

## Grandfather

The stench of hand sanitiser burnt her nose, the white sheets blinded her eyes, and everything about the situation made her sick to her stomach. But she still reached out and held her grandfather's hand. Because that's what you did when someone you loved was in a coma.

She watched his chest rise, up and down; she watched his long strands of ivory hair flick ever so slightly, and she studied his face; his button nose, the scar on his forehead from his 'rugby days', and his chapped lips, occasionally wheezing for breath.

It was something like torture, knowing nothing you could do would help this agonizingly pitiful state. No, it was something worse than torture. It was-

'Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, it's just-'

Snapping her from her thoughts, she spun in her seat, iron-cold eyes staring hard.

'I-I know.. how it feels.'

It was a boy, all chestnut curls and rosy cheeks, dressed in hospital scrubs, clutching to a trolley of blankets. She wanted to scream so badly he didn't know how it felt, it wasn't his Grandfather on the hospital bed. It was hers.

But instead, she asked in a wavering tone, 'Yours too?'

'Oh no, it was my Grandmother. I never met either of my Grandfathers. Lucky me, in a way, I suppose.' He chuckled in a way only inappropriate in a room full of coma patients.

The silence fell upon them hard, as death's signature was only a pen lid away.

He exhaled. 'It was the hardest time of my life.'

'I've got a feeling it might be mine too.'

'Well...' He changed his grip on the trolley, 'I'll be here to make it easier for you. One blanket at a time.'

'Thanks.'

'Except these are dirty. I wouldn't recommend these ones.'

'Okay- we get the idea!' She laughed softly. A laugh only inappropriate in a room full of coma patients.

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She had heard reading to your loved one increased the chance of waking up. So she started to read his favourite to him - Oliver Twist. But it wasn't until 4 pages in, that she realised how depressing it was.

And it wasn't until she was on Chapter 2, that she realised Blanket Boy had pulled up a chair behind her, eyes and ears listening intently.

'Haven't you got more blankets to clean?'

'Surprisingly, that's the job of the washing machine.'

His deadpan humour reminded her of her Grandfather. It washed away every sickening thought of workhouses and gruel and replaced them with his scent of warm linen. The dimples in his cheeks reminded her of his folded sheets.

'Who are you anyway?'

'I'm Dr Leigh Vere, to you.'

'A Doctor?'

'A trainee, I'm studying Medicine at uni.'

'How old-'

'23 - I know, one of my many blessings that I happen to look so young.'

She laughed, but she couldn't ignore the desolating feeling gnawing at her stomach. This boy, her age, was contributing so much to the world. Who was she? Someone who simply read her dying Grandfather bedtime stories.

Unworthiness must've flickered in her eyes, as he began again, 'But you know, you're here Adeline, and it's your compassion that matters. You're worth, so much.' Her gaze fell to the soft presence of his hand on her shoulder, and as she looked up at him, the unworthiness washed away.

But it wasn't until much after, that she considered how remarkable it was, that he knew her name without her even mentioning it.

It's after 4 weeks of unresponsiveness, that they start to consider the coma patient as deteriorating. If there hasn't been a response during that time, hope is lost.

They upped his medication, gave him a tube to breathe through, anything to increase the chance of him...

But only his chest was the only part of him that moved, the gentle rise and fall. Adeline could only watch. There was nothing else to do.

Until Leigh came and pulled up his chair. He needn't even crack a joke, as before they knew it, she was sobbing into his shoulder. Like an open flowing tap, it wouldn't stop.

They say denial is the first stage of grief. But Adeline simply felt confused when she arrived at his hospital bed, and he wasn't there.

It was only until they led her into a secondary room, that the truth hit her like a wave.

A wave of icy water poured down the crown of her head, trickling to the tip of her toes. A million emotions flooded her all in one. The only thought lingering in her head was that she should've been there.

She quietly repeated the simple notion,

'I should've been there when he died.'

Outside the hospital ready to leave, there was a boy with chestnut curls, but no rosy cheeks. He had pink carnations in his hand. She didn't know how he knew those were her favourite.

But she didn't question it, as she fell into his arms. Their tears followed suit.

'This may sound- well, I was here when my Grandad... There was a trainee, and he well... I want to thank him, for all he... Do you know if-'

'Name?' The sharp-toned receptionist inquired.

'Dr Leigh Vere.'

The seconds passed like hours as her keyboard clicked away. But her words cut time like a knife.

'Not in our database.'

'Sorry?'

'There's never been a Leigh Vere that's worked here.'

'Oh.'

The slam of the car door, the click of her seatbelt and the sensation of her hands gripping cold leather.

An inexplicable feeling waved over her, being met with a thought. It had been bubbling up inside of her from the start.

Was he real? Or just the manifestation of the man she was losing?

But upon facing the thought, neither pain nor numbness greeted her. Instead, hope was born inside her.

It didn't really matter.

Because it taught her that she didn't have to look for her Grandad in others.

For his love was already within her.