

Rooted

As I swing the front door open, my mother looks up from her coffee, still a little dazed. I close my eyes for a moment, take a sharp breath, and walk off to my room.

The cartons of clothes fly around the room, crash, and spill their contents onto the floor. My hand, whipping the air as it destroys, almost creates a whirring sound.

As the last bedpost shatters into splinters and the last untouched wall caves in, I crumble to the floor, remembering. The small, unkempt grave of my little brother, sitting, lonely, atop a hill.

I grab onto the window ledge and climb outside, a skill I just use out of habit back from when I was grounded all the time and the only thing I wanted to do was climb a tree and think. I jump down easily and land steadily in the dark—only to come face-to-face with my mother again. I smile with tight lips and try to push her out of my way. Yet she hugs me, probably a sudden burst of light in her perpetual drunkenness.

My rage waits, tingling on my skin. It fights the chilling gusts that blow through me. She shivers. From behind my mother, my tree sways. My attention is called by the angle of my mother's face. It points to my forehead, too weak to look into my eyes. The head is tilted up, and the long-unused neck seems to quiver with effort. I swallow, with disgust. Even at this angle, I can't help but see the top of her head, almost radiating vulnerability. Yet as much as I don't want to be here, I cannot turn away, almost as if my revulsion had worked its way down through my body and rooted itself, mocking me.

I follow her silent lead back into the house and to the kitchen table, the naked light bulb momentarily blinding me.

“I want to be proud of you, Aki,” she says suddenly, after looking my dirt-stained shirt over for a second.

“You’re a girl. You should do the kitchen cleaning and the laundry--you know I’m ill,” she continues. I know she is ill. She is always showing everyone her balding head, making a show of vomiting and her tearing eyes.

But I can’t do everything. I can’t think about her, I can’t think about the time before all the screaming started. It’s been 3 years since then, but it still haunts me. I can’t stop thinking about how he was smothered. My mother and dad had argued, and Kai, my little brother, had tried to stop it. Of course, I was already 11 then, old enough to know that once it started nothing could stop it.

“Kai,” I had mumbled, hesitantly. “Don’t.”

But that momentary protectiveness had vanished when he turned around and grinned, his blue blanket in hand, dragging behind him.

“Don’t tell me what to do! I can do anything!” he had shouted. He had thrown the blanket in my face, and it had landed silently on my head.

He had gone crying to my mother, hiding behind her wide skirt, playing with her hair, trying to get her to smile through her glaring eyes. My mother and dad were both drunk, clambering over and kicking the shattered gin bottles.

My mother was scared, of course. She was shaking, and threw herself into the closet, shutting the door. Yet Kai followed her in—to stop the conflict. Nobody but my mother knows what really happened in there. My dad was looking for her, banging on every door, while I escaped to my bed. Kai started crying. Just as I started to get up off of my bed to quiet him, the crying abruptly stopped.

As the fight ceased and both my mother and dad cooled down, she had stepped out of the closet, holding Kai against her chest, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Be quiet, and get me his blanket,” she said. “He’s sleeping.”

And I had dutifully gotten her his comfort blanket, the one he always cried into as he slept.

I was always told from then on that he had gone to a prestigious boarding school for kids, the Delphian School in Oregon. I guess some part of me had been, somehow suspicious. I ended up looking the school up online, and my jealousy only rose when I saw the school’s website. I thought that he was the talented one in the family. I was the one who had to be enrolled, and re-enrolled, in various public schools. I was the one who wouldn’t do as I was told, wouldn’t clean the dishes, wouldn’t do the laundry. I was the bad influence, a piece of burnt charcoal forgotten and washed with a pair of white jeans.

The day I ended up walking the trail, I’d stormed off into the woods after a smack on the head for not doing the dishes. The dying grass held faint footprint outlines, ones that I had never noticed before. Curious, I followed them I reached a moss-laden stone, hidden between some overgrown bushes.

I remember the faint smile that reached my lips as my hand swept over the small stone, my fingertips unknowingly tracing the etched letters. The leftover drops of water caught on the moss glinted and shone in the sun, sparkling and reflecting my glittering eyes. Anxious to enjoy my newfound discovery, I had roughly brushed the moss off of the stone, pulling up the ends of the moss that had grown stuck to the upright stone. As

the moss and dirt cascaded down, I started to be able to make out the letters. The first thing I read was the epitaph-- a simple statement of "I'm sorry."

At this, I smiled, content with the fact that I had my own dark secret, something nobody else knew, something nobody else could steal.

As my brow furrowed, I tried to decipher the text etched on the stone. It was cheaply made, a granite-like material. Its edges had begun to crumble. The last name, Taylor, gradually became apparent. My cheeks puffed up as I smiled, but the sentiment was killed off by the small whisper in my head that told me that this was getting creepy. The shadows shifted as the dark black clouds hid the sun away. But an adrenaline rush had breezed through my body, drowning out all of the voices and making me silent.

The smile found my lips again as I wondered whether I had found the long forgotten grave of some distant ancestor. I quickly brushed the remaining dirt and moss away. Kai, it said. I blinked, thinking, maybe, that with the dark cloud, I had fallen asleep. But after many blinks, the reality began to sink in. I looked around, for the first time, and found a shade of weathered baby blue, poking up out of the ground.

