

‘What Doesn’t Leave You’

The rain patters down on the gravestones. So many lives in one place, so much grief and heartache. So many stories. I put down the flowers before my parents grave. A small combination of peonies and yarrow.

As I stood still there for few moments, I got lost in thoughts and memories with them.

My dad used to buy bunches of peonies for my mom. She had always been fond of tiny clusters of white flowers. It took her some years to find a particular name for them. I loved whenever she found one and put it in my hair. My mother, to me, was the gentlest being on earth.

The only thing I found strange about her was that she would become cold whenever I mentioned her parents. “Don’t speak of them,” she would say with a blank expression and change the topic then. I never found out anything on my grandparents, well, from my mother.

But one day, my aunt visited us. My mother hadn’t returned yet from her office. So, we sat for a chat and I brought the topic.

“Tell me about my grandparents. I want to know why they didn’t like my father”

She hesitated first and then started.

“There are things you don’t understand now. So, I’ll keep it simple, dear. Your grandparents are kind of rich. They wanted a matching alliance for your mother. But your mother loved your father. Despite well qualified he is only interested in organic farming and never went for any job. I don’t remember how exactly they met, but they were in love and got married against your grandparents’ disapproval.”

I loved the story. “Wow, so it was a love story... like that movie...” I paused trying to recall the name.

She laughed. “But there is also another reason for your grandparents’ disliking.”

“What?” I’m getting curious now.

“Your father inherited a genetic problem, Fluorosis, a kind of bone deformity. So, your grandparents are worried that even the children might be born with such deformity.”

“But, I’m fine. I don’t have any deformity”

She is conspicuously calm for a while. I wondered why. Just when I was about to say something, she spoke.

“Yes, darling. You’re absolutely beautiful like an angel”

Then, she ended the topic and started enquiring about my school.

A sense of movement and a cold breeze brought me back from my memory album. A pale figure took form beside me.

“Jiah, stop trying to give me a heart attack.” I say.

“I can’t just walk here. People might see me.” Jiah says innocently.

“Jiah, no one sees you. We have been through this. Even if I try showing you, everyone will think I’m a lunatic.” I say and I immediately regret it.

Jiah looked down at the gravestone quietly. I wish I could make her happier. She is a spirit and I have seen her and talked to her ever since I remember. But no one else can see or hear her. She can’t touch anything in this physical world.

That didn’t stop her love for different varieties of flowers. She would often wake me up in the middle of the night and take me to the garden behind my house to show me fresh blooms.

Of all the flora we explored during a series of nights, her excitement remains unfazed at the sight of carnations. She speaks of them with such fondness that her excitement seems more beautiful than the visual of the actual flower.

One such night, after navigating through the garden with Jiah, I headed back upstairs only to find my mother’s motionless body lying at the foot of my bed. I huddled in a corner of my room until my aunt came and took me. I was never told how or why my parents died, and I really didn’t want to find out. I found solace in Jiah’s presence and time flew by. I sailed through the years that followed.

The sad part was, it was hard for Jiah to get by. I had other people to talk to and things like the warmth of my blanket, the words from the books in my library, the chilliness of a cold winter breeze, the hugs and kisses every now and then.

Whenever I am excited or low or free, I resort to another best friend of mine – sketching. As I sit through sketching or painting, I see how similar this process is to the journey of life. In painting and in life, no matter how best you think you erased a mistake, it still remains as a layer underneath the correction. You can, at best hide it, not erase it completely.

I couldn't Jiah's sadness away but only distract her, well, momentarily. One day, I realised that part of her sadness is also because of me or for me.

"I can never forgive myself for what I did to you. A sorry might not be enough. But, I'm sincerely sorry dear", she once told me, wet eyes, voice shivering.

I'm perplexed. "Hey, what are you sorry for? I can't think of a moment you hurt me anytime!"

"Hadn't I dragged you out of your home that night to the garden, You'd have been at home, trying to do something to save your parents or at least be with them during their last moments."

"Wait, Hold on. How would you or I know that what would happen to them? I never looked at it as your fault, then or now. You're never to be blamed, hon!"

"But... If not for me..."

"Shhh..." I stopped her from saying any further with a tight embrace. I could console her, but not myself. The thought of their death and the memories with them choked me.

"It'd been fourteen years..." I tried to pull myself together.

Jiah patted on my back moving out from my hug with a smile, “And you’re still the same sweet darling”

I forced a smile. We both remained silent for a while, busy gazing at the stars. I finally broke the uneasy silence.

