

# Spring

*Haley Merida*

The thrum of my father's old truck always had the knack for putting me to sleep. It was welcomed now. My dad has finally stopped going on about how proud of me he was. It was sweet when I first got my acceptance letter, but now that we were on the 16 hour drive up to my school, it was unneeded. As we pulled up to the table labeled according to our last name, I showed my new school ID to the girl wearing the polo with our school's name and khaki shorts. She smiled, asked for my name, and tried to ease any nerves that I might have. But I could only focus on her name tag. It said Callie.

I wish I could go back that spring. To my mother's steady breathing lulling me into a deep sleep while I stayed attached to her back like a koala, feeling her warmth. The scent of her perfume and tide detergent lingered around me for the few days I went to school that year. I would struggle to rub off her Revlon 535 stains on my forehead. My father would come home from work with some form of takeout and bags under his eyes. It was clear that he was hiding his pain within himself. Even then, at the age of 11, I knew. No one could understand those quiet days. Nothing and everything seemed to be happening around us all at once. All I can ever remember of my father of that time is the way his eyes could never quite reach any of us, just coasting through the house while Mom and I made conversation about what show we were watching that day. I still remember how deafening the silence was when the nurse would leave for the day.

My father eventually had to put his foot down and make me attend some school. I knew just from how everyone stared at me that the teacher talked to everyone. Their gazes, full of unwanted pity, ran through my spine and made the hairs on my neck stand. I dropped my head to avoid any unwanted eye contact as I made my way to my desk.

That day at recess a girl from my class came up to me. Her name was Callie. She told me that she was sorry that my mom was dying. I just said that I was too. Still to this day, I think about Callie and how most people would consider what she did rude, but to me, it was freeing. Callie offered me a sort of liberation from the quiet whispers behind my back. She let me know that she knew what I was going through. I found myself gravitating towards Callie after that.

When I crawled into my mother's bed after school that day, my mother brushed my hair from my face as I told her all about how Callie and I played at recess. I told her that I hoped we would be great friends. I also told her how I was really going to miss her when she left. I told her how scared I was. She wiped my tears away from my cheek as she whispered that everything would be okay. That she would always be with me and in my heart. She told me that her love for me was so strong that it would not be possible for it to leave with her.

Now instead of mourning the days that my father would force me to go to school, I would have a silent celebration within my spirit. I felt horrible about being excited to spend time with Callie over my mother. With Callie, death wasn't hanging over us like the Spanish moss in the willows of our backyard. I knew that I would always miss my mother dearly, but I couldn't help but miss Callie too. I would find myself wanting to talk about her to my parents constantly. This was something Callie said today, Callie would love that. Callie has pretty blonde hair just like that character. I tried to hold myself back for my mother's sake. Even at eleven years old I still had the forethought to put my mother first. It drove her absolutely insane.

One Friday night my mother wanted me to invite Callie over for a sleepover. My father was worried that all the medical equipment and the nurse would freak her out, but I assured my father that Callie already knew that my mother was sick. "That doesn't mean she really knows what that means, dear," he told me. I couldn't comprehend what he meant then. Even though I should have.

When Callie came over with her father behind, I felt nothing like the butterflies I had felt then. I knew that this would be a memorable. I still remember the way that my mother's candles reflected off of Callie's blonde braids. It felt so exhilarating to see her occupy the same space that I had been in my entire life. It was also a little unsettling to see her next to my mother's plethora of pills. I could tell that Callie's father was off put by my mother's headscarf. Callie clearly did not tell him about her, probably because she didn't see why she would have to. She was only there to play. My parents told me that I should show her to my game room, ushering us away while the adults got to talk. I didn't mind, however, since I really wanted to show her my toys and games.

While me and Callie were in the midst of making ourselves in the Sims, I heard my father scream my mom's name. The image I saw as I ran down the stairs will forever be ingrained in my memory. There will never be a moment in my life where I wouldn't have my father on the ground clutching my mother's limp body at the back of my mind. It will always be on in a loop.

I don't really remember the car ride to the hospital that night. I just knew that it was silent. There must have been a vacuum that sucked the air out of the car at some point. I swore that I could hear my mother's slowing heartbeat in the ambulance in front of us. I can faintly remember the way that Callie clutched my hand, begging me not to follow my mother wherever she was going.

After we got to the hospital, and saw my mother being ushered into intensive care, with a swarm of doctors, nurses, and CNAs trying to protect their queen bee. My father called Callie's dad to come get her. "I'm so sorry for this, Tim." Callie's father told mine. I had to watch her disappear into the darkness past the sliding doors. For a split second, I no longer was thinking of my mother and whether or not she was going to be okay. I was thinking of myself and Callie.

After around 6 hours of endless waiting my father was told that my mother

was, for now, in a stable condition. The cancer was now in almost every single part of her body. Her time was shortened in half overnight. This was the moment that I had my first panic attack. The spring was almost over and now I would have to face the summer without my mother. Without our shows. Without her voice shushing my cries away. I would never be able to see the way that my father tried to hide how much he loved her while she told him about her day at dinner. I would never wake up for school in the morning with her showing me what she painted for me the night prior. Everything that I had known about the world was collapsing in on me, filling my lungs to where I could not possibly breathe. I came back to the hospital waiting room in my father's arms. He was trying his best to comfort me the way he knew my mother would. I guess it's hard to do while you're sobbing just as hard.

