Sunlight

Sixteen years, six months, and six days Daniel had been alive, yet the service lasted a little over two hours.

Small candles lined the walls of the high-ceiling church. I had only been a handful of times, once when my grandparents were in town for Easter. Of course, we had to sit through a long two hours of church service before any egg hunting. The second time had been with my middle school choir to sing a hymn. The third, now for Daniel's funeral.

I lingered in my seat as the last few families slowly began to make their way towards the hall, tapping an agitated beat into my thigh and staring up at the dark brown casket that supposedly held my best friend. I was still trying to wrap my brain around it—the simple fact that a week ago Daniel had been sitting next to me in math class making origami cubes with graph paper, and now he was dead.

I felt stupid, weak, and entirely powerless over all of it. Reality was a muddled thing in my mind, torn between what should be and what simply wasn't.

A cold hand on my shoulder jolted me from my thoughts, and I turned slowly to find my mother standing in the aisle. She had on a somber, sympathizing expression that I tried not to misconstrue as pity.

"We have to go," a simple reminder whispered into my ear before she turned towards the exit.

I continued to sit and watch her until she was fully out the door, and then I stood hesitantly and made my way to the front of the room.

There was a certain formality to it all, one that hadn't felt necessary before. When I had received the phone call that Daniel had been struck by a car and died in the ambulance, I had felt

raw. Now, all those feelings had been forcibly stuffed away into a little box tied with a neat bow. I felt wrong, wrapped in a knee-length black dress I got from Macy's and made to sit and watch as my friend was "sent off" to the sound of an ancient pipe organ.

Everyone was gone now. It was just me and him.

Every single sound was amplified within the wooden walls of the large room. The ceiling yawned high up above me, coming together at a stained-glass point. Gray clouds collected overhead, threatening to produce snow on the most fitting of days. Leave it to Daniel to pass in the middle of winter. He never could quite get his timing right, be it during his short-lived baseball season, his arrival to every one of my birthday parties since I was three, and now, his death.

I tried to look fondly upon the thought, but all that settled in my gut was empty grief paired with a kindling sense of anger I had been desperately trying to keep private for weeks. It wouldn't come out of me now. I wouldn't let it.

Daniel's casket was long and sharp, almost the same color as the caramel candy he used to always have stocked up in his backpack during class. There were so many roses resting on top that it was comical, and I couldn't help but scoff at the sight. Anyone who knew Daniel knew that he hated roses. The smell made him sick.

Two twin handlebars lined the sides. They would use them to carry him out after the church cleared. My mind warred between the terms "he" and "it" when referring to the wood box before me. I didn't want to imagine what he'd been reduced to, but I struggled to see what else he could be now. A thought? A feeling? A soul dancing along the clouds somewhere I couldn't see?

None of the options made sense to me, so I shoved them away for another day and focused my attention on the sleek wood in front of me. I reached out and traced carefully along the top, the cool surface sending chills up my spine. Above us was a formidable statue of Jesus, arms spread in a diplomatic gesture. I tried to avert my eyes, but his presence was naturally imposing.

I don't know how long I stood there, unmoving, worried that if I left it would make it all true. Daniel would really be dead, and the service would really be over, and I would really be alive and alone. Not that I had ever had any power over the outcome. It would all be true no matter what.

That last thought finally pushed me away from the coffin, away from the altar, and away from that unnerving statue.

Slowly, I moved towards the exit, dress shoes scuffing against the ugly gray carpet that lined the aisles. In vain, I attempted to ignore what I was leaving behind.

As I finally took my first steps out into the hallway, my breath hitched.

Daniel was everywhere. Pictures of him at various stages in his life were set out along five tables squished together against the wall. Some of him as a baby, all soft skin and big eyes. Some from middle school. Most from high school, slowly leading up to his final age.

In nearly half of them, I was there by his side.

I tried to steady myself as I moved away from the doorframe. Avoiding any picture or video with Daniel's face had been a real challenge those last few weeks leading up to the service, but I had managed it as best I could. Now, though, I couldn't ignore his bright grin staring back at me through what must have been dozens of picture frames.

I hurried down the hall, keeping my gaze zeroed in on the exit. The somber chat of grieving guests and too-sweet perfume were everywhere. There was an old woman at the far end of the table, hands folded in front of her as she slowly stepped down the line of pictures, a gentle smile curling up her wrinkled cheeks. I was drawn to her like most things that had been out of my control those past few weeks.

