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Van Haecke
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Papaveris Mortiferum

Another year came and went and again we found ourselves under that same old oak. Leaves of scarlet, ochre, and aureate clung precariously to their brittle stems, the occasional gust of wind sending them sailing. Back and forth they swept, riding the current of the wind, periodically brushing my shoulder before they settled on the cool grass below; it was dawn, everything still asleep in the light fog that stretched across the grey speckled lawn.

I could feel the morning dew dampening the pockets of my faded blue jeans. I shifted to my knees and inhaled; allowing the weedy, overgrown grass and the bitter scent of chrysanthemums fill my lungs, penetrate my core, and rush through my veins. It was here, the place of the forgotten where I-, well we found solace. For me-, well Jack and I, it was where we loved; where we laughed and reminisced, and it was where we cried, well I cried, Jack never cried, he was strong as stone.

We heard the click of a car door shutting a few yards behind us and the slow yet steady footsteps until they hit the grass.

We didn't bother turning around, we knew who it was. Jack just smiled up at me as he lay at my side; I grinned and set the poppies he had brought me on his chest. He always brought me poppies; he used to say they reminded him of me, I said the same thing now.

"I thought you'd be here." A weary yet rough with age voice stuttered a few feet from behind.

"Don't worry, he'll be gone soon." I whispered, my eyes glazing over as I stared into the thickening fog.

"Dad, what are you doing here? I asked petulantly. I didn't bother facing him, he knew he wasn't welcome.

He let the shuffle of his feet answer my question and after a long tension filled silence he took a deep breath and exhaled.

"Oh pumpkin I know, I know." He sighed, the leaves crying out in a chorus of fatal crunches as he sat down cross legged next to me.

I gave Jack an apologetic half grin and looked to the sallow sunken man to my left. He had thinned dramatically within the last two years; his cheekbones protruded casting shadows over the hollows of his cheeks; his gaunt skin, once taut, had furrowed and sagged giving in to gravity's pull; small dark crescents had formed under his grey eyes, devoid of recognition; and his sickly posture suggested he hadn't been well for some time.

"I was just sitting at home thinking about that time when you were six, you had just learned to ride your bike without training wheels, remember?" He spoke soft and swift, his last word quavering as he stifled a cough.

I'd heard him tell this story a thousand times over the years; I would laugh along and join in the rehearsed recital, but today, I didn't want to hear it.

“Stop” I mumbled.

“You were just so cute, well until little Johnny Miller ran right out in front of ya, oh you cou-”

“Stop. Dad, I said Stop! I don’t want to hear it!” I hated him. I hated him for making me yell in front of Jack, here where I-, where we, found our sanctuary.

“It’s not like it was your fault, what happened to Johnny.”

His sympathy was sickening.

“It was my fault.” I murmured under my breath, I couldn’t look at Jack; I couldn’t bear it.

“Darling, it was not your fault.” he insisted. “Even if we had taught ya how to break Johnny still would ‘a run right out in front of ya, he still would ‘a been hit, and he still would ‘a wound up in the hospital.”

I could sense a bit of agitation in his voice, though his face was pale and sullen.

In reality, Johnny hadn’t really needed to go to the hospital at all; he had been released within an hour of his arrival with a minor concussion. However his parent’s had always been over protective; rushing him to the emergency room for every scrape, cut, burn, and bump.

But I didn’t care that Johnny had been okay. I didn’t care, not today.

“It was my fault Dad!” I startled him, “I knew Johnny was there, and I knew where my bike was going, and I didn’t stop it, it’s like I didn’t even try to stop it!” I was shaking now, why? Why had he come here only to interrupt Jack and I with a stupid childhood story?

I looked back at Jack, still smiling up at me. A leaf had fallen and I quickly brushed it from his head.

My father sighed, “What do you think?” He asked, directing his gaze, for the first time since he intruded, towards Jack.

Jack said nothing, perhaps he didn’t want to hurt my feelings by agreeing with my father.

Before I let the silence take over completely I sat back, now side by side cross legged with my father, my hand on Jack’s leg. I let the cool, damp feel of the grass run through my fingers, wishing Jack would speak up and tell me what to do, like he used to.

“I’m going out driving with your brother this afternoon.”

Though my father’s voice was meek, it sliced through the sharp autumn air, reverberating as if he were shouting down a well, ricocheting off the old dilapidated stones only to dissolve into an incoherent echo, to drown in the shallow murky sludge below.

“If you’d like to come along, I’m sure he’d love to have his big sister give him a few driving lessons.”

He always did this, trying to change the conversation so he wouldn’t lose face in an argument.

“It was my fault.” I said again under my breath, I could feel the anger swell and rise from the pit of my stomach; I swallowed forcing it to stay at bay.

“And no, I’ve got plans. Thanks.” I replied curtly. Billy would be fine with dad, and anyway Jack and I were spending the day together. We didn’t have many, anymore.

“I would really love it if you came along.” He pressed.

