

“Mourning Haze”

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*Fictionalized story based on an event from my family history.*

*Names changed for privacy.*

Everything was quiet. The early morning clucking of chickens seemed to be muffled by the dense fog rolling across the fields and climbing up the walls of the Irish farmhouse. Footsteps creaking along old floorboards indicated that Ruthie was among the last to wake up, but even the footsteps felt far away. She closed her eyes, blanket pulled tight around her, and silently prayed that sweeter dreams would cloud her vision instead.

A hand rested on her shoulder. “C’mon Ruthie,” the voice of her sister, Midge, said gently. “We can’t be late. Do you have your clothes ready?”

Ruthie nodded, still not opening her eyes. Midge, now 24 years old and considerably older than 9 year old Ruthie, had left the house some time ago to work, but returned as soon as she heard the news. She pulled Ruthie into a hug as she finally sat up. But Midge didn’t say anything. What could be said? What words could possibly soothe the shock of the past few days? Ruthie had always heard spring praised as a time of rebirth, but 1953’s spring felt as cold and harsh as the coastline cliffs.

One of Ruthie’s younger siblings darted past her into the bathroom, but all she noticed was a slight breeze. Downstairs, the five remaining siblings were scattered about the kitchen. Laura, the second oldest, stood at the counter, chopping herbs and vegetables. Four siblings sat around the kitchen table, either staring with empty eyes at the worn wood, or crying quietly into their arms. The soft bubbling of the stew that would be served after the funeral broke the stiff silence, and their mother hunched over it, spoon in hand. Already a dark veil covered her head,

and the long black hem of her dress brushed the floor. She moved fluidly, eyes empty, only faintly aware of the tasks she had committed herself to. It was an odd thing, seeing her mother like this. No barking orders or joking smiles. A dull specter against the knotted wood cabinets coated in thin white paint, and the window by her head illuminated her face in a gray haze, a mocking halo of barely-there sunlight.

Laura glanced up and frowned. “Ruthie, why aren’t you dressed yet?”

“I brought her down for breakfast first,” Midge said. “Her dress is set out. We have time. Rest of the family isn’t arriving until eleven.”

Laura pursed her lips. “Fine. Everyone else has already eaten. I’ll fry some eggs, and there’s toast on the table.”

The next few minutes were a blur. Ruthie found herself dropped into a chair between two of her brothers, and a plate of food slid in front of her. The eggs were flavorless and the toast was dust in her mouth. Every movement—picking up the fork, poking at the food, carrying it to her mouth—was mechanical, automatic. In reality, Ruthie wasn’t sure if she was hungry. Or thirsty. Or awake.

When Midge grabbed her arm to escort her back upstairs, Ruthie had difficulty focusing on her face. She brushed her teeth looking into a blurry mirror. Hair was braided with a black silk ribbon at the end. Midge helped her into a long-sleeved black dress that flared at the waist and rested just below her knees. The older sister was dressed similarly, except with the addition of black gloves and a simple black hat with a small veil that draped across her forehead. None of their clothes were particularly decorative. Laura and Midge had added small details of lace and silver buttons on their dresses, but the younger of the eight siblings were dressed modestly in

relatively cheap fabric. As the buckles of Ruthie's leather Mary-Janes were secured, the front door opened and soft greetings from strangers could be heard.

And again she was downstairs, crammed into the living room among neighbors and relatives and friends. A tall bearded gentleman removed his hat and bowed slightly toward Ruthie's mother. Her mother nodded her head in return, biting her lip as tears appeared at the corners of her eyes. A young woman in a long pencil skirt and thick arching brows drawn on her face pulled Laura into a hug and both their shoulders trembled. It was a churning dark sea, set against the stark white walls and faded floral furniture. Shadows in a sterile box of a room. Yet, Ruthie was only vaguely aware of the dull clamor of voices and sobs and suffocating heat from bodies pressed together. Everyone moved a bit too fluidly, blending together and becoming unrecognizable.

Ruthie wondered for a second why she wasn't crying. It would have been a relief to cry, to purge whatever emptiness sat in the crowded room. Instead, a weight clung to her chest and constricted her breathing. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to move. It hurt to think. To let her mind wander for even a second to the face she wanted more than anyone else's to walk through that door one last time.

At some point, Ruthie was shuffled out into the front yard. Cows and pigs made their way to the fences, intrigued by the swarm of mourners. Far off in the vegetable fields, stood a slowly rusting tractor. Nobody had bothered to move it since the hoarse scream echoed across the fields and metal collapsed with a sickening, clanging crunch. Ruthie's throat closed up. She couldn't remember much after that moment. Even though it was only a week prior, all she knew was that her mother ran into the fields followed by two neighbors that had walked in for a visit. All she

heard were her mother's retching sobs once she returned to the house, violently shuddering as she clung to one neighbor so tightly her knuckles turned white.

All she knew were the words she was told several hours later. "I'm so sorry, my dear. Your father's dead."

None of it felt real now. Before, her house would have been full of neighbors who carried their instruments from miles and miles away to play in the living room, her father leading them on his violin. She should have been listening to him sing, sweet and low followed by the harmonies of several other joyful voices. Her mother would be laughing as she cooked, asking for Ruthie's opinion on the stew before it was served. She would have been absentmindedly thumbing through the rations book left over from the second World War, before trudging upstairs to finish homework with her brother. She would have bothered her sisters to play Scrabble or Draughts with her after dinner. Now, the house of music was silent, and would stay that way for years to come.