; we just watched the rising sunlight dance off the ripples of the water. “When I was a kid, your Grandpa and me would come down here to throw rocks. We’d talk about our day, how school was, stuff like that. None of your aunts or uncles wanted to come; it was just me and Grandpa. The creek used to be much bigger then,” Dad paused. I could tell he was hesitant. “Want to know something? It used to scare me. I was worried that if I fell in I would just keep floating along forever. I once asked Grandpa if the creek went on forever,” I looked over at Dad, and saw a calm smile on his face. “He said to me ‘No, it ends, just like everything else; but if it didn’t end, then there wouldn’t be a creek. There would just be a pond or a lake; nothing more, nothing less.’”

And there it was, the purpose behind everything. Eman and his trees; Grandpa’s funeral; Dad’s sailboat; our family gathering for one last time. I felt the hardness around my heart melt away and condense around my eyes.

“Should we launch?” I asked, my voice shaking a little. Dad smiled and nodded.

We placed the boat in a small pool by the bank, and watched it spin around lazily. Finally, it drifted out towards the slow creek, caught the current and bobbed and dipped with the water. I held Dad’s hand for the first time since I was young. We heard a sound above us, like a jet tearing through the sky.

Together, we watched the little red sailboat float down the creek, and disappear forever around the bend.