

The Alphabet Carpet

The cup felt cold in my hand. My mother had given it to me, with a look of sheer pity, as the steam trickled into the air. Perhaps I gave it one perfunctory sip, not even thinking, but, I can't have touched it since. There was a little layer of milk forming on top, looking like a shallow island in a brown sea. I just couldn't drink. I couldn't do anything.

I could hear the mute conversation from my sister, my mum and my dad – but it seemed to be some foreign language. Not even that. Just unnecessary voices. They were low and pained, for my benefit, and at such a time, the world outside was just as sullen and silent. But within me, a maelstrom was in total effect.

It felt as if every inside me, every nerve was an electricity wire that had been sliced. Sparks of emotion were roaring from the ends of each of them, and their numbers were too many to comprehend. No thought could finish before another barged into it, demanding the stage, until quickly another. Some of these were trivial, such as knowing I have to sleep at some point. Others were- I just couldn't even comprehend the enormity of them.

Somewhere, the modicum of coherence within me scanned the room, where they darted, like a child scanning stars, at the odd crumb. A sudden swelling washed over me. I had an overwhelming urge to Hoover. Something I could *do*. Something I could control. But, I knew if I just stood up and started cleaning, my parents and sister would exchange glances, fuss about me and encourage me to sit back down as *they* took care of "all the stuff". No, the best thing I could do right now was sit, and just process. Just allow those lacerated wires of grief spark out until all my emotions had mellowed and solidified into catharsis, and then- maybe then I could sleep.

Somewhere on a different planet. A different realm. A different plane of existence, I heard a clatter, and then a sharp gasp, which preceded an intentionally subtle, but salient, "Fuck, I'm sorry, Jude."

I looked up, wondering what those words meant. What any words meant. And the world before me was just a fuzz of colours and shapes, until I blinked, shook my head a little and allowed sense to filter in like sand in a jar. My sister was standing at the sink, her hands held together in apology beneath a face of worry.

"What?" I finally managed, and then quickly looked to my mum and dad for explanation or translation. My dad was flicking through an old book that we'd- that had been left on the table, but my mother was studying me. When we caught eyes, an immensity of understanding held them there together, and it felt as if even with this distance, her arms were around me, holding me tight. But, even with the look of support from her, it wasn't enough. As a kid, all I'd need was this look, or that hug – aided by the comfortable, familiar perfume - and all the woes imagined and real would fizzle, dwarfed by fierce, protective maternity. But as an adult, my pain was my responsibility and all she could do was look on, and do the best she could.

A knot formed in my throat, my stomach fulminated into a tumult, and try as I might to quell it all- quell the raging pain... it leaked out. Two salty, traitorous rivers. I blinked them back with a fierce sting, and my lip trembled for a moment.

"Oh, baby," my mum said, standing up. In a swift and graceful sweep, she was sitting beside me, and strange as the notion is, seeing as her intention was to comfort me, the action seemed to roil the emotions, defeating instantly, my efforts to placate them, and I began sobbing once more. "Oh, baby. My little baby. I'm so sorry."

I grabbed her wrinkled hand, and pulled it to my chest, placing it on the heart as if the tendrils and ribbons that were left could be held as one, and stitched together as simply as my school trousers were by those same hands.

"I'm so sorry," I heard my sister say through my trembles and deafening effort to stop it, to stop crying in front of them. "Was it hers?"

I had no idea what my sister was talking about, but my mother seemed to understand. She acted as a conduit, from my darkness to the normal world that just yesterday I inhabited. "I don't think he cares about the cup, love," she said.

I realised then, the clatter – she must have dropped something. My mother was right. I didn't care. I couldn't care for anything again. Nothing. Except-

"Daddy?" the voice was meek and crept across the vast rift between worlds, instantly binding them together. My sister audibly gasped, my dad took one look at my son, then at me, then looked down, foreseeing the onerous burden.

A fortitude stole over me, and I accepted the resolve thankfully. It felt as if I were in the fray of battle, naked and unarmed, but hearing my son's voice had evened the odds somewhat, donned me in a full suit of plate, then offered sword and shield to boot. The army I was facing was still overwhelming, and sooner or later it would steal me – but I had someone to carry on fighting for now.

Rubbing away the tears with the palm of my hand, and breathing out - rather too loudly if I'm honest, but it was a forced effort to show my mother that I was taking control of myself again – I looked up, to see Junior standing awkwardly at the bottom of the stairs.

His foot was turned inward slightly, and he rubbed the sleepiness from his eyes. His hair ruffled by the pillow and tufted up at the back. Something, I'd battle with every morning. He was wearing the blue pyjamas, with the little planets and their rings. *She loved tho-* I cut off the thought. It was too dangerous. I had only just clawed myself back onto the cliff, I didn't need to look back over when the ground was so unsteady.

