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Long Goodbyes

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LONG GOODBYES

Sierra Archer

The air was stifling in a way that felt like a hug, thick around the skin and luring in a sense of content sleepiness. The din of the television was muffled by the sounds of laughter and gossip coming from the dining room, hidden on the other side of the thin wood paneling. The screen was buzzing with static and the images there were indistinguishable, filled with mosaics of color and flashing light in the dark crevices of the dimly lit living room. There were people on the couch behind the coffee table, but they had no faces, like the little knick-knacks safely tucked away inside the corner hutches.

A change. A rounding of the corner, into light and sound. The dining table stretched across the room. There are grooves in the chipboard, where the odd collection of dining and card table chairs with missing glides scraped the polyacrylic clean off. People are gathered at the table and their faces are hidden as they lean across. Their chairs are angled in, toward the head of the table. They're always angled towards the head. Their identities are out of sight, but they are known. They are familiar and they are safe.

They talk like they will lose their voices tomorrow. Conversations build railways back and forth across the way, crossing and intersecting every which way. It hardly seems like any of them should be able to hear one another - but they do. They do.

Any outsider might be intimidated by the racket they all produce, but there is great love at this table. It is in the curious lean of every elbow pressed into the table. In the foreboding creak of the one broken chair, cracked years ago - yet, there is no such thing as useless here. There is appreciation in every scrape of a spoon against a ceramic bowl. And again, care hidden in the savor of the air, of broth and brine. Punctuated in the sharp exclamations and raucous laughter. Any attempt to translate the garble would be futile.

*Only snippets of words are salvageable,
and not one was related to the other.*

“. . . not cooked -”

“- in the paper . . .?”

“Hey, pass the butter -”

*The head of the table seemed to be bathed
in light, despite the old scavo ceiling fan
with two out of four lights burnt out.
Moving closer, her face was somehow
recognizable. It wasn't quite right, like
someone had smoothed out the wrinkles
in her face and blurred all the details. But
she was here, she was sitting quietly and
keeping watch over her progeny, as if she
knew. As if she knew.*

*Her rheumy hazel eyes softened and she
winked. Her bony hand curled over small
fingers.*

“Charlie.”

“Charlie.”

*“Charlie. Hey. Finish that up.”
Charlie blinked the daze out of his
eyes, the pencil in his hand suddenly
feeling like a weight between his
fingertips. His mom wasn't even*

looking at him, eyes still glued to the
magazine in her hands. A phone rang
somewhere behind the glass window
and in the corner of the room, a child
whimpered feverishly against her
mother.

He always hated doctor's offices. He
knew there had always been routine
checkups throughout his life, just as
any other kid, but the only ones he
could remember were when he had to
get shots. Sure, he'd get a popsicle
afterward and he'd fall for it every
time. Big welcome smiles, then
suddenly wiping your arm down
with those strong alcohol wipes and
sticking you with a needle. He'd be
tricked into trusting them again when
they picked a superhero band-aid
and offered him colorful, flavored ice.
And so the cycle would repeat.

He hated doctor's offices. But he
wasn't here for a shot this time.
“Am I adopted?” Charlie asked,
hovering the pencil over the question.

She turned another waxy page. She
hardly blinked. “No, I definitely
would have returned you.”

Charlie grinned and checked off his box. He didn't understand why, ever since he turned thirteen and started going to the doctor's, he had to fill out the surveys. Well – he did get it. They asked about abuse, drugs, and sex lives. Cause and effect stuff that could sway these visits. But nothing ever changed with him. He was pretty sure he made the same joke last time his mom brought him.

"Genetic disorders?"

"Nope."

"Early hearing loss?"

"Unless you count Lyle's selective hearing."

"Mom, I can't help that you had more kids after me. You still have to deal with Emma and Weston after him."

Mom hummed with amusement.

"Tell your father, not me. It takes two and you know I just can't resist his good looks."

She was baiting him; *let's mention mom and dad's fertility to embarrass my son*. He opted to ignore her, wanting to get the survey over as soon as

possible. "Any medical diagnosis for you or dad?"

"I don't think so," she answered. Jennifer Aniston peered up from her magazine, holding a bottle of cover-up. Some sort of movie advertisement was on the opposite page. Charlie scrawled down the symbol for 'Not Applicable' and moved on to the next question. Siblings.

Lyle Hall, male, age 12, no health problems.

Weston Hall, male, age 11, heart murmur when he was a baby.