“The doctor said it’s a girl.”

With eyes lit, wide smile, Jiah gently laid her hands on my belly. “Really? That calls for a celebration. So happy for you”

“Let’s walk” She offers. “We’ve been sitting for long time. A walk is good for you.”

“Sure.” I stood up, with help.

Few steps into the walk, I sensed an intense pain shot through my belly. I stopped and wailed while my hands clutched my belly as if securing something back from slipping.

“To the hospital please...” I barely finish. I’m losing consciousness. My eyes are closing as someone puts me into a wheelchair. That’s all I think I remember.

I woke up to notice a nurse walking towards me, with the Just Born in her arms covered in a clean white robe. I could feel my eyes glowing, my lips widening and my heart pumping with unfathomable joy. I looked at the baby as if there were only two of us in the whole world.

A few moments later, I looked around for Jiah and him. “I wished for you to have a baby like me...” a sinister voice whispered in my ears as Jiah appeared, out of nowhere.

Still looking at the baby, I smiled and then shifted my eyes at her.

An intense uneasiness ran through my spine at what I saw. This is not the same Jiah I know of and have been associated with for years.

Her left corner of the lip is slightly cut open, her chin twisted upwards and the right eye bulged outward.

“This is the real me dear. Disgusting, right? Had you seen my true self in our first meeting, you would’ve run away from me, avoided me like my mother did then... well, like OUR mother did...!” She paused. Or, is it that my mind stopped listening any further or stopped functioning?

I tightly closed my eyes as some images started flashing rapidly and I could register a face among the speeding visuals. Yes, that was my sister! And yes, the same Jiah I’m seeing now. Sensing something sinister, I opened my eyes with heartbeat pounding heavily. While I still remained dumbstruck with shock, she continued.

“Yes, OUR MOTHER! We’re sisters, siblings, born to the same parents. And our ... No, No, I should say, your mother abandoned me for this ugly face and preferred you over me because you’re a trophy kid, a picture postcard baby, then and even now. “

My sight blurred with tears. Her voice shivering, with pain, with anger.

“Our father didn’t stop her. He always lived in his own world and left all decisions to mother. He was non-existent for me, for you. And I DIED... died of hunger. I never missed them for what they did to me. But I missed you. So, I returned to be with you. Overpowered by the fear of rejection again, I wore this cute face when with you. You still could’ve shut me out for I am a ghost, appearing, reappearing as I wanted. But you didn’t. You embraced me. We were like alter egos all these years”

All I could feel was a lump in my throat. Her presence or her deformed face is no more scary.

“I was thinking of leaving your life to be when you got married. But when I heard you’re pregnant, I returned. What if your baby is born like me, for some strange reason, genetic or whatever? What if you do the same thing your mother did? I stayed back to watch out for the kid. To make sure she earns her place in the world, to make sure she’s not punished for no mistake of hers. To do ANYTHING in all my power to ensure that.”

Her voice resolute, her looks intense. I could feel the Pain, the Rage.

“I’m truly sorry Jiah. Sorry for what you went through at that tender age. None should’ve been there in that place. I was too young to do anything then. And I’m and will be thankful to you all my life for making my childhood so memorable and beautiful. I ...”

“I know you’re not your mother. She, your daughter, might’ve been born fine now, physically. But, as she grows, she will have her vulnerabilities. She will make mistakes. Everyone does. No one is flawless and perfect the way we want them to be, like a product manufactured in a

factory. Don't try to prevail over her life, just because you gave her birth doesn't give you all rights over her. Learn to accept her as she is."

I nodded in agreement, obediently, like a student to a teacher. It wasn't forced. It was effortless.

"But you'll be there for her too, like you're for ..."

"I'm leaving. I trust you. You've got her, a new friend. But remember dear, I'll be watching, will be her shadow, in light and in dark too. Don't make me come again. Love her. Love You"

Her face changed back to what she has always been to me, to old Jiah. Same old beautiful Jiah. Perhaps, she wanted me to remember her the same way as I've always known her since the beginning. She looked into my eyes for one last time. And then, she vanished.

It is strange that animals don't need to be taught, to be disciplined, and to be reminded of their duties. They just follow their own unwritten laws. It is humans, for all the brains and reason they have, who need all these reinforcements time and again.

I took the baby from my lap, close to my heart and kissed long. I could still feel Jiah by the bedside watching intently, with all the love she is made up of.

Scars stay with us. Memories stay with us. So are some people. They are indelible - live inside us, with us.

~THE END~