"Hello, Junior," I croaked, in a toneless, cracked, huffed voice.

"Are you cry- why is nanny and-" then he caught sight of my sister. "Aunt Pat?"

All eyes were on him, and though only nine years old, it was clear he was processing something wasn't right. Something was wrong. And I didn't know how to tell him he was right, something was. Everything was.

"What's happening?" he asked, all semblance of exhaustion immediately dissipated.

"Come here, Junior," I said, holding an arm out with weak motions toward myself, as if trying to coax a startled fox. "Come on, don't worry."

"I heard a bang," he said walking over.

"That was me," Patty admitted in a hollow whisper, barely audible. "I smashed a cup, baby."

"Is that why you was crying, daddy?" he asked.

"No, no." I pulled him toward me when he was in range, smiling in spite of myself, at the innocence of his question, and how I'd do anything to think of a smashed cup worthy of tears. My mum realised what was about to happen, so she shot up from beside me, procuring the cold coffee from my hands, but cautiously, protectively, perched herself on the arm of the couch to be ready for assistance. Just in case.

Every word in the English language presented itself before me. Each one tasting differently, none of them right. Every movie, every book, every show, every song – all the art in the world that dealt with loss and grief flickered unhelpfully, as I tried to comprehend how to tell him.

There was no way. There was no possibility. There was nothing I could say to even start this in the right way. How could I ever?

“You know mummy has been ill, don’t you?” is what came out. I didn’t even realise those were the words that had been chosen. It was autonomous. He nodded, and already I could see understanding stealing over his face. His jaw clenched, and I could see his little pink cheeks moving in and out as he tensed up, as if bracing himself in any way he could. The little eyes, always full of wonder and play began to glisten, offering a tragic reflection of the low lamplight that spilled in the room. “And-” I tried. “And, you- you know we sai-”

This was almost as hard as the news. Having to be the one to pass it on, as if it was some vile, virulent taint that had destroyed my life, and I couldn’t be the only victim because life it just too cruel, too ruthless to allow it. I had to, because this something we couldn’t avoid.

My mum leant forward, as if about to take over, realising that a blockade of tears kept my words at bay, but I gave her a quick look, and shook my head. It had to be me. With Herculean might, I mustered up a feigned calm, painted on a thin coat of bravery, so he knew that I would be okay, I would still be here... and carried on. “You remember when we went to the hospital, and you asked mummy why she looked sad?”

His chin was trembling, his lower lip inadvertently curled outward, his arms crossed into himself as if he was freezing. A single droplet crawled out from his eyes, and that seemed enough to dismantle the dam. Both eyes stopped glistening, because he clenched them shut, but the tears gushed down. He nodded, weakly. He knew. But I had to say it. I had to confirm it.

“And we told you- remember? We told you that we found out mummy won’t get better? And that she was going to have another bed in there for a while?”

“Jude,” Pat tried, her voice thick with difficulty, but I ignored her.

“And we told you about heaven and- and that even when she goes, she’ll still be here with us? No matter what?”

“Tap tap,” he muttered, feeble as an echo.

“Tap, tap,” I repeated.

He wept. Instantly, curled up into foetal position, and fit himself into any nook he could find offered from my body. As if the loss of his mother might somehow mean the loss of me, and he wanted to do anything to make sure that I couldn’t go, couldn’t leave, couldn’t fade. His frame shook and shuddered, then it would pause for a moment as he took in a pained breath, which would then renew it. I just held him tight, knowing it was his turn to give in to it, like I did when I got the call. I had to be strong again.

I pulled him closer, even though it seemed like an impossible feat. I just squeezed, and cradled and whispered any comforts I could think of. Unsure if any made sense, if they worked – perhaps repeating what my mum and dad had, just an hour or two – though it felt like an eternity – before had offered to me.

I braved one quick look around, and my mum, perched; my sister, standing with arms folded – both were sobbing, too. Stifling the noise, so Junior wouldn’t hear, but displaying the full rawness of their feelings. I heard a gulp, and a sigh, then looked to see my dad doing the same. Always a taciturn man, but this seemed to have broken him, too.

I can’t say how long we stayed like this for. My entire body was screaming with discomfort. I needed to move, but it was impossible. Only when Junior stirred, I would. He had stopped crying, and outside, dawn was yawning – reminding me that though my world has stopped, time would trickle on – initially a betrayer, ultimately a healer. He was asleep, but even now,

little shudders would take hold of him – perhaps cold, perhaps nightmare, perhaps just remnants of loss tormenting him.

Perhaps I had fallen asleep, but it is possible I had been staring into space, stealing what peace I could from numbness. It was strange that. At the nadir of sadness, the very drudging depth of despair, we as people could transcend feelings and just *be*. Maybe a simple necessity when life just seemed to cruel to understand.