Emma Hall, female, age 8, no health problems.

Another section followed. It was like a conclusion, asking for any other related health issues that ran in the family. Charlie had always heard words thrown around about high blood pressure. He also knew that the family gossiped about addiction, but it didn't carry the same concern. It always felt more like judgment. "It wants to know about other family health issues."

The little girl in the corner of the room cried harder when a name was called and her mom had to practically drag her into the long hallway where the nurse waited. He wondered what color popsicle she would choose.

Mom paused, her eyes finally raising as she looked to see what he had already put down. "Yes, high blood pressure. Um -" Her hands dropped the magazine further into her lap, signifying that she was thinking a little bit harder. "Well, Aunt Joyce had a bit of dementia, but she's not blood-related."

"She was married to Uncle Graham right?"

"Yes, she's Peg's mom."

"I'm pretty sure Peg's getting there," he commented flippantly. Last Christmas, Peg had told the same story three times. They had all laughed, but the unease hadn't been lost on Charlie.

She slapped his shoulder. "Shh. Put down clotting and congenital heart failure."

He didn't know, specifically, what the string of words meant as a health

issue. But he knew he had heard the term before and he hesitated.

"It's c-o-n-g -"

"I know how to spell it," Charlie interrupted. There was a churning feeling in his gut, but he couldn't explain it. "I - is . . . is that what Grandma Del had?"

His mom lost interest in the magazine altogether, setting it aside on the stand beside her. She shifted in her chair and he could tell she was trying to read him. Her brown eyes scanned his face and he couldn't meet her gaze all the way. "Yes," She spoke the little word like it was precious and breakable. It annoyed him for no good reason at all. "You have to put cancer down too."

He swallowed as he wrote the word out. It was only six letters and easy to spell. Why was it so easy to spell?

Mom was rubbing his shoulder and reached up to brush back his light hair. Charlie leaned away, finishing the survey and getting up. "I take it to the window, right?" He asked, forcing his voice to remain flat. It was

too late. She was looking at him like that again. He didn't wait for an answer – he already knew – and took the clipboard to the front window. The receptionist popped gum as she opened the sliding glass and took it from him.

"Thanks, hon. Doctor'll be right out," she said sweetly. Then she really looked at him. "You're Ava Shepherd's grandson, aren't you? I'm Louise Smith, I went to school with your grandma. I'm so sorry, how's she been?"

He felt like he walked into a trap. Out of the frying pan and into the fire, his mom would say. Where were his popsicle choices? "She's in the hospital right now," he said nonchalantly like it was nothing. Just a six-letter word. His stomach hurt. "But she's hangin' in there."

All the adults always said that to one another. When you saw someone you knew in the grocery store and they asked how you are, it was customary to reply, *oh, you know, hangin' in there*. Usually, it was also followed up by family news and local events – everyone here was a self-proclaimed

town crier. He revoked it, squirming in place and tugging on the sleeves of his flannel as he hoped she would dismiss him back to his seat.

"You're up for a physical today, you joinin' a sport?" Louise asked curiously. Her face perked up. "Football?"

Charlie nodded, scratching the back of his neck. "Soccer. Uh, varsity. Varsity soccer. My cousin Eli plays and he convinced me to join, so. . ."

Louise smiled politely, though he knew soccer was way less lustrous than hometown football. "Well, you let your grandma know I said *hi* and to get better soon. I know she'd love to come to your games."

Charlie's smile reflected her politeness, but he knew it was far less genuine. "Yeah, I'll let her know."

-

"You sure you want to go in?" Mom persisted, her heels clicking on the linoleum.

Charlie wasn't sure of anything. He was tired of being asked questions. "Yeah. I want to say hi."

Her light brown hair swayed behind her as she came to a stop outside of one of the hospital rooms. Her gaze was serious. "It won't be - she's -" She got teary and he fidgeted. He didn't want her to be upset. It made his stomach hurt and his chest shake inside. Don't cry, please. "She's not the same right now, okay? But she will be so, so happy that you're here."

He nodded, though he wasn't sure it was a conscious action. He felt nervous, like he was preparing to meet a new person. He had never been scared of seeing his grandma before. Not before all of this. Mom wiped at her eyes and shifted into someone else - gone was the woman who tried to hide her crying in the bathroom late at night. She tucked the scared daughter away like it was so simple and Charlie wondered for a brief moment how.

He would never ask though.

"Hey woman," She swept into the room with a singsong voice, like it was any other day. "They keepin' you fed in here?"

