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## Untitled

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## Untitled

Peyton Cassel

1

I had just finished crying and was curled up on the end of the couch in my empty apartment when my grandmother called. She sounded impossibly calm and happy, which infuriated a selfish part of me. There wasn't anything about my current situation that I wanted to be positive about. A friend of mine had made a careless decision, and because of her I was locked up indefinitely on the other side of campus.

"Think of it this way," my grandmother told me. "You're living through history."

While her comment was not untrue, it also was not comforting. My only consolation was that I did not, in fact, have "The Big Sick" as my boyfriend so eloquently put it. This did not make my current situation feel any less unfair, however.

It sounds so dramatic, the word "isolation." Reminds me of dark prison walls or lonely icebergs floating in the South Pacific Ocean. But isolation doesn't have to be as grand as all that. I understood this the first night I spent in that empty apartment. Faded inspirational posters hung on the walls in odd places, almost like an afterthought—one above the bathroom light switch, another behind the kitchen sink. The four extra empty beds and chairs seemed to mock me and my incapability to utilize them all. I shut the second bedroom door so that the bunk beds would stop silently laughing at me. Placing my single water bottle in the massive refrigerator had an almost comical feeling as well.

The loneliest part of it all isn't avoiding the windows (it becomes depressing to watch people walk by), or the detached knock on the door (that's how you know the food has come), or even the routine FaceTime calls with friends or family (they always bring up a wish for hugs, which of course, you can't have). Rather, it's that moment when you get into bed in that massive, empty room or crash on the couch in the living area for a change of scenery. You lie there, eyes trained on the ceiling, and listen.

Sometimes, it's unbearably quiet. The hum of the old refrigerator eventually becomes a replacement for the sound of human breathing. Other times, you hear people laughing and blasting music as they drive down the street. That, you know, is the sound of life carrying on outside the white walls of the apartment. You lie there and think about how you're missing the season change, and all the dinner conversations, and doing homework on a blanket in the sun. You go to bed telling yourself to wait just one more day. Then you do it again. And again.

2

My grandmother placed a warm hand on my shoulder. "A lot of memories in this old house."

I nodded but didn't turn. She moved to sit down beside me, pushing aside one of the moving boxes to make room.

After a moment of silence, she spoke. "Your great-grandfather never threw a thing away in his life. Chalk it up to his living through the Great Depression or just being plain stubborn. Everything important he ever saved is in here."

"Everything in here is important?" I echoed skeptically, surveying the room full of exploding boxes.

She chuckled. "To him," she amended.

I allowed a small smile at this and rested my head on her shoulder, thinking back on the first half of day.

It was the weekend before my great-grandfather's funeral, and it was raining. Not the sad kind of rain that you see in movies all the time. It was more like the gentle, steady kind that slowly washes away drawings of chalk from the sidewalk. Clumps of mud clung to my boots on the hike up to his house, weighing me down. When I reached the front porch, I kicked off my shoes, proceeding in damp socks. Inside, the house still smelled faintly of him, like dill pickles and tractor dust.

Light filtered into the cramped kitchen, illuminating the yellowed tile floor, the refrigerator with its homemade magnets, and the crooked table, its third leg propped up by a brick. I traced the grain on the tabletop with a certain fondness, recalling the meals and laughter that had been spilled there. Strange how everything looked and felt the same, despite him being gone.

I moved past the kitchen slowly, drinking in each familiar detail: the living room with its well-worn chairs and knitted blankets, the leaning staircase, and the last of the three bedrooms at the end of the hall. Just like the rest of the house, his bedroom looked the same. The clutter on top of his sturdy, wooden dresser and the quilted blanket on his bed remained untouched.

I threw myself down on the carpet, careful to avoid the spread of moving boxes around me. They looked menacing like that, items spilling out over the sides. There was an absurd amount of stuff that my grandfather had collected over the years, random items of little value. I rolled up my sleeves and opened the box closest to me. Dust floated up in an exasperated puff. I sneezed. This was going to take a while. It was a dirty and slow process, and I was interrupted and joined by various family members. By the time we finished sorting through everything, the sun had long since shifted positions in the sky.

“Take a look at this,” I said, holding a swath of bright blue fabric to the light.

On the floor lay a random spread of my favorite items: an assortment of notebooks, a pocket watch with a missing minute hand, a blue kimono, and a beaten leather wallet. The notebooks were filled with indecipherable sketches and records of plane coordinates. The watch was of no significant value other than its ironic lack of ability to tell time. The kimono was tacky and thin, patterned with golden intertwining dragons. I had never seen him wear anything like it before. He had been a farmer, a “salt of the earth” kind of man. The bright fabric looked bizarre and out of place in his simple home.

She laughed at the face I made. “Probably a souvenir he picked up overseas,” she suggested. I placed the robe back down gently.

His wallet was what interested me the most. When it unfolded, a roll of pictures fell out, revealing a long strip of black and white photos—one of a young woman with striking eyes, one of a boy cradling a harmonica, and another of a group of half-naked men, their ribs pushing painfully through their sun-browned skin, faces shadowed by their woven straw hats. I had no relation to any of these people, no way to find out who they were, or even if they were still alive. Yet these were snapshots of his memories, and I liked to try imagining them as real people through his eyes.

The picture that held my attention was of the young woman. She seemed familiar to me in a strange way. I felt as though I knew the color of her eyes, the shape of her nose, the curve of her smile. It dawned on me that I was seeing traces of my own face in this picture.

“Who’s this?” I asked.

My grandmother smiled when she saw what I was looking at. “That’s my mother. Actually, that’s the very same picture your great-grandfather carried with him when he went overseas.”

“He must have missed her terribly,” I commented, inspecting the many-times-folded-over picture.

She sighed. “He kept a diary that he wrote in every day to her. I’ve never known two people more in love.”

I stared at the little picture that had given him hope all those years ago. I liked to imagine him asleep in his hammock on a ship, rocking gently in the waves of the Atlantic. The lamp he snuck from the galley would be tucked under his arm for when he woke in the middle of the night. Restless, he would pull out his wallet to gaze at her. The light from the lamp cast a warm glow

on the photograph, illuminating the planes of her face. Such a simple thing, but such an emblem of hope. She gave him something to look forward to, the start of a new life when he was to return home. I vaguely remember wondering at the time if I would ever have need for such a token, but the thought was there and then gone, like sidewalk chalk in the rain.

3

“Living history,” I repeated skeptically. I was stretched out on the apartment couch, my phone pinned between my ear and shoulder.

My grandmother was quiet for a moment as she thought. “Take your great-grandfather, for instance. He lived through World War II.”

I made a face. “I don’t think this even comes close.”

“Different situations, of course,” she admitted. “But neither is pleasant, and both require hope. You have to hold onto hope.”

I thought about our conversation long after we hung up. Later that night, during my loneliest moment of the day, the memory of my great-grandfather’s photocard came to mind. He would take her picture out to smile at during his darkest times. It stayed tucked away in his pocket through storm and battle. A reminder that even though he and other young men woke each morning with the possibility of greeting death, life went on.

I realized, suddenly, that I had a photocard of my own. While I had no tangible reminder with me, like him, I also had something to look forward to. I sat there in the dark, listening to the hum of the refrigerator and the sound of cars passing by. Somewhere in the distance, a boy sat on the steps outside his dorm, strumming his guitar. The group of girls walking by stopped to listen to his song before carrying on, their raucous shouts of laughter floating in through my apartment window. Yes, they were reminders of my situation, but they were also sounds of life.