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You

The one thought that resembled coherence and juggled stability for my impulsive flight that night was this: that one day, I'd have to explain everything to you. My neglect. My dismissal. What I had done, why I did it, and why that night. And most importantly, how it felt.

I'm shaky, admitting it took me ten years. Mom, it was Christmas Eve. We all arrived at our house for dinner. No Bing Crosby or popcorn strings, just our hushed small talk around the table. It wasn't surreal, yet I couldn't offer the truth to your parents or "Baby Rue"... who is the first "baby" to ever be in middle school.

"No Grandma, I'm just tired from the flight."

"I'm good Rue, the eye bags are from studying."

"You know, I haven't been sleeping. Classic college."

Dad tries to make it feel like Christmas, but he can't capture the spirit like you did. Your straight-stitch stockings are above the fire, but your intoxicating gingerbread scent is missing. You'd waft it through the house, smiling, knowing our mouths were pooling at the edges. I can see you counting down the minutes, knowing like a mother does that Rue and I would come chasing, exploding into the kitchen. Then you'd just wink and say, "After dinner", while sneaking us the cookie dough you spared.

There is one piece you would melt over; a new ornament Dad made. A mahogany crafted miniature piano, like the one we used to play. A sanded, classy top, four swivelled legs, and perfectly blanketed white keys that glisten under the colored lights. But I don't touch it; it's always Rue, Dad, Grandma, or Grandpa that hangs it. Tradition was stabbed with delicate circles of gazes and floating nods between a broken family. In his planned manner, Dad choked, "Henry, would you like to hang it this year? For Mom?"

I had been running for ten years, not in a tangled maze or woods, but on a sidewalk, in a busy city. It looked like I was peacefully jogging, but I was running for the only life I've ever known, the one I needed to keep. Now I was met with this ugly reflection, pervading behind me in a store window. Bursting, like a million flames, I rushed as far as I could from the scene. Fists clenching the staircase, I pulled myself to the attic. Away from our once whole family and the ornament of your favorite instrument. There was unfinished business between us.

I had unveiled it; the white cloth flew, as if in slow motion. Dust flew like dandelions into the static air, as snow whirls in a snow globe. The dead walls inhaled and the room waited in a newfound anticipation... The image, its flames ever growing, the painful resident of my mind, had morphed into a smoke, and I was high on it. It was revealed. Our Grand Piano, standing tall in the desolate state, had the courage after my abandonment. Standing triumphant and proud in my neglect, it was posed with grace and care in my hardened presence. I took it in fearfully, processing my now most hated treasure I would die to defend. My unworthy steps circled its field and my dirty hand swept the surface. Dust blew off as

if it became the Sahara, and the capsule was unearthed. The whites gleamed through our smudged fingerprints, like it was a portal back in time.

I hadn't told you, the first day of our ending as I drove us to the doctor, that I was terrified. That through anxiety ridden Googling, I memorized more than a medical student. That my heart went still when I heard Dad downstairs whisper hello to the phone, that my head collapsed to the floor with my ear squeezed against the planks to hear what would follow, and that I was met only with my gasping for breath, a second before I sensed his complete loss for a response. We were now survivors at sea, no land in sight and no floatation, only constant beating against the waves. I felt that water rush between us during every hug, that sensation of two wet bodies clinging. Desperate for warmth, for life, for survival, and never quite knowing which wave was our last.

That water flooded through me then, and I struck the instrument. Chords reverberated like ribbons unravelling down a wedding aisle, each note like bells. My fingers nestled in their old spots as if the keys were mittens, and their ivory felt like your fingertips as you squeezed my hand from the hospital bed. Without warning or any divine sign leading up to this, the water flooded differently this time: it brought me back to you. The piano had always been the moon that hung over us night after night at sea. Now that I was playing it, with you nearby, it kissed the tide we once waded in and caressed the shore we had dreamed of. I was no longer afraid.