Charlie followed her into the room and tried not to stop and stare. He

had been to hospitals before. Lyle had broken his arm once climbing a tree and he'd sat in a hospital bed while they cast his arm. Dad had brought him and Weston along since Emma had been out with Mom and no one had been home to watch them. Lyle didn't look like Grandma Ava did now.

She was connected to wires like she was charging. She had a clip on one finger and a needle plunged into the thin skin on the flip side of her palm. It made him shiver inside, thinking about how it would feel to move your hand with something like that inside you. Tucked around her ears and under her nose was one of those oxygen tubes that patients on tv always have. The beeping monitors felt fake.

Real, he reminded himself. This was real. She's sick and real and right here.

"Look what I brought with me," Mom pulled up a chair to the bed and Charlie stood awkwardly at the end. "You recognize him?"

Grandma blinked very slowly at her daughter before her eyes shifted to look at him. He expected the familiar chuckle of greeting, the few-tooth smile, and some sort of fond insult she liked to give out. Instead, she stared at him like she didn't even know him. Did she even know him? He felt a rising sense of panic in his chest, but he stifled it down.

"It's Charlie," he said, making sure to speak loud enough for her to hear.
"It's Charlie-Boy, Grandma."

"He just went and got a physical done. He's gonna be playing soccer," Mom said proudly, slipping her hand into Grandma's. She hardly reacted, but he could see the ghost of a smile on her face. "Say hi, Mom."

Grandma moved her mouth like she was chewing on something. There was some low noise that came out of her mouth, but Charlie couldn't tell what she said. He came closer and looked anywhere but her face. There was something wrong, like she was a husk sitting there. The pain in his belly was crawling up his throat, scratching at the back of his teeth and making his eyes water. He forced his

legs to stay still, despite their urge to flee the room. It felt so - so - wrong. He couldn't think of another word.

"Hey, it's Charlie-Boy," A familiar voice turned his head and he was surprised to see his Uncle standing there, holding a brown cup of steaming coffee. His gray shaggy hair was unkempt as usual and his bearded face was a relieving sight. "And baby Nellie. Did you say hi, Ava?"

Grandma looked like she wanted to say something. Charlie selfishly stole her chance.

"Hey Tadpole," He stood up, hugging his uncle tightly. Uncle Creek was one of his favorite people. True to his name, he loved fishing and had taken every chance to bring his nephews and nieces out with him. He was Ava's younger brother and he'd always done his best to annoy her at family dinners. As long as he had known him, everyone called him Tadpole. Charlie never asked why. It was just one of those things.

"Heard you were gonna play soccer," Tadpole chuckled.

Charlie nodded, relieved at his active response. "Yeah, with Eli."

"Tad, you mind if I go talk to a nurse, quick?" Mom interrupted, standing from her spot.

The big man shook his head and strolled by her to sit down. "Go on. You took my seat anyways."

Mom looked at Charlie. "You okay?"

Charlie was about to offer to come with her, when Tadpole intervened, "He's good. We're gonna chat."

He deflated as his mom left him there, with Grandma's labored breathing and her machines beeping forebodingly. He pulled up the other chair and sat on the opposite side of the bed. Grandma didn't seem to mind either of them, quietly watching their movement without a word.

"So you decided to come and say hi?" Tadpole asked, stretching his arms back over his head and pushing his boots forward.

Charlie looked at the floor, scuffing his worn sneakers over the patch of red and white tiles and pushing his

big-rimmed glasses back on his nose. "Well, Mom was coming to say hi. I was along for the ride."

"Hard, isn't it?"

Charlie snapped his eyes to his uncle. He was watching his sister in the bed. She had closed her eyes. He couldn't define the feeling that rose in him at the sight. She looked - she looked dead. The heart monitor said otherwise, but he couldn't look away. A memory tried to present itself to him, but he shoved it away. He couldn't help the waver in his voice when he replied, "Yeah. It - it doesn't feel real. It's not - it's not supposed to happen to - to -"

"Us?" Tadpole finished grimly.

Charlie nodded, too choked for words.

His uncle was quiet for a moment as he nodded, then he leaned forward. He itched at his beard thoughtfully. "Do you remember when Great Grandma Del died?"

Rheumy hazel eyes and her bony hands curled around his, squeezing lovingly.

