

All the Things You Aren't

It was Wednesday morning and it was nine degrees out and the Greyhound dropped me off at the South Shore Station at the exact time I had told her. Ten thirty sharp and no sign of my mother anywhere. I sat down on the icy bench and waited.

Next to me, a hungry pigeon sifted through a trashcan full of plastic cups and hot dog wrappers for crumbs. It seemed to be the only bird around and I felt bad for it. I pulled some pieces of a cookie out of my purse and extended my hand slowly toward its perch on the can. But as my finger tips neared its beak, my entire body shivered, scaring it away.

I waited thirty minutes in case she was just running late, and eventually took a taxi home. I found her at the kitchen table reading the newspaper in a robe and black knee highs, a smoldering cigarette dangling from her parted lips.

I cleared my throat. "Hi, Mom."

"Bianca! Hi." Her black curls were streaked with grey and bounced slightly as she spoke, and I noticed faint, purplish circles under her eyes. I hadn't seen her all semester, which wasn't unusual, and she looked more tired than I remembered.

"You were supposed to pick me up an hour ago," I said.

"Oh, right. I'm sorry, I forgot. Um, can I get you something?"

“No, thank you.” I felt strange standing in the middle of the kitchen, so I moved toward the table and sat down across from her. She folded the newspaper she had been reading and placed it delicately on her lap.

“So, how was your fall semester?” she asked.

“It was good. I made Dean’s list.”

“Yes, well, you usually do.”

“Yeah.” I crossed my legs and the chair creaked, echoing throughout the house.

“When I talked to you on the phone, did you say how long you were staying?”

“Just tonight. I have to pick up a few sweaters and some books for next semester.”

“Ok. What time does the bus leave tomorrow to take you back?”

“Nine in the morning, why?”

“I won’t be able to bring you to the station.” She paused. “My mother’s funeral is in the morning in Newport, and I’m going.”

I stared at her. No sign of emotion crossed her face.

“Why didn’t you tell me my grandmother died?”

“Well, you never really knew Francis. I figured you wouldn’t care.”

“How did it happen?”

“Here.” She picked up the newspaper on her lap and handed it to me, then left the room. It was open to the obituary section and Francis White was listed at the top, followed by an extensive write up.

I didn’t necessarily care that she hadn’t told me, but I would have liked to know. I had only met my grandmother once at my tenth birthday party. My parents were together then, though unmarried, and my father thought he would be polite and invite her. He never thought she’d actually come. When she showed up, my mother left the party, and she and Dad didn’t talk for weeks.

Francis stayed briefly, and didn’t really interact with anyone. In fact, the only thing I remember about her from that day is how she smelled—overly clean, like she had spent hours scrubbing under hot water with bleach, and would probably do it again, and more thoroughly, after she left.

Since then I had learned two things about Francis: that she was a devout Catholic, and that you did not mention her name in my mother’s vicinity. I never knew what went wrong between them, and I was surprised that my mother was even going to the funeral. But I guess when a parent dies, that’s just what you do. I could understand that. If my mother died right now, I’d certainly go to hers. And I’m not sure how upset I’d be.

I left the table and ascended the long staircase to my bedroom. I opened the door and the stark room struck me the same way it had every other time. Empty.

I sat down in the middle of the blue, carpeted floor surrounded by dark blue painted walls and tried my hardest to think of a time when my mother and I had connected. I heard the phone ringing downstairs and waited for her to answer it. A minute later she called up to me. “Bianca, that was the doctor’s office. They said you need to schedule a routine check-up.”

“Ok. I will.” I shouted back. But I didn’t move.

My mind wandered to the times when I was younger and I used to look forward to the doctor’s office. The clean sterility and shiny white tiled floor had always amazed me. I would open my eyes as wide as possible to try to take all that brightness in. And, it was the only time my mother would ever voluntarily hold my hand.