“Don’t” I warned through clenched teeth.

“Honey-, sweetie-, I just don’t want to see ya lose yourself. Being here, with Jack, It’s not good for ya!” His feeble attempt to raise his voice was pathetic.

I looked to Jack; the fog had enveloped his face; his eyes, shining sapphires, dissolved dissipating into the mist. My chest tightened, my heart twisting as if someone were wringing it out like a sopping rag. My vision blurred and realizing I had stopped breathing; I inhaled, gulping down air, gasping as if I were drowning. The frigid cold bit at my face as tears threatened to break my frail façade. I looked to my father through bleary eyes; his mouth moving as he swayed his head back and forth. I found myself rising over his slumped figure, my whole body numb.

His head shot up, eyes unblinking as a moment of fear flitted across his face. I was shouting; my arms thrashed about; my façade breaking, letting a flood of warm salty tears spill down my cheeks. My head pounded as I strained my voice to go louder, the sight of my father's resigned patience revolting. I knew I was shouting but I couldn't hear a word, my ears pulsating with every pump of-

"Jack-" I choked on his name.

My arms fell to my sides as my legs folded and collapsed beneath me.

Sunk in the unkempt grass, I sat blindly face down, my head in my hands. My father reached out and placing his hand on my knee we fell into a still silence.

It had been autumn, mid-October, and we were driving back from Jack's family cabin after celebrating our second year anniversary. We were half way home when Jack turned off onto an unmarked dirt road; he said he knew of a place where oak leaves blanketed the sky, where you could practically see their colors changing. We had driven two or three miles, winding our way through a thick forest of pines, when the Jeep's engine started to sputter. Jack coasted to the side of the road before putting it in park and shutting it off. He had told me to wait in the car as he jumped out and opened the hood. I started searching through the glove box for the owner's

manual, when he shouted through the window for me to turn on the flashers. As he walked to the rear and started rifling through the tool box, I leaned over the center console, my elbow accidentally pushing the gear shift to neutral. I heard the twang of metal hitting the ground and Jack's muffled cursing as he bent down to pick up whatever he had dropped. Before I knew it, the Jeep started rolling backwards, I leaned back in an attempt to pull the emergency break but it was too late; Jack had stood up; giving me just enough time to see his shining blue eyes in the rearview mirror before-

My whole body jolted upright as I snapped back to the present, my head jerking from side to side trying to shake the nightmare away. My father had pulled his hand back in alarm and turning his face away, left me staring at the poppies lying in the grass. I closed my eyes and inhaled, letting the cool air numb the hurt.

I could still feel him, the way he would wrap his arms around my waist, his hands tracing patterns on the small of my back; the way he would pull me up when he kissed me, bringing me to the tips of my toes; the night of Doomsday when mascara streaked my cheeks, dressed in my ratty sweatpants, my flaming red hair mashed to the back of my head as he held my face, brushing his thumb against my pale cheek and said he was falling in love with me. I swallowed the lump in my throat; I could still feel him.

"Why don't ya come over for dinner tomorrow night? Mom's making your favorite." My father had turned back to face me, this time his face red and blotched.

I nodded my head in reluctant acceptance and watched him pause before pushing himself to his feet.

"I can give ya a ride home if ya want." He offered, gazing down at me.

I shook my head, diverting my eyes back to the poppies.

“Alright, well at least walk your old man to his car won’t ya?”

His face brightened as I stood up and taking one last look at the grass where Jack lay he turned on his heel and started walking. I followed him through, amongst the forgotten stone until we reached a crooked, black iron arch, which marked the park’s east entrance. Ivy wound round and through its many intricacies and at either side two large bushes of gold and orange marigolds framed its base. I stood just outside the arch next to the curb which bordered the parking lot; drawing my black hoodie closer, my arms hugging my chest trying to ward off the cold. I watched my father step over loose gravel and around jagged pot holes as he slowly made his way to his car.

“You’re sure ya don’t want a ride home?” He asked from behind the open driver door.

I looked at the car; its pale yellow paint had flaked off leaving behind rust caked stains, and the trunk gave me shivers, its left side crushed from when my father had backed into our mailbox, he still had the bungee cord hooked from its hinges to the bumper to keep it shut.

“Yeah, I’ll walk home when I’m ready.” I said, looking over my shoulder, peering through the thick wall of fog.

“I love you.” I could see the hurt in his eyes.

“Love you too Dad.” I felt a pang of guilt as he got in the car, but it wasn’t enough to make me go with him.

I watched him back up and drive down the highway until he disappeared. I turned back, the marigolds brushing my leg as I passed under the arch. Slowing my pace and holding my breath, I approached that same old oak. I sighed in relief as I saw Jack lying in the grass smiling up at me just like he always had.

“Sorry” I whispered, kneeling down beside him.

I picked the poppies up from his chest, and laid next to him, a subtle breeze tousling my hair as Jack whispered in my ear, letting me know everything was going to be alright.