



Piano

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I can recite Grandma's daily routine since Mom's funeral like clockwork.

7 a.m. Wake up and make a lot of noise getting ready in the bathroom. Brush teeth slowly. Brush hair even slower. She's been having arm pains, but refuses to let Hallie or I touch her gray strands, saying she's "perfectly capable of taking care of myself, thank you very much," in a huff whenever we offer.

8 a.m. Sit at the window in her bedroom until either Hallie or I bring her a cup of coffee. She rarely ever says thank you.

9 a.m. Listen to music or watch the news, Channel 12. Same channel that told her about Mom's accident, minutes before the hospital called her. She says she likes watching the handsome newsboys. I think she's waiting for Mom to appear on screen to tell her the accident never happened, that the truck hadn't pushed her car over the boundary lane, that the glass hadn't punctured through to her brain, that the car hadn't spontaneously burst into deep orange flames after she was pulled out of the driver's seat, that we wouldn't have even gotten a body had they not pulled her out just in time, that she hadn't been pronounced dead before the doctor even entered the hospital room.

12 p.m. Leftovers from last night's dinner for lunch. She's not too picky.

1 p.m. Nap.

3 p.m. Green tea. More music listening. When it rains, she hums along, as if the rain pounding on the glass will prevent Hallie and I from hearing her through the door.

4 p.m. Nap again.

5 p.m. This is about when I come home from work. Whenever I walk past Grandma's room to get to mine, I can hear her talking on the

phone with a relative. It's probably Aunt Helen. I don't know why she puts up with Grandma's antics, especially since I always hear Grandma saying over the phone that she misses her—even though she visits every weekend—but she hardly seems excited when Aunt Helen is actually here.

7 p.m. I usually call Grandma down for dinner at 6:30, but it takes until 7 p.m. for her to make her way to the dining room.

8 p.m. Sit in the living room in her favorite rocking chair. Some nights, when I have some spare time, I play piano for her. I think she likes it because she knows Mom taught me how to play.

9:30 p.m. Medications and bedtime.

It's a pretty boring routine, but I guess the regularity keeps her sane. While I'm away at work half the week, I like to pretend she does something a little out of order or spices things up a bit, maybe sing or laugh out loud, but Hallie's solemn head shake when I walk in the door each afternoon tells me it's wishful thinking.

Grandma used to be around—and loud about it, too—laughter booming off the walls as she showered us with baskets of gifts and homemade cakes. Mom used to complain that we would be spoiled soon enough, but that didn't stop Grandma from handing us goodie bags of sparkling hard candies, winking, when Mom wasn't around.

It's not that she's not around anymore. She moved in with us shortly after the funeral, even when Uncle Henry—Mom's brother—offered to take us in. "Nonsense," she fussed. "Those girls need motherly guidance, they're only teenagers for God's sake."

But that was months ago, and that motherly guidance only lasted a week or two before she began to retreat back into her small corner room upstairs, barely climbing down to join us for meals.

She's quieter, always watching outside from her bedroom window, keeping an intent eye on the neighbor's lawn for them, like it was her job. Her jokes don't ring across the house anymore, her arms never filled with baskets of treats. I don't even remember the last time I heard her

laugh.

"Maybe it's because Mom was her only daughter," Hallie would whisper to me before we headed off to bed. "Maybe she doesn't know who she is anymore now that she can't be a mother."

How about our Grandma, I had wanted to scowl back, or *how about Uncle Henry's mom*, but never did. Mom would have wanted me to be a better role model for Hallie than that. Plus, Hallie wasn't wrong. Every day that passed, Grandma was starting to look less and less like herself and more and more like the living ghost of someone who wished for death.



"How has she been today?" I dice up the last bits of onion and offer the cutting board to Hallie, who's waiting with her washed-and-dried mushrooms, ready to make her signature Saturday dinner.

"Same," she offers sullenly. "I don't get why you always ask, as if something's gonna change. It's the same every single day."

I shrug. "You never know."

"When are they getting here?" Hallie begins quartering the mushrooms and throws them into a bowl while I start the stove.

"Around 7," I smirk. "Not sure why you always ask, as if something's gonna change. Same thing every week."