There was a hand-sewn "KT" on the corner of the fabric, just as on Kai's comfort blanket from years ago. That was when I believed. Believed that if I pulled on that faded triangle of blue sticking up out of the ground, the gravestone would tumble, the dirt would be displaced, and I would find the dried bones of my brother, shrouded by a milk-white powder that used to be him.

Shivering at the memory, I re-enter the world where my mother is still talking, "seriously," to me about my responsibilities.

“Remember how I told you that you have to go to the post office for me to receive some packages? I have to come-- I need to be the one to sign the paper.” I sigh in relief, happy that I can spend my time not forging my mother’s signature, again.

“So, you won’t need me there,” I say, as decisively as I can.

“Of course I do. You’re the child that takes care of me, and I need moral support. I need to know that someone in that stuffy room doesn’t want to ridicule me.” I stop breathing for a second, the whirring of the desktop refrigerator screaming in my head. Yet I feel my head nodding, I feel my lips curving up at the ends, and hear the monotone sound of “yes” coming from them.

We walk silently on the pristine suburban street. It feels narrow, and I sigh with relief as the post office comes into sight. Feeling my mother’s eyes on me, I turn to her. I stare back, and she smiles. *But does she even know that it’s sinister? Does she know that I don’t want to smile? That I don’t want to be her child, that she is so weak that she makes me ashamed? Does she know that I know?*

My inner monologue is punctured by whispered words, murmured under her breath.

“You know I love you, right?” She stops walking, and faces me.

“Do you?” I say, but then, after a pause, I add, “think that you do? Do you think that you could leave me to be your maid that waits on you hand-and-foot, and then tell me, when it’s most convenient for you, that ‘oh, by the way, you love me.’”

Her head shines in the sun, her eyes glint, and the tears shoot out like daggers.

As I run away, words jumble together and dash out of my mouth, scrambled and poached. The shocked faces never cease to amaze me, but today, they seem to stare deeper, like they are all grabbing at something inside of me, rather than openly gaping like blundering deer, as they usually do. Past the small shops that promise the smoothest soles, the shiniest shoes. Past the bigger shops that sell jewelry as the quickest way to win a heart.

I momentarily stop, watching as my mother stands there, one foot stepping off the corner-- her face slanted, her eyes downcast, her toes flat from clutching at her flip-flops, her misleading map of veins almost bursting through her plaster skin, and her overly-pink lipstick smudged outside of the thick, trembling lines she drew with the dollar-store lipstain.

I blink, then turn back around. I feel my head shaking from side to side, but it's only to keep myself from becoming a statue. I have become just a form to everyone. They look into my space, just to see a whisper of a person, no face. I can judge, but they cannot.

An image pops up in my mind, clogging up every source to the outside that my body has—my mother quivering. I look again, and I see the droop of her eye-bags, the beginnings of wine tracing her eyes like eyeliner, her squared shoulders.

As I keep walking pointlessly, a child with his grubby hands and knobby knees crosses the street, the traffic not even a thought in his mind. His shirt is covered in new, vibrant grass-stains, and his face is smeared with chocolate ice cream. Somehow, I start to crave his life. No matter how much I would be repulsed by my own tubular fingers, my own duck-like feet.

He reminds me of what Kai would have looked like. His eyes glitter a deep fawn, and he looked about eight-years-old, the age Kai would have been.

He bumps into me, and yells out an abrupt “Sorry!” He flashes me a carefree smile, then skids away from me. I want to call out to him, tell him to stop. Yet I continue to walk, my head deliberately placed so my eyes see nothing.

I turn the corner, my feet seeming to drag on their own. I imagine her sitting there, face hidden between her knees. She would look up, her bittersweet tears streaming down onto her smile. And without beckoning open arms, I would still be guided to her, the mist opening a path.

But there is no mist.

The end of the corner keeps advancing, and the deserted street stares at me, blankly. As the street finally straightens, I see the creases of a woman’s back, crouched behind a fierce plastic trashcan, her shoulders slightly sighing in the wind. It’s my mother. *Why is she sitting there?* But I try to discard the thought from my mind, slowly approaching. As I reach for her shoulder, a breeze blows, and her form shifts. Her shoulder becomes an open bag of rotting strawberries and spinach. My fingers almost burn, and I retract them, quickly, away from the trash bag I thought was my mother.

I walk away briskly, toward the forest behind my house.

There, I find my tree, and start to climb.

At the top, I feel my lips start to chap with the wind as my fingertips make their way silently to a different bough, softly stroking the rough bark. There are letters engraved there, spelling out both my name and Kai’s name over and over, like a cluster of ants. My letters get less crooked as the years have gone by, but Kai’s name just lies

there, an unforgiving jumble of etchings. I look out, remembering how I used to climb this tree as if I were some sort of wood nymph, remembering how I would survey the house and the surrounding trees and somehow believe I was in control.

Movement catches my eye in the window of my room. The breeze seems to stop around me. A figure shifts, slowly. With slow, labored footsteps and a hand that is perpetually rubbing her temples, my mother walks back and forth in the room, carefully folding the shirts and returning them to the shelf.

I stay frozen, lips dry, and watch until my mother finishes and she backs out of the room. She shivers in the doorway, leaning against the wood, while I crumple into a ball at the top of the tree, inhale, and bury my head between my knees.