He nodded. His words still wouldn't come. It wasn't an event he would soon forget. Everything had been fine. The night before they had dinner at Great Grandma Delta's house, vegetable soup and bread. The next day, she died in her bed. Charlie was there when they came to take her away - no, not the hospital. It had been pointless. No, a man in a suit and his workers came to take her to the funeral home. He had seen her - and no, Mom, she's still breathing, look, she is, I saw it -

"I don't think the family has been the same since," Tadpole sighed wearily. "But I know she wasn't sufferin' anymore. She was ready."

"I wasn't."

Charlie surprised himself with the bitterness in his own voice. Usually, he was good about hiding his emotions recently. But being here felt so wrong that he couldn't help the burst of emotion that had been festering inside his ribcage since that afternoon. Maybe it's been growing there a lot longer than that.

Tadpole stayed quiet. Charlie didn't look at him, afraid he'd see pity there. "I - well I was only ten. It felt different then - like, like I didn't really get it? But I do now. And I know I'm only fifteen now and I didn't know her as long as you, but I wish - I wish I had talked to her more. We're supposed to have more time now - there's supposed to be . . . more -"

He choked on his own voice and if he let go of the arms of the chair, his hands would probably shake. He felt embarrassed by the emotion that welled in his eyes and thickened his voice. He didn't want his mom to come back and see how red his eyes probably were. His fingers were growing cold and he flexed them along the wood, trying to get rid of the numb sensation.

"It's alright, bud. Breathe," Tadpole soothed. "Take a deep breath."

Charlie followed his instruction, filling his lungs with the crisp hospital air, and imagined the expansion breaking apart the brittle growth around his ribs. He let it out, casting a glance at Grandma Ava. She

was awake again, watching him silently. He smiled at her, ingenuine, but she didn't seem to mind as the tiniest of smiles crossed her face. On impulse, he reached out his hand and grasped her fingers gently, careful not to bump her IV. Her skin was cold like his. Bony fingers just barely grasped his fingers. She closed her eyes again.

"Sometimes all I can think about is how much I wish I could talk to Grandma Del again," Charlie admitted, his eyes flickering to his uncle's. He was relieved to see the understanding there. "I miss her more now than I did then. And now I feel like - like I miss Grandma Ava and she's still here. I think about it all the time and I know - I know nothing will ever be the same. How can it ever be the same?"

Tadpole nodded, and when he leaned back again, the lights made the tears in his eyes gleam. He coughed, clearing his throat and pulling his hands hard down his face. As his face reappeared, Charlie couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking. What if it was his own baby sister there? His throat closed off - now was not

the time to consider that. But he felt like a door was opened to him and he knew now how strong Tadpole was at this moment.

"I don't think it's supposed to be the same, Charlie. People can't stay forever," His voice was raspy, forceful like he was talking around something. "The world just keeps on going. But sometimes I like to remember. Remembering, - the memories, you know? They don't change."

Charlie nearly mentioned forgetful Peg, but he held his tongue. He knew his uncle was trying to comfort him. He felt uncertain about his memories, sure that even those would be tainted by this, the darkness spilling over into what was supposed to be good and pure.

They fell silent and eventually Mom returned, Tadpole offering up his seat for her at Grandma's bedside. Charlie didn't release her hand, afraid it would wake her. Wake her and her six-letter word. As Mom and Tadpole talked quietly, exchanging their family gossip, Charlie couldn't help but focus on making sure he was

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breathing. His right leg was tapping a bit too fast and his fingers were still freezing, but he felt like he was taking real breaths again.

It wouldn't last. He'd pick his popsicle and it would repeat all over again.

But he was here now. He was here with her, holding her hand.

He wandered out of the living room, bored with watching football, and was greeted by the noise of the dining room. Everyone sat around the table, talking over their second bowls of soup. They all talked so loudly and so quickly, that he hardly could tell what they were saying. But despite the frightening level of noise, he was not scared. He was safe here.

He headed towards the end of the table, where Great Grandma Del sat bathed in light from the ceiling fan above her head. As soon as she saw him, she winked and blinked her watery hazel eyes at him. He reached for her hand and she gripped it with bony fingers.

"Charlie," she greeted in that familiar murmur. "Too big to sit on my lap now."

He remembered laughing. Sitting next to her elderly mother, Grandma Ava pinched his ribcage.

"Boy's growin' like a weed," she teased. "Soon he won't want to even hold Grandma's hand anymore."

He sat beside them in an extra chair, listening to the family as they talked and laughed and ate. He felt warm and safe and content. He didn't know the word for it then. He played it over and over again until he knew it would never change.