

Home

I've never been to a funeral. Where I grew up, where I still call home, they just aren't necessary.

From the friends I've met at college I've learned they got big fancy ceremonies for the dead when they pass. I always cocked my head to the side and pretended to understand when they described 'em to me. Nobody ever asked me if I'd ever been to one, they just assumed I had.

Even Bill had assumed. And Bill doesn't assume anything. He asks careful questions to get the information he wants and to make sure his theories are correct. He asked me if I was studying at the college we both go to.

In the library, my nose stuck in a book, he pushed the eraser of a pencil into my shoulder to get my attention.

The first thing I noticed about him was his shaggy orange hair falling over his ears and eyes. His face was covered in freckles like a connect-the-dots puzzle. I knew I liked him even before he opened his mouth.

"You go here?" He asked me.

I closed the book in my lap and nodded.

He also nodded, did that thing where he chewed on his inner lip before asking a question, and we left the library together.

And now he's driving me to my parent's house down in the Dirt Valley.

"College is the first time I've been away from home for more than two weeks," I tell Bill. He grunts and keeps his eyes on the road. I like that about him. He's a man of few words. He matches my endless stream of nonsense perfectly.

"My mom likes nutcrackers. She used to keep 'em around the house all year long. My dad is a big chess player. When I was little, he tried to convince me the reason he won all the time was that his glasses showed him where to move the pieces. So, of course, I wore his glasses for the next game. But I just got a headache."

"That right?"

"Yeah. True as true can be."

He chuckles. We've been together for a while now. I know how he shows his emotions. I know his sarcastic chuckle from his giddy one. I can tell he's nervous from the way his fingers grip the steering wheel and how he's biting his lip. Not even the inside, the outside.

"I think they're going to like you," I place my hand on his forearm. His eyes flit to me for a half-second and he let go of his lip.

"I hope they will."

I pat his arm a couple of times and replace my hand back to my lap. I look out the window at all the scenery I remember from my childhood. I remember that clump of trees where I used to play and just behind it the blackberry patch where my blood from the thorns that pricked my skin was nearly indistinguishable from the berry juice that ran down my arms and face.

Bill doesn't notice things like that unless you point them out to him. Which I am happy to do, but after we met my parents. That's first.

I tell Bill where the next turn is and before I know it we're zooming past a tilted sign with the name "DIRT VALLEY" painted on it. I once asked my parents where that sign came from, but they only shrugged and said it always was, like everything else in Dirt Valley. Always was and always is.

Twenty minutes later I'm trying to calm my beating heart as I tell Bill to pull into the next dirt driveway because that's our destination.

The house is wood and old and has paint peeling from everywhere. It looks like one of those abandoned barns you pass on a long road and forget about the second you're past it.

The two chimneys are clean of smoke and likely filled with spiders and cobwebs by now, but at least the porch looks sturdy enough to stand on. There are roof shingles blown around the yard some, but I don't pay any mind. I'm just thinking about my parents and how excited they'll be when they see us.

I almost expect them to be waiting for us on the porch swing like they did when I got home from school when I was little, but the swing is empty and one of the chains is broken, spilling the swing onto the porch.

Bill pulls up to the end of the driveway but doesn't stop the car or get out. I raise an eyebrow at him and motion toward the locked door.

“Are you serious?” He finally asks me. He’s staring into my eyes, probably looking for signs of lying but he won’t find any.

“Yes, Bill. This is my parent’s place. I know it’s a little worn down but please just be polite about it.”

He nods, turns the key in the ignition of the truck so it stops vibrating and we’re left in silence. I open my door and my boots land on the dirt ground, chucking up some dust as I walk. Bill still doesn’t get out of the car. His hands are back on the steering wheel and he’s looking straight at something, unblinking. Scared.

I turn my head and see his target: the pile of smashed-up car parts shoved behind a shed. I know what he’s thinking, that car looks like the accident it was in killed every person involved. And he’s right. But I don’t tell him that.

I convince Bill to get out of the car and guide him up the driveway to the front door of the house. I knock on the glass, the sound echoing through the inside. There’s still a button for the doorbell, but that thing hasn’t worked in years. I press it anyway, just in case.

Eventually, I stop pounding and try the knob, which opens at just the slightest nudge.

“Of course,” I grumble as I invite Bill inside. He’s chewing the inside of his lip again. I really wish I could make him stop that, I feel like he’s gonna pop a blood vessel or something. I tug his hand into mine and I give him the tour.

The kitchen is covered in a thin layer of dust and Bill squishes a spider egg sack we find in an empty cupboard, but it’s in pretty good shape otherwise. I straighten the framed pictures of me when I was little on the counter and scrub the glass with my thumb so my parent’s faces smile through the grime.

I pull the plastic covers off the couch and overstuffed chair in the living room and we sit next to each other. I can tell he has questions. Bill always has questions, but he doesn’t ask them.

Somewhere a clock ticks and the sound of leaky pipes drowns out my thoughts. Bill is staring straight ahead at the fireplace, but his eyes are glassy. My parents are late and I wish they would hurry up. This will be the first time I’ve seen them in a year and I want to see how they’re doing.

I’m tired of sitting so I go look out the window, at the large pile of dirt just on the edge of the woods behind the house. Bill comes up behind me and snakes an arm around my waist.

“What are you looking for?” He asks.

I bite my lip and debate with myself whether I should tell him the truth. I decide not to and just lead him back into the living room and make him sit on the couch. I sit next to him and put my head on his shoulder.

“They’re late, Bill. They’re never late.” I feel a sob echo through my chest but I try to keep it inside.

“Why don’t you call them?” Bill offers. I shake my head.

“It doesn’t work like that anymore.”

Confusion takes over his face as he tries to get out another sentence, but the sound of rumbling distracts him.

My face lights up and I clap my hands together like I’m a little kid again. I don’t need to look out the window to see what’s happening, it’s been like this since I was sixteen four years ago. For only one night a year, I get to see my parents again.

I grasp Bill’s hand to try to calm him down. I can feel his pulse through his fingers rocketing and practically vibrating. I smooth the skin of his hand over with my thumb in a hopefully comforting motion.

“They’re not gonna to hurt you,” I whisper to him. I feel him swallow. I grip his hand tighter.

Before he can respond I shush him by putting a finger over his mouth.

“It’s the only way I can see them nowadays. You’d understand if you were from here.”

He searches my pleading eyes but I can still feel him trying to escape my grasp. I hold his fingers until mine turn white. He jumps at the sound of footsteps and dragging feet from outside on the dirt driveway. I can’t help but smile at the sound of my parents coming home.

I’m practically holding Bill down as shadowy figures appear behind the glass of the front door. Bill tightens his hold on my hand and looks at me as if asking another question, but he doesn’t speak.

The doorknob turns in a jerky motion until the door is pushed open.

“Welcome home, Mom and Dad.”