

## Center Stage

This was not my first time at a funeral. The black veils and rented suits, the faces washed of joy by the blue wave of I-should-have, and the family waiting ever so patiently for the purple-clothed priest to describe a woman he had never met all painted a scene of sorrow. I stood by the side, unable to find an open seat. As I scanned the room, faces new and old filled my view. I saw the visages of visionaries—people with dreams who set their hopes higher than stars only to be crushed by the cruel chaos of college and everything that followed. Some did not even make it to college, while others left half-way through. Now, standing and sitting and sullyng over the death of one Mrs. Gallows, those of us left who shone a glimmer of care recognized the irony of our position. For our high school reunion to be upstaged by the death of our drama teacher—that was a cruel joke played by time.

Always the wallflower, I attached myself to the wooden columns on the side of the church like a vine, and I watched as the priest, old and doubtlessly seeing a harrowing vision by being here, talked about life and love and God. I used to cringe at that word, though now I understand why people attach themselves to the idea. It acts as a counterweight to all the bad things we do in life, and all the good, too. It balances us, often justifying our actions, many times for the worst. But here, under the wooden stilts and glass paintings that make sunlight dance, the word “God” becomes a comfort—a counterbalance to death itself; a semblance of purity where grief pollutes the air like coal.

“Amen”, the crowd said in unison. That was the first time I heard their voices in years. I followed blankly, staring at the box in the center of the stage. All I could think about was how after so many years of putting on shows, she had finally sold out. She was the center of attention, and all she had to do was die. I felt like telling her that. Knowing her, she would have laughed.

Her family stood at the front, clumsy papers in hand and tears in their eyes. They held each other close, as if supporting each other like little living pillars. Mr. Gallow, his dark hair now a mess, struggled to get a word out. His kids spoke for him, holding his hand tightly. Each sentence came out like molasses, each word like sugar. Sweetly and slowly, they stepped through the moments in life that made her seem perfect. Her son, a scrawny 20-year-old in a suit that was too big for him, took over when her daughter’s words turned to bawls. I thought about how wonderfully perfect of a mother Mrs. Gallow must have been for all these honest words to incite such bittersweetness. I felt jealous, I think, though I struggle to admit it.

By the end of their speech, I was already drained, and I could feel the energy of people like me who were wilting away. Some seemed like they had better things to do, staring at their phones intermittently to check the time or a text. Others talked amongst

themselves or tried calming down their overactive children through loud whispers. We stayed in that emptiness like settled dust for a while. The silence was awkward and heavy. Until you stood up.

The clicking of your footsteps scattered noise around the church. My face perked up. I could see your face in profile, those sunken cheeks and auburn hair, a single mole under your right eyelid, and a nose that fit just right. Your makeup looked really nice for a funeral. It brought it to life.

I watched as you held the weight of your day on the podium, the black sleeves of your dress flowing over the sides of the mahogany. It was like a bad dream to see you again in these horrible circumstances, to watch you scramble over papers as you felt the eyes of the audience piercing you. I could practically see your heart beat out of your chest. Mine dropped to my stomach.

With weary eyes, you looked around. Our eyes met for just a second, but that was enough. I was thrown backwards into a sea of calm regret, feeling a guilt that had become much too familiar. And there you stood, ready to perform an act of icy tears and flaming spirit, ready to tell the world about what a woman this was. By the beat of your blood you spoke, word after word, your voice shaking and fading at the sight of her coffin. Everyone here loved her, and they were not wrong to, but you and I knew her best. We knew the good she did for us and the pain she caused us. But you do not speak ill of the dead— I would have, but you could not bring yourself to that. You loved her too much, I could tell by your whimpering words.

“Kelly Gallow was an incredible woman. A mother, a wife, an actress, a teacher, and a friend. And now, she is gone”, you said, tears forming in your eyes. “She helped so many of us with kind words, after-school rides, and touching stories. Mrs. Gallow believed in all of us. And... and she saved my life”. Those last few words took what seemed like hours to get out. With them, a glance in my direction. We both knew what you meant. That glance stung.

I stuck my hand into my right pocket, as if trying to hide further from the world. I felt a paper inside—a note I kept with me, knowing you would be here today. It was rough and worn from travel, its words overread and its creases bent tenfold. I grasped it in my hand tightly.