As I approached, she was the first to properly look at me, her smile unwavering.

"How did you know Daniel?"

It was a question I had heard one too many times in the last three hours, but the delicate warmth of her voice, deviating so boldly from the pitying tone of those who had previously asked me, drew me in. I stared for a heavy moment, before blinking back to myself.

"He was my friend," I said so quietly it could have been a question, though I knew she could see past my uncertainty.

"And you?"

She didn't wait a single beat before laughing calmly and stating, "Oh, I didn't know him at all."

The pause that followed would have been deafening if not for the surrounding chatter muffling my dead silence. My gaze, which had been previously glued to the pictures of Daniel, slowly slid over to meet hers.

"What?" was all I could manage, my brain caught between desperate attempts to add logic to the statement and the overwhelming knowledge that there really wasn't any. It wasn't exactly logical to show up at a funeral for a person you didn't know.

The woman, however, seemed mostly unbothered by my surprise. She continued looking over the pictures, smiling serenely before realizing that I was waiting for an answer.

"I didn't mean to come here," she laughed slowly, her gaze trailing over a picture of Daniel as a baby, one messy hand in the air and the other submerged in a pile of spaghetti.

"Believe it or not, I thought I was at a different funeral."

My eyebrows slowly knitted together. She said it with such abandon, as though this was the same as stepping onto the wrong bus or turning up to the wrong concert.

I was suddenly very urgently concerned, turning to her quickly. "Is it still happening? We could get you a ride if you—"

"That's alright," she chuckled again, as though there was anything humorous about the situation. I looked around frantically to see if there were any adults I could refer her to.

"I go to enough funerals these days. I was just looking at this young man's photographs. He seems like an easy person to miss."

It was an odd way to phrase it, but the truth remained. Every time I thought about Daniel, I didn't think about his death. I thought about him, and what the absence of him meant. I thought about lonely bus rides from home to school, the empty passenger seat of my cheap Kia, the last unread text from him on my phone I still didn't have the guts to open. I thought about all the jokes void of meaning when not rolling off his tongue, or the stories he never finished writing.

I thought about all the things that would be different without him, and it killed me.

Turning my head, I found the woman staring back at me. She had a knowing look on her face, as if my expression had let her in on a secret I hadn't intended to keep.

I swallowed thickly, brushing a hand over the tablecloth. "Who was the funeral for? The one you missed."

"Margaret Austen," she responded fondly. "A friend from grade school. She made it a lot longer than we thought she would."

I searched for humor in the sentiment but came up with only a bitter feeling of frustration.

"And you're not… sad?"

"Oh, dear." The woman's eyes widened as she turned to me, an action that swiftly sent a bite of guilt to my chest.

"Of course I'm sad. But there's a certain… routine to it, I suppose. I mourn greatly for all that I've lost, but each funeral and loss is just a reminder of all I've gained in my life. All my friends and family that I can proudly say I stuck with until the very end."

This final sentiment settled slowly into my mind, bringing on a profound sense of softness I couldn't quite trace. I felt like I had just exhaled for the first time in weeks. Still, absence lingered. I hadn't realized how shaky my voice had grown until I asked quietly, "Won't you miss them?"

"The more I love them, the more I miss them. And isn't that such a beautiful thing?"

"To miss them?"

She gently placed one hand over my own, the warmth of her palm cupping my chilled skin.

"To love them."

I finally looked up at her, the pink blush on her cheeks and elegant curl of her gray hair blurred through my teary eyes. Despite being strangers, understanding passed through us as easily as water through a sieve.

Just then, for a brief, untouchable moment, warm light swelled from outside, slow and gradual before it covered the room in a sheet of pale yellow.

"It's Daniel," I heard my mother say. It was a sweet idea in theory, and I heard the all-too-familiar sniffle of Daniel's mother quickly being muffled by her husband's shoulder.

But at the same time, I was struck with a strange sense of dread. If the only person who could console me about Daniel's death was the boy himself, how would I ever move on?

And then it hit me. I glanced out at the window, then back to the heavy lines in the elderly woman's face, swirling like a ribbon in the breeze, as a smile split across her cheeks. The sun hit her green eyes, making them sparkle, and when she turned her gaze back on me, I couldn't help but share her smile.

"Thank you for coming," I said quietly and meant it.

She looked at me one last time, squeezing my hand softly before slowly moving down the hallway, a ray of sunlight left in her place.