Hallie throws a mushroom quarter at me. "Oh shut up."

It's quiet for a while, as Hallie and I move around each other gracefully in the kitchen. We never say it aloud, but I know we're both thinking back to when Mom was alive, when the three of us would cook meals together every week when Aunt Helen and Uncle Henry came over, when Grandma would come over with a bright colored outfit and black sunglasses, even on the rainiest nights. Back when everyone used to be happy, so happy the house would burst into song if it could. Now, the house is quiet, music coming only occasionally from our old baby grand in the living room or from Grandma's humming when it rains.



We're clearing dishes when we first notice Grandma.

"Everything okay, Grandma?" I ask softly as I watch her eyes fidgeting from corner to corner.

She barely nods before she gets up soundlessly and shuffles her way to the living room. Aunt Helen and I exchange worried glances.

"She been like this all week, Evie?" she asks me, carrying plates over to the sink.

"I don't think so. I mean, quiet as usual, I guess. But she seems nervous, like there's somewhere else she needs to be..." I trail off doubtfully. "We're not forgetting an appointment or something are we? Am I missing something? Did I-"

"No, you're not." Aunt Helen must have noticed my anxious face, because she walks over and places an arm over my shoulders. "Hey, sweetie. You're doing great. You know that, right? You're doing a great job."

I know she's trying hard not to tear up, to not get emotional, to not finish that sentence: *you're doing a great job taking care of someone who was supposed to take care of you, a great job being Mom when your mom died, a great job not being a kid anymore.*

"Evie," my sister walks in the room, taking one look at Aunt Helen, then back at me. "Grandma wants you to play piano."

I sigh, looking at both of them. "Just a little. I have a headache."



Grandma settles deeper into her armchair as I open the piano lid. The keys are caked with a thin layer of dust every time I open it, a testament to how little I play. I look over at Grandma, expecting her to watch, but she's gazing off into the air, eyes glazed over.

"Ten bucks she falls asleep before the first song," Hallie whispers jokingly, handing me some sheet music from the box under the piano. I begin to play. Scales at first, to warm up, then swooning chords bellowing into each other with a swiftness that comes naturally.

I don't hate playing, although that's what Hallie and Aunt Helen think. Only Uncle Henry, who watches intently every time I play, knows why I stopped practicing as often. He watched, after all, as his older sister, Eleanor, fell in love with the instrument through years of playing. He watched her play at parties and recitals and halls, creating dancing images with her notes, her love for the music so strong she taught her first daughter, Evelyn, to play the second she could read (she tried again with Hallie, but she didn't have the ability to sit still for nearly as long). He watched as this first daughter grew up spending weeks and weeks playing along with her mother. He watched as they played together, mother and daughter, matching charm bracelets with two big E's hitting the edge of the keys every so often, E for Evelyn, E for Eleanor.

I reach the end of the song, taking a moment to look down at the charm bracelets. I wear them both now, ever since Mom's funeral. E for Evelyn. E for Eleanor.

E for everything used to be okay when Mom was alive.

Frustrated, I blink back tears before anyone can notice. I hate that my emotions don't stand a chance when it comes to this instrument. Playing used to be an escape for me, but now, it's become a weapon, piercing through my walls, forcing me to accept that...I miss her. And I don't know if I can do this without her.

I'm almost thankful for Grandma's groggy croak interrupting my downward spiral.

"E-e-"

I turn, knowing she's about to call for me, knowing she may ask me to keep playing I meet her eyes, a fair blue, expecting them to meet my own. But somehow her eyes are not quite looking at me, but instead at my ear, or my shoulder, I can't tell which. I'm about to ask what she's looking for when she finishes her thought.

"E...leanor."

Eleanor?

My heart drops. It takes all my willpower to not let the shock force

my fingers down on the piano keys, letting a high pitched C-sharp shriek echo through the thick silence.

Aunt Helen gasps, then covers her mouth in hurried embarrassment.

“Mom,” Uncle Henry clears his throat. “I-uh...Eleanor’s not here. Did you mean Evelyn?”

