

The Brown Box

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I like the sound of rain. It pattered on the roof of the tall building, going *tap, tap, tap*, just like how my hammer did on my old play set at home. Wind blew all around us, rushing in from the big oak doors open on either side of the building, making me shiver. I wrapped my arms around myself, and pressed up against Mommy's legs, because they always keep me warm. The bottom of my new black dress blew around crazily in the wind, rubbing up against my pretty stockings with the dogs on them. I held onto Mommy's hand tightly. Her hand was cold. Very, very cold, and it was shaking. No wonder, I thought. Mommy must be freezing, too.

I didn't like the tall building with its tall ceiling. It made the tall man with the loud voice at the front of the room sound even louder, echoing his sad words off of the gray walls. The roof was made out of dark wood, probably soaked through with rain. Suddenly, I felt drops of water on my right hand. The rain must have found a hole in the ceiling. I looked up at Mommy's face, to tell her that the roof was leaking. But when I looked up at her, I saw that tears were falling quietly down her cheeks, gathering on her trembling chin in blobs before becoming too heavy to hold on to her skin and rolling off of her face. Her tears dripped on my hand like rain, making me shiver.

I moved closer to her. I wanted to disappear into the folds of her long, dark dress. I wanted to leave the gray building with its gray walls and the gray clouds outside creating that cold wind. I wanted to leave all of those people who kept hugging me, stroking their hands

through my hair, telling me everything was going to be all right. I wanted to leave this awful place that made Mommy cry.

It had happened a few weeks ago. It was raining that day, too. The phone rang just like it did on any other day, cheerful and loud, not caring that I was building my first card house and that I was easily scared by loud noises. Daddy picked up the phone while Mommy wrapped her arms around me and I sniffled into her neck in the wreckage of my destroyed house. Her dark, curly hair surrounded my head like a helmet. She stroked my brown, pigtailed hair, as she whispered kind words into my ear. She promised me that we would build the biggest, bestest card house there ever was. Her lips tickled my skin. I giggled.

Daddy came over to us. I giggled some more and stretched out my arms to him, so he could swing me around and around like the merry-go-round at the fair. But he just walked over to Mommy, without even looking at me, and whispered something into her ear. Suddenly, Mommy and Daddy completely forgot I was there. All they talked about was Grandma. They talked and talked, and the more they talked, the more Mommy became upset. Mommy burst into tears, like how I did when I fell off of the swing set at the park. Except this time, Mommy didn't stop. She cried and cried, until it sounded like she was having a hard time breathing. Her face was pressed against her hands, and tears dripped from between her shaking fingers. I ran over to her, and wrapped my arms around her waist. There, there, I told her, rubbing my hand down her back like she had done to my hair before. That always made me feel better. But Mommy wouldn't stop crying.

It was like that at the hospital, too. I sat in a chair in Grandma's room with a set of crayons the nurse had given me, while Mommy held Grandma's hand and cried. I thought that was strange. Grandma was clearly asleep—why didn't Mommy just wake her up? Using blue and red, I drew pictures of Grandma and myself, so we could tape them on the wall in her room reserved especially for my drawings. It was still stormy outside. The rain hit the window hard, leaving streaks of water on the glass that made my reflection look funny, like the mirrors at the fair's fun house. My legs swung happily, back and forth, as I doodled curly blue hair on Grandma's head and red on my own. All around me, machines beeped and hummed, flashing green and blue lights, like in the movies. Only one machine was broken. For some reason, one of Grandma's TVs was only showing a red line, buzzing a flat note that hurt my ears.

I didn't like being with all of those other people, wearing black and remaining still as statues, with such sad looks on their faces. Everyone stared straight ahead, watching the front of the room with sad eyes. Even the flowers decorating the front of the room looked sad. The bright pinks and blues seemed to droop, hanging down towards the floor as if the stems weren't strong enough to carry the petals.

The tall man finished speaking, and now a woman, wearing a black dress and black shoes, began to talk. Her voice shook as she talked, and she kept tripping over her words. The rain came down harder, smacking into the ground outside so loudly it was hard to hear anything else. I was glad it rained. I listened to the *tap, tap, tap* of the water drops on the ground, and imagined all of the puddles forming from the water trapped on the sidewalk, unable to sink into the concrete. The loud rain helped to block out the woman's sad voice. The rain continued to

come down harder, and I heard quiet thunder come from the distance. I think the woman was crying by then. Daddy left the bench where we were sitting and walked up to her at the front of the long room, rubbing her back like how I had done to Mommy the day we got the phone call. But somehow, I knew that wouldn't do anything to help the poor crying woman. She continued to cry, even though Daddy was trying to make her feel better. I learned about a special kind of sadness that day. A kind that was different from falling off of a tire swing at the park. A kind that even made grownups cry. A kind that no amount of hugging and nice words could help.

As the woman cried, the wind continued to blow in from outside, sending shivers down my back. I hugged closer to Mommy, trying to keep myself warm.

The woman continued to cry when we left the building with the tall ceiling and walked out into the rainstorm. It was even colder outside. The icy-cold rain hit my head and soaked my hair and my dress, and the wind blew drops of water into my eyes. I was so scared I would be lost in the group of sad people. They walked around me, their wet clothes sticking to my skin as they passed me. I held on tightly to Mommy. I rubbed at my eyes, to get the water out of them. My fist was tangled in her dress, as she tried to open our black umbrella to protect our heads from the loud rain. Her hands were white and shaking as they tried to force the little umbrella open.

My brand-new Mary Janes sank into the gross mud as we followed the other people dressed in black, across a soggy field towards what looked like a pile of dirt that was all slimy and dark brown from the rain. My shoes made a strange slopping sound as I pulled them out of the mud. My stockings were soaked through with water and mud, and felt all scratchy and

uncomfortable. All around us, people were walking slowly, opening umbrellas to protect themselves from the rain. I couldn't help myself from shivering, and water continued to fall into my eyes, making it hard to see. I clung to Mommy's dress while I shook my head back and forth, to try to get the raindrops out of my eyes.

I remember that walk to the dirt pile the most. I remember rubbing my hands against my eyes to try to get the water out, only to force more in from the water on my hands. I remember Mommy finally able to open up the small umbrella, holding it over both of our heads to protect us from the storm. I remember the dark green trees that surrounded us while we walked, probably bent over from the rain pushing them down to the ground. I remember coming to a stop at the edge of a deep hole dug in the ground next to the pile of dirt, big enough to fit my whole bed in, rain making the bottom of the hole mushy and damp. I remember the tall man, water dripping from his clothes from the storm, reading words from a book whose pages were so wet they stuck together. I remember seeing that plain, brown box the size of a refrigerator lowered gently into the hole. I remember burying my face into Mommy's wet dress, trying not to look at the sad faces of the people wearing black while they watched the box disappear into the ground.

That's when my eyes began to burn, and my vision became all watery again, like it had done when we first walked to the dirt pile. Water had covered my face then, rain pushing more and more into my eyes until it hurt to blink. But now, I was protected from the storm by Mommy's umbrella. I knew at that moment that the water on my skin was not from the rain.

I closed my eyes, and as I did, I felt tears squeezing out onto my face.