

- Autumn days and sunrays -

It was a casual Thursday afternoon. One of those where a cool wind was swirling through the broad street I was walking in, picking up red and orange leaves and lifting them up into the blue sky. "I will do some homework first when I get home", I thought to myself and smiled gently.

I was guessing what Mom might have prepared for lunch today when a familiar face caught my attention.

Nancy, 3c, a junior, in the classroom across the hall, just two doors apart from my own classroom on the other side of the corridor, was gracefully strolling down the pavement just two hundred meters in front of me. "Miss Perfect" was sauntering down the street, wearing a red fluffy pullover with a black skirt, black tights, and matching autumn boots (the cool ones, the ones that when you see them, make it oh so clear that the person is very fashionable). She was carrying a beige trench-coat in her right hand and her brown hair, which looked like she always found the time to put conditioner in, was undulating over her shoulders.

She was well-liked in our school." Popular" as we might call it in high school even though she was a bit nerdy. I was used to her smile and remembered the fun math classes we took together last year.

Where was she going? I wondered as she strolled along the street casually.

She hadn't mentioned that she could accompany me visiting my dad's grave. I could have invited her to a coffee in Joe's bakery if she had told me.

In general Nancy has been acting a little bit more introverted and shy towards me lately and therefore probably hadn't mentioned it to me or had simply forgotten to. Her usually perfect skin was perfect no more. One could spot deep dark circles under her eyes that she had tried to cover with some concealer.

She also seemed to be less talkative with everyone else at the moment.

For now, her face was turned in the other direction as we were both strolling along Broad Street.

There was a crossroad about 400 meters away. One street led to Joe's bakery while the other took a turn and led straight to the graveyard.

I realised that I hadn't heard her heartfelt laugh in a while.

Of course, a few residential units lay on the way, but I doubted that she wanted to visit anyone there. All our friends lived south.

This is what made me so curious. We were neighbours so usually she would take the tram a few stations east from school, then take the Mary-Red Lane and head straight from station home just like I did. Our conversations were always something I looked forward to after long schooldays. A cool, but not cold, gust of wind gently brushed against my face while the sun sent a few warm sunbeams to my skin.

I remembered how close we were when we were kids. At that time Dad was still around. He once had organised a barbecue at our house and a few neighbours had come around, Dad had grilled for us and Nancy, and I had run around our porch in our garden with the other neighbours' kids.

At that time everything was still fine.

What if she was on the way to a teacher for tutoring lessons? That was a possibility. Nancy had always tried to do as good and be as perfect as possible which had led me to think that she would probably be ashamed of needing help from anyone in any way.

Of course that was nothing to be ashamed about. On the contrary.

She would probably grab a coffee at Joe 's bakery on the way and I could ask her myself.

With this plan in mind, I followed her another few meters.

So, I was even more confused when she passed by the bakery and headed straight for the graveyard.

I stood there for a moment perplexed and confused. Then I hurried to keep up with her while maintaining a safe distance of two hundred metres. I didn't want to invade her privacy. God, I didn't want to follow her around like a creepy stalker, but I had to walk in the same direction.

I followed her a few turns, left, right, left, right. Nancy stopped abruptly at a very new-looking wooden cross on which one could read a small text and a name on the middle part where the two beams were crossing.

I was narrowing my eyes trying to read the words on the wooden cross. For a second, I was thinking about crouching behind the gravestone right in front of me but found it even more creepy and stalker-like so I just stood there and read.

In Memory of Hildegard Brandt

A loving mother, daughter,

Grandmother, sister,

Great chef, playmate, listener and

everything in between

May magnolias bloom just for you in the heavenly gardens.

We will miss you always.

I was standing still. In my body there was silence. I could hear my heartbeat. That wasn't Nancy's family name. Bum-bum, bum-bum. It still reminded me of something. I just couldn't place it. Could it be her aunt or distant cousin? Before I could wrap my head around a possible answer my legs unfroze themselves from their position and started guiding me in Nancy's direction.

I watched Nancy going onto the ground in slow motion.

A shivering sob cut through the suddenly ice-cold air and let my heartbeat stop. The pain in her soft but (deep) crying dragged a sharp knife through my heart.

It reminded me of my very own pain.

Two steps. I reached her.

My fingers touched her shoulder softly. "Hey ", I said. She spun around hastily while she was trying to wipe away her tears and some mascara with the back of her hands until our gazes met. "Alfie, what are you doing here? ", she asked shakily gasping for air. "Just visiting someone ", I replied casually. "Oh. Sorry I forgot ", the girl with the most beautiful brown hair I had ever seen said, guilt and sadness troubling her hazel green eyes.

She was too overwhelmed to speak, and I recalled that I had put my hand on her shoulder but couldn't recall taking it off her. This brought me back to the original reason why I had (more or less) decided to walk over here. "What about you? Are you meeting someone? ", I questioned carefully. Her eyes went glassy again, looking even greener than before. She turned around, looked at the new, almost orange and glowing wooden cross for a heartbeat, then turned back

to me and replied: “My grandma. “Her voice cracked in the middle of the word, and she broke down again. I knelt down at her side and hugged her. The church bell had been ringing continuously, and together with my memories of her, a precise image imprinted itself on my brain.

I remembered Nancy’s beloved, gentle, invariably smiling grandma who had always had a dad joke on her lips to uplift one’s mood in seconds. Loss is a sharp knife. It cuts through some people’s hearts and steals their joy. Yet this mostly happens to the lonely ones, people who have no one or who let nobody in.

For people who live through the pain together, there is a great chance to not only survive but to actually start living again.

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