My sister was busying herself about the way she always did when nervous, wiping this, dusting that. Mum and dad were asleep on the other couch, sitting up like a pair of old, tattered ornamental statues. Her shoulder on his head, cushioned by her wild, briary hair. His head, bald and chubby, leant back over the cushion so that his mouth was aloft, emitting deep and slow grumbled exhalations that threatened to be snores at the slightest movement. The two of them sleeping in one another; melding together into unity...

The numbness was fizzling as I compared my future without such a position that the lucky took for granted, and I breathed out to pace my thoughts. My sister spun to face me then.

“Oh, you’re awake,” she whispered.

“Did I fall asleep?” I asked, looking down at Junior. His eyelids flickered, but he was steadily away.

“Only for an hour or something,” she said.

“What time is it?”

She slipped her hand in her pocket, and pulled it out. Even though there was a clock just behind me. She checked quickly, and the I could see her eyes flick across the screen in which I assumed her husband, her love, her partner had been messaging for updates, or to offer support. She blinked as if to snapshot the information, then looked back to me, “Nearly five.”

“Nearly five,” I repeated, because I didn’t know what else to say.

“Do you want a coffee?”

“A wha- oh, no, thank you.”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. You should get more sleep, Jude. Take Junior to bed, and we’ll sleep down here.” Silence followed for a while. “We won’t leave, you know? Not for a while. We’re here for you.”

“Okay. Okay, um... just give me a second.”

I swallowed the knot that was forming, because the last place I wanted to be was in that bedroom. I’d had to sleep alone in there for a long time, but knowing that she was still alive, still here – it made it somewhat bearable. She’d always joke that I had all the space to sleep in, and I should be happy and take advantage of that whilst she’s stuck in a stuffy single bed. But I never did. I stayed on my side. I sprayed her perfume on her pillow hoping the smell would encourage my dreams to conjure her, and perhaps there we could cuddle into one another.

I couldn’t go there now. I couldn’t be in that empty bed, I couldn’t smell the lingering taunt of her perfume – like a scented ethereal spirit that I’d never truly be able to hold close again.

“Heaven?” Pat said, suddenly so close to me that I jumped at the vicinity.

“What?”

“You mentioned heaven to Junior?” she explained. “Since when did you believe in all that?”

“Oh,” I looked down at him, and waited for a moment. Definitely asleep. “It was Kathy.” Another silence was about to take hold, but I couldn’t allow it. Talking was nice right now. “She didn’t believe in it either, to be honest. But I think she just couldn’t bear the thought of Junior thinking she abandoned him.”

“She hasn’t abandoned him!” Pat whispered, in shock.

“No, I know. I know.” I looked up at her, and she was staring down at me – her hair a brown, youthful reflection of what my mother’s was at current. “That’s what the tap tap thing meant.”

“I wondered about that,” she admitted.

“When we got the diagnosis, we were trying to think of the best way to tell him,” I explained to her. “She said when her mum was sick, she used to tell her all she had to do was,” I tapped my heart twice,” because no matter what happened, she’d always be inside there.”

This was all stuff I didn’t believe, in a spiritual sense. But, in a sense it was true. And this is the way Kathy saw it too, because despite everything, she consisted of half of her mother’s genes. No matter what happened to Kathy’s mum, she’d always be a part of her. And that was just the same with Junior. And for a moment there, I realised that falling asleep right on my lap, was something she had left her stamp on.

I loved Junior more than I could ever put into words, but the sudden realisation that she lived on in him sparked a sudden overwhelming love, that made me feel perhaps, just perhaps, there was a chance I’d make it through this. Kathy always found a way to make me smile, or give me hope – even throughout the worst blows in life. She always found a way. And this realisation was just another example of that!

Pat was still staring at me, and I realised my thoughts had stolen over me. “But then, she- uh- her mum got too sick to move, so whenever Kathy went to visit, she’d just say, ‘tap, tap’.” I sighed then, lost in the sadness of it all. “I’d see her doing it as well, y’know, Pat? Just every now and then. Obviously, before all of this. We’d be watching something that upset her, or when we went for a walk, or- I dunno- anything, really. I assume little sudden thoughts of her mum would just enter, and she’d just,” I tapped my heart again, and it felt nice... like a hug. Like a little peck on the lips from Kathy. “Then she’d just carry on with what she was doing.”

“Maybe it does all exist,” she offered, fruitlessly.

“Yeah,” I said. “Maybe.”

I tapped my heart again, and once more, I felt that little swelling of warmth within. It was, in truth, nothing compared to the universe of grief I’d landed in. But, just that one miniscule mote of light was *something*. Some defence against the bleakness. It was all I had.