Getting shots was the best. She would sit up on the table next to me, high-heeled feet swinging in the air, with one hand around my waist, and the other clasped tightly in my own. When the nurse was about to insert the needle she would say, “Break my fingers,” and I would try as hard as I could to do it, too. But all that was ever left were some lingering nail marks and the combined perspiration of our sweaty palms.

Thinking of this, I lay down on the floor and drifted to sleep. I was extremely uncomfortable lying there, and I dreamt vividly. I was back at the bus station and I had been waiting hours, perhaps days, for my mother to come get me. The pigeon was there too, and this time I offered it an entire cookie, and it plucked it from my hand and flew home to feed it to its pigeon

babies, in its warm pigeon nest. After they feasted, they all snuggled together and slept, and I was so glad to have taken part in their happiness.

I awoke a few hours later with the sad realization that it had been just a dream. It was afternoon and the sun was setting, throwing tired rays through my bedroom windows. I decided it would be a good time to go downstairs and find the books I needed for school.

I descended two flights of steps to the basement, and made my way around multiple storage boxes to the large bookshelf. I picked out the titles I needed, and I was about to walk upstairs when I noticed a half open photo box on the bottom shelf. I removed the cover, and sitting on top was a letter from Francis to my mother. It was stained and crumpled with age. I picked it up. It read:

Dear Marie,

I'm sorry I won't be present for the birth of your daughter. Having a child out of wedlock is extremely irresponsible and more importantly, a sin in God's eyes. I know you're not a religious person, and I've attempted to be hopeful for you, and put my thoughts of what God will think of you aside. But I am unable, and I realize now why I've failed. To be a mother is an honor and a gift. One must be selfless, supportive, and most importantly willing to shape a child's life. These are all things that you aren't, and will never be. I don't want to take part in something destined to fail.

Sincerely,

Francis

I read it over three times, then placed it back in the box, and restored the cover to its half-open position.

I tried very hard to convince myself that it didn't matter, that it didn't make a difference. Was this an excuse? That night in bed I stayed awake and thought it over, and didn't shut my eyes until five in the morning, when I knew what I had to do.

The next morning when my mother came downstairs, she found me sitting at the kitchen table, dressed in black, and eating breakfast.

"Good morning," she said, eyeing me suspiciously. "What are you doing up so early?"

"I'm going with you to the funeral." I told her in a tone that allowed for no objections.

She stared at me for a couple of second, then sighed. "That's fine, I guess," she said. "We'll leave in an hour."

The old Subaru station wagon was heaving exhaust in the cold Boston morning air. I climbed into the passenger seat knowing that the ride would be painfully silent. We pulled out of the driveway at seven forty-five and entered the highway exactly at the height of rush hour. The traffic was miserable. I realized that we might not make it to the church on time.

Mom, however, didn't seem worried. But she did seem different. She couldn't stop playing with her hair and readjusting her outfit. She never had both hands on the wheel, one was always fixing something. I wanted to ask her how she felt, if she was angry, if she was sad, but we had never spoken of these things before. There was no open line of communication between us; we existed entirely separate from each other.

The night after my tenth birthday party, my mom came home late and she and dad yelled at each other for a long time. I listened intently at my bedroom door, trying so hard to understand. My father's argument was sound. "How was I supposed to know she'd come," he said. "I was just being polite! And anyway, she's your mother," he continued. "You know she wants to be a part of your life, even if she doesn't say so." But my mother was firm. "No, she doesn't. We are united by genetics—by blood and nothing more," she said. She seemed so convinced that I had to believe it, too. And I did, for a while. They weren't as big a deal as everyone thought, those family bonds, I told myself. They only end up as a burden in the end. My mother had taught me well. But looking at her now, I wasn't sure if I still believed it. And I wasn't sure if she did, either.

I turned my head and looked out the window at the passing cars. The rhythmic motion soothed me and dropped me into a dreamless sleep. I dozed, and my mother drove on in silence.

