

Let Me Go

SHORT STORY

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I hear a faint melody coming from the door as someone punches in the keycode. As the door handle turns in that definitive way, that quick, strong twist that only a large hand could make, I let out a short breath.

"I'm home!" I hear his voice before I see his face, the door not opening fast enough. And then there he is. I rush into his arms, his unshaved face scratching my forehead as he bends down to kiss it. "Hi Pumpkin!"

His voice wraps around me, flooding the house as if it had never been silent, landing sweetly on my ears. "Hi, Dad."

He doesn't take his shoes off (Mom would be so mad at him if she knew), and instead walks into the kitchen which lights up with him in it. "You haven't done the dishes, Pumpkin!" He rolls up his sleeves and turns on the faucet, beginning the chore I should've done hours ago. I sit at the kitchen table and watch him scrub away the sauce that was starting to crust onto the two plates I left in the sink, the familiarity of it all a hollow ache. "What've you been up to?"

"Nothing, really."

"Nothing? Why not?"

"I was waiting for you to come home."

"Well I'm here now." He leans against the counter and smiles at me, his face creasing at the edge of his lips. "What do you want to do?" I stand and let my head fall against his chest, warmth seeping through my skin. I promised myself this would be enough. I just wanted this. But can't I have five more minutes?

"Let's just talk, Dad."

"Sounds good to me." We walk into the living room and I curl onto the couch, staring at him as if he might disappear.

"What do you want to talk about?" There's a silence as I search for the right words. But what am I supposed to say? How do you say a million words in a few minutes? How do you condense a life's worth of questions into one?

"What happens when we die?"

"What do you want to happen?" God. Can't he just talk and fill the room until his voice gets trapped in the walls and never leaves?

"I guess I want it all to be okay. Is it peaceful? I want us to be able to see talk to the people who die. And for them to hear us. Does that happen? I want it to be so that when people die they become little flames that guide the way for those they love who are still alive. But mostly, I just want it to be okay." His pale blue eyes trace the lines of my face, the bags under my eyes. He parts his lips to speak, then doesn't, a newly formed wall between us digging into my chest.

"I hope it's like that when I cross over." His voice sounds scared. Under the lights his face is paler than usual, the white in his hair shimmering.

"Dad, will it always hurt this much?" Silence. I want him to fill it. I want him to reassure me that everything will work out, that my pain won't bleed me dry, and my soul won't always feel this empty. "Dad?"

"I don't know, Pumpkin. But I hope it doesn't." I can feel it. Time is slipping away, my fingers scrambling to catch it, and stop it, and hold him just a moment longer. What do I say as seconds rush past, his face flickering, my heart stumbling?

"Dad, I really love you, okay?" His lips curve upward but his eyes are somber.

"I want to go now, Elsie." I blink and he's standing, just out of my reach.

"No, please, don't leave."

"Elsie, please." He's near the door now.

"You know what will happen when you walk out. Please, stay with me." He faces me one last time, his big hand enveloping mine, his cold fingers laced through my own.

"I love you, Elsie. Let me go." I close my eyes as he presses his lips to my forehead, and when their touch fades I open them to find him gone, the house

dark. I pull on the door, the wood fighting back, and press my face to the glass window to see him walk away. I can barely make out his shadow walking down the driveway, towards the car.

“Dad! Dad! Please! Take me with you!” I pound the glass, willing it to break, to free me, to let my body run to him. He reaches the car. “Dad, please, stop, please, come back!” I watch, helpless, as he sits in the drivers seat, backing out of the driveway, our eyes meeting one last time. The air in me sinks as I watch history repeat. “I’m going to be okay,” I whisper to him, our eyes still locked, my voice hoarse from screaming. Then I close my eyes. I hear the tires screech, steel meeting steel, life meeting death. I open my eyes. The street is quiet. The driveway is empty. I’m alone again. But I hugged him, didn’t I? I told myself that would be enough. But now all the questions I forgot to ask slam into me.

“What’s your cookie recipe?”

“How do I write a good essay?”

“How do I move on from losing you?”

I want him to come back. I want his soul to stay with me until I’m ready to let it go. Five more minutes. I know what I want to ask him now. Two more minutes. I don’t even need to ask him that I just want one more hug. One more minute. All the air leaves my lungs and I wonder what it would’ve been like to go with him. To be at peace.

“Dad?” My voice echoes in the empty house, landing on the floor, making it shudder. “Did you cross over?” And though every fiber in me wants to see him again, I sincerely hope that he did. ■