

Scar

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IT was the first time I watched you sleep. I stood there for what seemed like an eternity, committing your every feature to memory.

Fine, almost feminine bone structure. Light eyebrows and lashes. A nose you thought was too big for your face. Tiny moles here and there. A faint scar on your cheek: a pockmark, no doubt. *Beautiful.*

A suspicious dampness blurred my vision. A solitary tear fell on the cold glass of your coffin.

* * *

The cool, crisp night air seeped into my skin. I was exhausted; it had been a long day. I couldn't wait for my head to hit the pillow so I could fall asleep at last.

You were waiting for me at the corner of my street. Your friends were there, as usual, just hanging out on a Friday night. Our eyes met as I drew nearer.

I shook my head no, but you mumbled a quick "excuse me" to the others, anyway, and jogged up to me.

"You going home already?" you asked, checking your watch. It was a Casio, with black leather straps and a rectangular face.

I nodded. "You don't need to walk me home. I'm really tired."

"Are you sure?" There was concern in your voice. Somehow, over the past few weeks, you had morphed from Mr. Laid-back into The World's Biggest Worrywart. I liked the extra attention, but it wasn't always necessary.

"Charles, my house is just a few feet away, you know."

Behind you, your friends began to cough and wheeze. "Come on, say good night already!" someone—your best friend, Jerwin, maybe—said in mock impatience.

I smiled. "They're calling you. I'll see you Sunday. Now go."

* * *

When I woke up that Sunday, the house was empty. Not being a morning person, I was used to

that. I rolled out of bed and dragged myself to the bathroom.

Half an hour later, I went outside and ran into an old friend from my theater group.

"Hey..." She grasped my hand. She stared at me strangely, as if she wasn't sure who I was. "What happened? What happened to your daddy?"

My stomach turned to ice. "My dad? He wasn't at home when I woke up. What happened to him?" My father had always had kidney problems. In my mind, I saw him crumpled in a heap on the ground.

The color drained from her face. Her voice sounded like it was coming from far away. "You mean you don't know?"

That was when the world around me seemed to start melting.

"What?"

I had whispered it, but it sounded deafening to me. The way a person's voice rings in her ears when the waters close over her. The way her thoughts echo in her mind just before she drowns.

* * *

Not five minutes later, I caught up with Jerwin and some of our other friends.

"You know what *Ate* Rowena just told me?" The voice I presumed was mine sounded frighteningly casual. "She told me Charles was dead, can you believe that?"

"That's not true, I wonder what made her say that," Lynn said quickly. Her voice sounded different somehow. Hollow. The others just stared at me, like deer entranced by the headlights of an oncoming truck.

The next person I saw was a friend of your aunt's. I touched her arm and she turned to face me.

Her eyes were red and brimming with tears.

"What?" I asked softly, needlessly. I was already crying. "Is it true?"

Whatever her answer was, I didn't hear it. I only remember her rocking me in her arms, the white fabric of her blouse suddenly damp beneath my chin.

* * *

Trips to Cavite always made me nervous.

"Any message from Jerwin?" my friend, Weng, asked. The sound of her voice jolted me out of my thoughts. I wasn't sure what those thoughts were, exactly, but I knew I was thinking them.

I checked my phone. "Oh, yeah. Here." I paused for a moment as I opened Jerwin's message.

Weng read his message over my shoulder and sighed. "You were probably the only one Charlene called," she said.

"I guess I shouldn't have assumed she already invited the others," I said regretfully. "Looks like it's just the two of us today."

We sat in silence for a while. Then Weng spoke up. "It's been three years since I last visited his family."

"My last visit was two years ago. It was Charlene's eighteenth birthday."

"He should've turned twenty-one today."

"Yeah."

It's hard to talk about it.

* * *

I rolled over onto my stomach and opened one eye experimentally. The alarm clock was adamant about it: It was 5 a.m.

I considered rolling over again and going back to sleep. Five more minutes wouldn't hurt, would it? Then again, knowing me, those five minutes could easily stretch to fifty. I hauled myself out of bed and crept up to the phone in the next room.

You answered on the first ring.

"I'm up," you said sleepily.

"OK. See you."

Click.

About an hour later, I was on my way to school. You were walking me to the bus stop. Almost reflexively, you reached out to ease the knapsack strap off my shoulder so you could sling it over yours.

"Nice shirt," I commented. You wore a long-sleeved indigo shirt. It was the first time I saw you in long sleeves.

"We're wearing the same color of clothes again. Will you stop copying me?" you demanded, trying to look indignant.

"This is my school uniform! I can't help that it's blue," I replied, swatting your arm.

"Well, then, ask them to change it," you said, a playful glint in your eyes.

* * *

You went to college in Manila but, once a week, you would visit me at my high school in Diliman and hang out around the university before you took me home to my grandmother's.

"I heard some girls from your school talking about Portia," you told me once. Portia was a year ahead of me in school, but I'd worked with her on the school paper. She was one of the golden

girls of the senior class—one of those people who couldn't help but be good in everything they did.

But Portia had been comatose for a week after a bike accident, and yesterday morning the students were told that she had passed away. I had told you about it the night before, over our notoriously long phone conversations.

