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Visitation

By Dominique Cobb

Orange and yellow scatter across the sky, pushing away the daylight and allowing darkness to settle into place. I stretch and wipe the sleep from my eyes, ignoring the mess surrounding me in my room. The lingering light shines on my windowsill and beckons me to look out. In the distance, my brother is standing by a river with his friend in a boat. He's so far away, he looks like a little beetle. He's in our father's suit with the jacket hanging off his shoulders. He never likes to wear clothes the right way. Elijah raises his hand, acknowledging me as I peer at him through the window. When did he get home?

"Elijah?" I call out as I open my window.

He waves his hands and walks towards the house through a field. I knock an empty bottle off the windowsill as I climb outside. Cool air swarms my body. I should've changed out of my pajamas, but it doesn't matter now. A smile spreads across my face as I run to meet him. We grew up running around in this field. Our parents let the grass grow tall and let us play hide and seek in it. We'd fill our water guns in the summer. If it was hot outside, we'd turn on the hose and fill an inflatable pool up. Then, we'd splash around so much in the pool, the ground would grow soft with mud. Later, we'd make mudpies.

"I've missed you," I fidget with the fabric of my pajama pants. Elijah pats my head.

Last summer, we had a send-off for Elijah's freshman year in college. Our parents had his best friend meet him at the local mall while we got everything ready. There was a huge Stanford

banner hanging over the eave of the roof. Our dad set up the grill in the center of the backyard and surrounded it with tables and benches. He didn't want to miss a single moment of that night. Not a single joke or laugh. Our mom forced me to help in the kitchen, even though I wanted to go with Elijah. Hours went by.

I cross my arms as Elijah loosens his necktie.

"I called you so many times. Why didn't you answer?"

Elijah twists his lips into a smile. "Bad reception."

"That's not funny, Eli. I've been so worried about you." My brows furrow. "You never-"

The words hang on my tongue. They slide back down my throat and pierce my heart with needles. We take a seat at one of the benches our dad set up. A piece of paper slips from my pajama pants, and Elijah picks it up. When did that get there? I can't remember. I do remember this spot, though. This is exactly where I sat when Elijah's best friend came to our home alone. Dad stood at his grill, frozen by the news. He listened to all the reactions of our family and friends who were gathered here. Mom dropped the macaroni just a few feet away from the serving table. I rushed to clean up the mess while they cursed the world and cried.

My vision becomes blurry when Elijah unbuttons the top of his collar to reveal the scar that did it. I reach out to feel it. I wince, touching his skin. Elijah's cold.

"There was an accident," Elijah carefully grabs my hand. "Believe me, I wanted to come home. I wanted to talk to you, Mom, and Dad. Live my life. But I can't go back."

"But home is here?" I point to the house deteriorating behind me. It's being held up by duct tape and glue now, but it's still *ours*. We can fix it together.

Elijah points to the man waiting in the boat. He's cloaked in black cloth and watching us. "Once you take a ride with Death, you can't go home."

“That isn’t fair! This isn’t *fair*.” I squeeze his hand. “You have to come back with me. I can’t do this without you. Mom and Dad have changed so much, and I’m all alone now. I need my brother back.”

Elijah shakes his head and stands up, “Mimi, that’s not why I’m here.”

I hit his chest without thinking, then I snatch my hand away. It’s been a year. How much more could I take? Our parents let everything go after Elijah died. Everywhere I look, I see the lingering light of what used to be. I just want it back.

“Mimi,” he grabs my hand once more. “You have a choice to make here. Not me.”

I rest my forehead on the back of his hand. When I look back at the river, I see the man in the boat is still watching me. When our eyes meet, I’m reminded of everything I did. The note in Elijah’s hand. The pill bottle on the windowsill. I gasp for air.

“Elijah?”

“You said you want to join me,” He pulls me into an embrace. Our body temperatures are nearly the same now. “You miss me. I understand. But you have a chance to live your life in all the ways I couldn’t. If you come with me, then it’s okay. I won’t be mad, although Mom and Dad will be alone. They’d grieve more without you. But if you go back home, you have to find a way to accept this and wait your turn.”

I cling to my brother, nearly ripping the suit he was buried in. If I let go and return home alone, what will change? Every day, there’s something new to grieve.

“You’ll bring light back into your life, Mimi. Things won’t always be this hard,” He continues. “You can find different ways to remember me, and know that I’m always there in a way. My absence won’t always make you feel alone.”

The man in the boat raises an oar and knocks the handle three times against the deck. Each knock echoes out a loud bang. There's only a speck of light left. Elijah pulls away from me. My hands ease their grip. My bedroom window echoes the voices of my mom and dad, who are also waiting.

“So?” Elijah utters.

Author's Note

Honestly, I didn't plan to write this story, but March is a time of remembrance for two of my dearly departed. One is my godbrother. Right before his birthday a couple of weeks ago, my godbrother visited me in a visitation dream of sorts, and we talked a lot. Since then, I couldn't stop thinking about him or my other loved ones, so I did what all of us do, and I wrote about it.

All of this being said, this is a highly fictional story exploring the extremes of complicated grief. I never got to the point where Mimi is in this story, and I'm doing alright these days, guys. :)

Complicated grief is a medical term used when someone experiences an increase in depression, anxiety, and/or suicidal ideation after losing a loved one. It prolongs different stages of grief and can disrupt a person's life. The twist in Mimi's visitation dream is that it isn't a dream at all. She's literally in a realm between life and death, unraveling the grief that got her there. Her lines are lines that reflect people's thoughts during mourning. Some people want contact with their deceased, some worry about where their souls go (I'm referencing Greek Mythology here), and then there are the stages of grief. Elijah's lines are primarily messages of hope for people who are either grieving or dealing with suicidal ideations.

Lastly, I did intend on this piece being left on a cliff hanger. Writing out an ending where a decision is made for Mimi doesn't resonate with me, so I didn't want to force it. If you think it should have a definite ending, I'm open to your opinions on it. I don't have specific questions for this piece, so share whatever comes to mind for your feedback. Thanks for reading!

Dominique :D