I don't remember much from the weeks after that hospital visit. Just a sense of quiet mourning that was rolling through the house in waves. My father had stopped making me go to school. There was no borrowed time anymore. My mother was put on hospice care, her only drugs now just consisted of easing her pain for the remainder of her time on earth. I cried more in the weeks before her death than I actually did when she died. Even though she was still in the house living and breathing she was as good as dead. She had become what she dreaded the most. A walking corpse. My father and I tried to respect her wishes and to treat her as normally as we could. It was impossible to ignore the reality of the situation.

Everyone told me to remember her before she got sick and to try and see her as that. But I've only ever seen her bright eyes and flowing, thick hair in photos. I could never remember my mother before she was sick, she was sick for what felt like my entire life. My father knew this, he just told me to know that her suffering would end soon. In whatever afterlife was waiting for her, cancer would not follow, it was too deeply rooted within her body.

The funeral is what I remember the most. My mom already took me to Khol's to get a dress for it. She wanted to make sure that I looked good and still felt pretty. It was her last act of being a mother. From the moment I got out of my father's truck and entered the funeral home I told myself I wouldn't cry. My whole family was expecting me to cry. I still have trouble crying about it. I always knew my mother was going to die sooner than other's. A part of me that I tried to ignore and tried to throw away was happy that I didn't have to worry about it happening anymore. I could finally rest at night not thinking about when she would die.

Me and my dad sat in the front row, right by the casket and the preacher. I tried not to react to the way the preacher's false teeth flopped out of his mouth when he sang old mountain hymns based on some weird abstract Bible verse my mother cared nothing about. It had to be my grandpa's doing. No way dad would ask for that. My grandmother grabbed my right hand and rubbed what she must have thought to be comforting circles on the back of my hand. However, they didn't seem so comforting with how she was shaking terribly while ice cold. I had the thought that my mom's hands had to be warmer than grandma's. I wanted

nothing more than to go up to my mother and crawl in the casket with her and drift away into our dreams together. She would always be protecting me then.

After the songs and verses were finally finished, me, my father, and my grandparents stood in a line in front of my mom's casket.

I tried to stay glued to my dad for the remainder of the funeral. He was now my only anchor to the world. The only proof that I had that someone loved me. I listened to what everyone told us. How this would pass. How they were praying for us. My father would just do his best to nod along and not ignore them completely. He later told me that the whole time he was wondering how ridiculous my mother would find the whole thing. She knew that her and my father's families would make it weird.

The world got dark after. There were always remnants of my mother in our house. The plates we ate dinner on were hers from her first apartment. Their bedroom still smelled like her perfume. Her Revlon 535 was still sitting on her dresser, waiting for her. Just as me and my father were. I asked him to let me go to online school after. He had no choice but to let me.

My dad was forever different after the death of my mom. If someone who barely knew him, like his coworker or something saw him, they wouldn't see it. I knew that he didn't laugh as much anymore. I knew that he stopped playing the guitar. I heard his muffled sobs come from their bedroom while he thought I was sleeping. I knew that the reason he didn't clear her out of the house was because he didn't want it to feel real. I didn't either.

It felt impossible to live with just my dad after my mom died. She was always the one to take care of me, to talk to me. Living with a grieving parent who you never felt close to was excruciating at first. Until I saw him one evening slumped on the kitchen table, with a bottle of whisky in hand. Even at 12, I knew that this was his coping. Knew it was the wrong way to cope. Knew that my mother would hate it. That's what I told him when I shook him awake. Though I was afraid he would be angry, he wasn't. He just laughed and said, "Part of what hurts the most about losing her is that you are *just* like her. I hate that I hate it. I hate that just looking at you do your schoolwork sometimes makes me cry because I'm reminded of how your mom looked while painting. You both furrow your brows in the same exact way." After the initial sting of what my father, my last parent, had just said to me, I sat down next to him.

"Sometimes I hate how when I'm looking for something that I lost I think to ask her if she saw it. I also hate how when you come home from work you sometimes call her name from instinct." I said. This made him smile. He started laughing, and me with him. I really felt like my father's daughter in that instant. We were both doing a terrible job at what my mom told us to do.

I stopped laughing when I noticed that his laugh had turned into a sob. He hadn't openly cried since the funeral 6 months prior. I barely heard him whisper,

“I’m sorry Sam. I should have saved her. I could’ve noticed the symptoms sooner.” I immediately hugged him before he could say any more. I knew my mom was spinning in her grave. I knew that this had to stop immediately. I knew I had to save my father from himself.

“Dad, you know you have to stop this before mom starts haunting you. This is what she said not to do. You know she hates when people don’t listen.” My own voice sounded foreign to me as it was wet with tears. My father just nodded his head and hugged me back. I don’t remember how long we sat there like that. I just know that he started going to therapy after that.

We moved away from my mother’s dream house a year after she died. Both me and my dad decided that there was no point as it was always *her* house and there was nothing but ghosts there for us.

I still think about that spring as the best of my life. Sometimes if I think about it hard enough, I can go back there. Those memories will forever be ingrained in my soul. I think that my mother gave me that spring to stay with her, that was what she meant when she said that her love for me was so strong that she would never leave. She would be in every spring.

For Holy and Chloe.