I awoke alone in a parking lot behind an expansive stone church, which sat a few yards from the ocean. Its perfectly groomed back lawn sat next to the cemetery, and sloped down to a wall that stood over the water. The lot was full, and the service appeared to have already started. Squinting, I realized that my mother was sitting on the wall, looking down into the icy blue waves. I walked toward her.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “Let’s go inside, the funeral must already have started.”

“You go in. I’ll stay here for a bit.” She fingered something crinkly in her pocket and continued to look down.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m not going inside.”

“It’s freezing—we came all this way. Just come inside with me.”

“No.” She looked at me almost angrily. “Go without me.”

“Fine,” I said. I wasn’t in the mood to argue, and she was making no sense. I started walking towards the church alone. But halfway there I changed my mind and turned around. She was still sitting on the ledge when I reached her.

“This is it, Mom. She’s dead. You’re going inside this church with me so you can let go of her memory, so you can be a mother without her guilt hanging over your head.”

Her face softened. It took her a while to form a response, but it came out eventually. "What if I can't?" she asked. "I'm scared."

"You have to," I told her.

I walked into the church first, with her close behind. We entered through the side door and sat down quietly in one of the pews. Soft music was playing and a priest was saying something about "Life through Death." My mother's earlier expression had melted away, and her look was stony again.

I took a moment to look around us and I realized that the amount of people there was overwhelming. Some people wept, some dabbed delicately at their eyes. I had never been to a funeral before, but I was almost sure that they weren't usually this well attended.

When the priest finished speaking, he opened up the podium for anyone else who wanted to say something about my grandmother, Francis White. At first, no one got up. But the Father was a patient man. He waited silently, expectantly.

Finally, one voice spoke up. She would say something about Francis. Then another voice rose to the occasion. Then others still. Six people in total got up on the alter to speak about the generosity and kindness that Francis had shown them. She was their guiding light, their second mother. This last phrase struck me. To whom was she mother first? Certainly not to the correct person. I was angry. How could they claim her like this? How could they celebrate a woman who had abandoned her own daughter? I looked over at

my mom, and to my surprise, she didn't look upset at all. In fact, she almost seemed to be smiling.

After three quarters of an hour, the testimonials were done and the priest came back to instruct people to exit the church and make their way through the backyard to the cemetery for the burial.

The minute we got outside I spoke to her. "I can't believe the nerve of those people, taking away your mother like that. She should have been there supporting you, instead of barging into their lives uninvited."

"No, Bianca. She was right in what she did."

"What do you mean?" I was shocked. I pushed further. "She chose them instead of you."

"That's right. And I'm glad she did it. That woman had nothing to offer me. Our beliefs, our thinking patterns, the ways we chose to live our lives were completely different. It would have been more painful to have her around. I realize that now."

I didn't know if I believed her completely.

We walked the rest of the way to the cemetery in silence. When we arrived, a light snow was falling. My mother picked a spot to stand, up close, in front, near the right corner of the coffin. As they began lowering the box that held Francis into the ground, she started fidgeting and looked around nervously.

The attendant cranked the apparatus used to lower the coffin, and Francis began her descent into the dirt hole.

Hearing a loud crinkling noise, I looked around and realized my mother's right arm was stuffed into her pocket. The crank stopped as the coffin reached the bottom, and the priest asked, "Does anyone have any last words?"

No one made a move.

"Ok, then," he said. "Let us all take a moment to silently say goodbye."

As he said this, the attendant began sprinkling the overturned earth, delicately, back into the hole on top of Francis' coffin. The crinkling in my mother's pocket grew louder, and I watched her suddenly remove her pocketed hand with a piece of crumpled paper in it. She took a step forward, and with difficulty, threw the paper into the hole on top of the scattered dirt. As it floated to rest on the coffin, I noticed its familiarity. It was the note I had read last night.

I looked from the hole to my mother. She was crying now, silently, and a stream of tears was running from her left eye to the indent next to her left nostril, and down between her lips. She stepped back and looked at me, and we made eye contact for a few seconds. She turned to go, but before she did, I grabbed her hand with both of mine, as the teardrops fell on us, and she squeezed as hard as she could.