

Stages

I sit in the corner as I always do. He won't acknowledge me.

The chair I'm in has been well loved — the undersides of the armrest a different texture than the malleable fuzzy material I rest my fingers against now. The seat cushion dips to cradle me like a playground swing. A stack of paperback books balances on the side table; paper shreds or pieces of napkin jut out from the pages. They aren't his books.

I pull my knees to my chest and let my white dress waterfall down the cushion's edge. I will wait.

His storm-colored hair stands at odd angles from his right hand's persistent and repeated runs through it. Its shape and shine a drastic change from the gelled and parted form it had three days ago when I first approached him.

He had looked at me then for only a moment, then turned as far from me as he could without circling to face me again. He'd paced the hospital room, stopping periodically at the window, like a bird fighting to reach the safety of open skies. I reached for his hand once, but he jerked it away as if he had been burned, then knelt to pray against the hospital bed.

To be fair, I hadn't seen him in a while. For me, it was a blink, but for him and his kind, I knew it to be a lifetime.

He was just a boy the first time we met. The top of his head only barely met my midsection. I floated behind him as he walked home from school. I laughed watching him kick rocks off the sidewalk and leap between imaginary markers. He bounced through the front door and dropped his backpack on the tile beneath its intended hook. He skipped along his path to the living room

TV only to find his parents waiting for him on the couch. They beckoned him to sit; he looked at me for reassurance, I nodded, and we sat side by side.

His mother and father's faces were red, and tear-stained. They unnaturally widened their eyes and blinked fast with fake smiles. They called him Dilly. I liked that. Much less formal than Dillian which is what he is called now. He looked back and forth between them and balanced his small hands in theirs. His little body postured tight, braced for what he knew would be the kind of words that hurt more than sticks and stones.

They told him his grandfather had died. The grandfather he had built model El Camino cars with. The grandfather who had taught him to count to one hundred using lemon drops.

Dilly had looked at me then. He reached for me, yelled his denial to his parents, and ran to his bedroom. He threw himself at the foot of his bed and cried into his dinosaur comforter. I laid back against the headboard, twirled the hair at the nape of his neck, and waited. Eventually, he crawled up onto my lap, dropped his head against my breast, and sobbed. He rubbed the satin hem of my dress between his thumb and forefinger and fought to control his breathing until finally, he fell asleep.

That time I had stayed with him for days. For as long as he needed, really. We went outside together, sat in the warm grass thigh to thigh, and I did what I was supposed to do: be there for him and help him welcome Acceptance.

But that time wasn't like this time.

This time I appeared in the street and watched him flutter around the car like a puppy anxious to retrieve his tennis ball from the pool. The sirens of the emergency vehicles had long since silenced while their lights remained oddly flashing. Urgent voices worked to tear open the car. Glass shards cracked between the asphalt and the boots of firefighters and paramedics. Dillian's

heart pounded above it all, and Shock worked to pull his attention everywhere else, anywhere else. Big meeting tomorrow. What should we make for dinner tonight? I heard it's supposed to rain this weekend. Meanwhile, other vehicles crept by with passengers I knew I'd see another time, straining for a taste of someone else's pain.

I followed Dillian and his wife Violet, (I liked that name too, a name with a smell) to the hospital. Violet lay wilted on the stretcher, eyes wide open and empty as he choked out reassurances down the hallway to the operating room. The doctors and nurses moved steadily lifting Violet's limp limbs to attach tubes and monitors as if Dillian wasn't there — and then they told him to leave.

Dillian had welcomed my siblings so readily. Repeated phone calls of the day's events to his children and in-laws held the tones of my older brother Denial. He sat next to him in the waiting room, his eyes bright, dressed like he was going to a rave, patting Dillian's leg and assuring him Violet was fine. He reminded him how normal yesterday was, how normal breakfast was, and that these sorts of things were too impossible to happen on such a normal day.

But then the doctors emerged, my sister at their side. She dismissed Denial and began to whisper in Dillian's ear. The doctors and nurses all read from the same script: Violet was brain dead they said. Nothing we can do, they said. Make her comfortable they said. Dillian stood boiling and desperate, while my sister vibrated at his side. Do something. Fix it. A second opinion, a better doctor, another choice. My sister galloped about the room in her black boots, arms waving, while her body radiated her heat onto Dillian until he could take it no more. He collapsed in the hospital chair; resigned to staring at the blank wall across from him. His body exhausted from screaming and pleading in the same breath.

Violet was moved into a recovery room. A misleading title. Dillian sat slumped and blank across from her as if his head had been vacated of all thoughts. But I looked into his eyes and could tell it was the opposite. His mind was a prison. He was trapped in a body that could do nothing to save his wife. Trapped replaying the memories of their life together and the moments before the accident.

My sister of course departed as she always does; out of boredom or exhaustion, I'm never sure which, only that her presence is usually short-lived. My mother, Pain, named her Anger and she is always easier seen than I. Most humans go to her eagerly.

Bargain came in with the breeze. He has no physical form like my other siblings. But I knew he was there because I could hear it in Dillian's thoughts: Take me instead. I'll be a better man. I'll never drink again. I'll do *anything*. But I sent him on his way before he drove Dillian to madness.

I used to hate my job in times like these, but now I've come to understand I am most needed. I am a bridge to be crossed; if they can bring themselves to cross it that is.

Which is why I sit here now in his house, waiting for him to see me.

He hasn't turned on the lights in days. Likely, Depression's suggestion, to plunge into a pool of darkness and nurture the despair. Dillian's daughter came by tonight carrying an aluminum-covered casserole dish of lasagna and a paper bag of sliced French bread. She hugged the rectangular package to her stomach while she begged for him to eat, to sleep, to shower. She stared at the back of his head as he told her he was fine. Depression reminded him not to look up, her eyes were Violet's eyes. She abandoned the lasagna inside the fridge, kissed the crown of his head, and left.

I decide it's time for him to see him. I summon my twin sister Acceptance and she appears at my side. She will take over when I'm done. I slide my hand into hers and admire the way her deep blue dress clings to her frame and wafts like she's made of water. Depression retreats to the shadows at our resolve. Dillian is at his kitchen table staring down a bottle of pills and a handle of bourbon. I take a seat next to him and use my forearm to slide both out of his reach.

"Dilly." I say, "It's me."

He looks up, eyes filled with tears, and takes both my hands in his.

"We've met before," I say, "My name is Grief."