"It's horrible," I said simply. The entire student population had been wandering around the hallways listlessly, like zombies, ever since news of the accident came. "Everything was so sudden."

"I wish there were a way people could tell if they were going to die," you mused, shifting my knapsack from your right shoulder to your left. "Just some way so they could be ready for it."

* * *

"Guess I have to go now," I said, tentatively, into the receiver.

"OK. I'll call you tomorrow, then?"

"Don't you mean tonight?" I kidded, looking at the clock on the wall.

You chuckled. "You're right, I'll call tonight." Then, softly, "I love you."

That was my cue to say, "OK, bye." But today was different. I replied, "Love you, too."

Silence.

I grew worried. "Hey, are you all right over there?"

It took another moment for you to answer. "I'm sitting here with my eyes closed in shock."

I laughed. "Was it really that surprising?"

"Yeah, well, I thought I'd never hear it."

"You can open your eyes now."

"OK." Another pause. Then you started to laugh.

"What now?" I asked. I liked it when you laughed, but I didn't want you to go all silly on me.

"Power failure!" you sputtered.

I burst out laughing, too.

"You have an effect on everything," you joked.

"This is getting really weird," I told you.

"I know. Well, guess I better go find some candles. Good night! Love you again."

"Love you."

"Twice in one night! All right!" you whooped.

I laughed. Now it was my cue. "Stop it! We're never going to get off the line. Bye."

* * *

It hurt to remember. It was a physical pain. I welcomed the pain. I loved the pain. I thought, as long as I was hurting, I was doing justice to your memory.

Everyone worried about me. A girl in my English class who always sat on the other side of the room suddenly came up to me in the corridor and gave me a hug. Friends I hadn't seen in years called me. My grade-school buddies showed up at my door with a cake from Red Ribbon.

I remember that, of all the people who tried to comfort me then, Ed from homeroom made the most sense. "I want to tell you everything's going to be all right," he said over the phone one night. "But I know nothing I say can make you feel better."

Everyone else said stuff like, "Life's like that. These things happen."

These things did *not* happen. You were supposed to lie or cheat or forget my birthday. You weren't supposed to have a heart attack at age 17 and *die*.

* * *

But, in time, I had enough of the pain. I decided I needed to distract myself. I don't know when I started to forget, or which memory was the first to go. It was when I came across a picture of you by accident that I realized I had forgotten which cheek your scar was on, and whether it was near your temple or your nose.

* * *

"So good to see you," your father said. He had just arrived from work. "It's been so long."

I gave him a hug. "It's great to be back."

"Have you eaten dinner yet?"

I nodded. "It was delicious. I'm stuffed! Thank you for inviting me."

"How could we not invite you?" He grinned broadly, adjusting the watch on his wrist—a Casio with black leather straps and a rectangular face. "Drop by as often as you like. Are you sleeping over?"

I shook my head. "No, but I promised Charisse I'd wait for her. I won't leave until she comes home from school."

Your mother looked at the time. "She's still at cheerleading practice? It's almost eight o'clock."

Charlene nudged the refrigerator door closed with her hip. Her hands were full. I took a few bags of chips from her to lighten the load.

Your cousin Erick popped in and tried to swipe the drinks. “Ooh, can I come with you guys?”

“No!” Charlene said, dodging him.

“I see, this is another one of your sister things, huh?” he said, sniffing.

Carmie bounded up to me. “Ate! Can you braid my hair?”

“Carmelyn! We’re busy,” Charlene said, shooing her away.

“Next time,” I promised Carmie. The youngest of four—three, now. She’s grown a lot since the last time I saw her, but she still likes to be babied. She had always been your favorite, hadn’t she?

All my nervousness had flown away. I thought I would break down all over again, but it turned out that going back was what I needed all along. I needed to see you; I saw you in your parents, your sisters. I needed to feel your presence; I found it in your family, in the way they welcomed me into their home. Maybe they see a little bit of you in me, too.

* * *

You and I were sitting next to each other in a packed jeepney. I always liked to sit at the very end of the jeep so I could get off more quickly. We had just come from the wake of a friend’s father. So many people were dying those days. It was as if dying was the in thing to do.

The radio was tuned in to a sappy oldies station. I hated anything overly sentimental, but I found myself singing along. “Let me tell you, goodbye doesn’t mean forever,” I sang softly as I watched the road race beneath us. First a stretch of black asphalt, then gray cement. Black, gray; black, gray.

“That’s true,” you remarked gravely.

I turned toward you and rolled my eyes in mock disgust at your sudden shift to Sentimental Mode, only to get my nose tweaked in return.

* * *

The bus was cruising along Coastal Road.

Weng had spoken again. “You know what? That guy who plays Clark Kent in *Smallville* reminds me of Charles.”

“I know.”

Yeah, you do—did—look like him. Yes, you weren’t as dark, and you were skinnier, but you did. You had the same sad, puppy-dog eyes, the same wistful smile. And you always made us feel like no harm was ever going to come our way, like a real Superman in the making should.

Then again, Superman probably never had a scar in his life.

* * *

I wish I could remember where your scar was.

But I can't.

I wish remembering would bring you back.

But it won't.

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