Grandma turns her head then, looking at me at last, her sharp blue eyes burning holes into mine. Strangely enough, it doesn’t feel like she’s surprised; rather, I see a twinge of recognition that happens when one looks from one person they know to another person they also know. She recognizes me. She knows I am Evelyn.

But that would mean...when she was looking behind me before...she was seeing...

“Eleanor,” Grandma repeats again, firmly, her eyes shifting back near my ear. I turn, half expecting to see a wisp of my mother, thin and pale. Instead, I see only our family picture, Mom, Hallie, Grandma and I, the only family we needed after Dad left us. The photo was taken maybe about eight years ago, a Christmas picture we sent out to relatives we barely knew the names of. No ghost of a person, no dark aura in the corner of the room. Just a sudden chill from the draft coming in through the window, and the unshakeable feeling that something bad was about to happen.

Any other night, no piano, I may have simply brushed this feeling off. But tonight, the music has pushed me too dangerously to the edge. I can’t. I push back my seat, not even bothering to close the piano lid, and run upstairs, slamming my door before landing on my bed, face buried in the pillows, tears of sadness mixed with fear soaking the sheets as I drown out Aunt Helen’s and Hallie’s soft knocks on the other side, begging me to come out.

They give up after a while, and I hear them downstairs for a few hours, clanging dishes softly as they clean up, whispering. I hear Uncle Henry join them, and I fall asleep uneasily as I listen to their hushed voices drifting in and out of focus, with words like “dementia,”

“Alzheimer’s,” “old age,” “your mother.”



Sleep is strange to me that night, the dreams feeling far too real.

At one point, I envision Grandma’s face in front of me, stark blue eyes and all, whispering, “Eleanor told me to do it.”

“She’s dead,” my dream self screams at her, but my voice feels faded. “She can’t tell you anything. She’s dead!” But even as the words fall out, I feel that chill and my mother’s smiling Christmas photo face is etched in my mind.

Grandma keeps looking at me, and somehow her blue eyes seem brighter, a deep orange undertone overtaking them, as if reflecting a fiery pit. “She told me over the phone. See you soon. See you soon.”

I shoot up from bed, barely noting the late hour as realization hits me. The phone, the calls Grandma makes every afternoon. They’re not to Aunt Helen.

A pang of morbid sadness hits me as I realize the truth, mom’s voicemail greeting playing over and over in my head: “Hey, it’s Eleanor. I can’t come to the phone right now, but I’ll call you back as soon as I can. See you soon.”

See you soon. See you soon.

She wasn’t calling Aunt Helen. She’s been listening to Mom’s voicemail greeting for hours on end, day after day.

But of course she has. We may have lost a mother, but Grandma lost her daughter, someone she never should’ve been allowed to outlive. Of course she’s having a hard time. I muse a little longer, wondering if maybe we’ve been too harsh on her, blaming her for not taking care of us. I have a sudden image of Grandma in her rocking chair, eyes closed, humming softly, listening to Mom’s voice as if she’s just a phone call away, instead of being buried in the cemetery ten blocks from our house. Grandma talking back to Mom on the phone every afternoon at 5 p.m., thinking she’s actually having a conversation with her daughter.

See you soon. See you soon. Grandma really did think she would see Mom soon.

There's a loud banging on the door that makes me jump. I hurriedly open it to see Hallie standing there, hair a mess, eyes frightened.

"Evie, didn't you smell it?" she asks.

I'm about to ask what she's talking about when a sudden twinge of burnt wood drifts towards my nose. "What-"

Hallie grabs my arm, eyes filling with tears. "The piano."

We run downstairs, barely managing to not slip as we make our way to the living room. I hardly notice Aunt Helen and Uncle Henry standing there in shock as I come face to face with the large flames, engulfing each other as they compete over the wooden boards, the black and white keys.

Grandma stands close, too close to the flames to have just been woken up by them. She doesn't seem shocked. She merely turns to look at me as I meet her eyes with my own horrified ones. I note the deep orange undertone, the same orange my mother must have seen five seconds after she was pulled from her totaled car all those months ago, the deepest of orange burning in her blue gems. She opens her mouth, and I have to force myself not to scream as she says the words I dread most:

"Eleanor told me to do it." 