“Y’know,” I said, finally, not realising how long I’d been silent for. “I think I will go and take him to bed.”

“You go,” she encouraged. “Don’t worry about food, about cleaning, about anything. I’ll come check on you in a few hours, or just come down if you wake up. Or if you can’t sleep. Or- oh, you know what I mean, Jude. Just... we’re here for you.”

“Yeah, I know. I know. Thank you.”

Carefully, as if my son was so brittle he might fade to dust, I slipped my hands beneath him, and gently lifted him up. Sleep was going to be the only time he’d be free of all of this, and he deserved that much. The future was going to be horrid and grim, especially the next few months. I’d have to read articles on child grief and- oh, Kathy’s dad! He’ll no doubt be visiting tomorrow, and her brother and- *Tomorrow*. I forced myself.

Pat was right. I needed to sleep.

I pushed the door to his room open. The creak that emanated from it seemed to be so loud, but I knew that was only in contrast to my want for quiet. His curtains were pulled shut, but the advancing pale light poked through, creating one small line that poured the dawn across the alphabet carpet. Large letters, colourful and myriad chequered across the floor in no specific order. The hours we’d spent as he showed us, day after day, what words he’d learned to spell

by jumping on them, or leaving toys on them so we could guess what the word was. Not that we complained.

There were toys hastily cleaned – by which I meant shoved to the sides of the walls, piled up precariously - which was as good as we could hope for with a nine year old. His blanket was shoved to the bottom of the bed, from when he woke up – just before the world stole his mother and youth in one cursed swoop.

I placed him in the bed, and pulled the superhero blanket over him. *They can't save you from this one*, I thought to myself, well aware I was on the brink of collapse. *But I'll do my best.*

But when I turned to leave, I couldn't step. I just couldn't face going into that room. Not yet. Not right now. I didn't want to go back down to Pat, or wake my mum and dad. I looked back at Junior, and realised, maybe it was going to be him who saved me.

As delicately as I could, I shifted him to the side, and tried to contort myself into the bed around him. I disturbed him enough that he moved, but he didn't wake. Instead, he shuffled over, permitting me space, and so I lay next to him. Clearly, he felt the presence, and without thought, his wiry little arm was snapped about my neck – as if I was a little teddy that would help him sleep... as if he weren't the little bundle of love that was actually helping me.

And sooner or later, the anguish I'd felt since the call soothed, and I slipped into a broken sleep. It was hard to say exactly what I dreamt, but it was of Kathy. I could hear her voice, but she weren't calling, she was trying to explain something – calm and at ease. I just couldn't make out what it was. I could feel an attempt to hug me, but it was to no avail – as if a shadow wanted to embrace, but she who cast it was nowhere to be soon. I could feel myself twisting, shuffling, jolting. It wasn't a nightmare, exactly, but perhaps a manifestation of longing. She wanted to comfort me, as much as I wanted her to be there. But I just couldn't make out what she was saying. I couldn't hear her. I couldn't understand.

A sudden pulsing, booming beat began to fill my ears, blocking out all sense. A *boom, boom. Boom, boom! Boom, boom!* And then, an awful crashing sound and I jumped up from the bed. My entire body was drenched in sweat, and I looked to see Junior still asleep, but he pulled the blanket close from where I'd dislodged it from his warmth.

On the floor, his toys tottered over. Perhaps that booming was something outside my dreams, not inside. I waited a moment, to see if Pat would come in to see what the noise was, or to see if Junior might wake, but when it seemed as if the occurrence was for me only, I relaxed.

Kathy never liked a dirty room. Never. She wasn't insistent about it, but she'd always be sure that before she was asleep, the house was at least free of clutter. So, deciding I wanted to try and steal the last few hours of sleep, if possible, I started to pick up the toys. "I'll keep it clean, love," I whispered a promise into the air. "Don't worry."

And quickly, I got to picking them up.

One at a time.

And maybe from habit. Maybe some bizarre notion. Maybe whatever.

I took note of the letters that were hidden beneath each toy.

Beneath the first toy, a bold and fraying **T**.

A hid beneath the second.

Then, finally, below a third, **P**.

My heart skipped a beat. And I was frozen in shock for longer than I can say. Trembling, tearing, barely able to connect conscious thought, I proceeded to pick up the last of the toys.

And once again, in order... **T-A-P**

I was speechless. I was- I- just...

I placed the toys carefully at the side, and I shuffled back next to Junior.

No matter how dark life seemed, how cruel and terrible it could be. Kathy would always find a way to give me hope, to make me smile. And it seemed that even at the pinnacle of grief, there was no exception.

She was here.

I hugged into Junior, and with one hand on my heart, one hand on his, I offered a *tap, tap...*

And then, I slept.