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HOME

When my grandmother died, she left me a legacy. I never knew her, which has only increased her legendary status. A hippie, my mom calls her. A Woodstock-attending, protest-marching, Nixon-hating feminist who bucked the patriarchy and knew that the only way to live was raw and free. A woman who stood for something.

It's much easier to idolize the dead. The living constantly fail us. But in death, we remember a person as near perfect. Flaws are forgotten until one day, you're listening to Cat Stevens's "Peace Train," imagining a woman in bell-bottoms with flowers in her hair hanging out the side of a Volkswagen van with a "Make Love, Not War" bumper sticker, on her way out west, in search of herself. You're not sure if it's an image from a movie you once saw or a picture from an old photo album somewhere in your house. But does it even matter? All you know is that you like her.

My grandma's legacy is all around me—the house I live in, the café where I work, the crates of vinyl stacked in my room, filled with records alphabetized by band name, from America to ZZ Top.

Rebekah Crane

Grandma is dead, but I've never known a time without her. She's always been here, like a birthmark.

"Use the records carefully," my mother, Rayne, said to me when I was younger.

Rayne would sit me down on the bed, slide a record out of its sleeve, and place it on the turntable gently. The collection is vinyl from the sixties and seventies, when rock stars weren't flashy, and jean shirts with bell-bottoms were the height of fashion. When all a person needed for the perfect album cover was a beat-up old truck in the middle of a field, or a couch sitting on the lawn in front of some abandoned house, to make the perfect statement. Slowly my mother would lower the needle. "If you scratch the record, it'll skip, and then it's ruined. Always be gentle, *Amoris*."

To Rayne, they weren't just records. They were the soundtrack of her memories. Of her life with a mother she could no longer see in the flesh. We'd sit on my bed, and she'd tell me story after story. How her mom hitchhiked from Michigan to Florida for spring break one year when she was in college. How she made her own clothes and refused to wear a bra. How she smoked weed out of her father's tobacco pipe and inadvertently helped his glaucoma. How she traveled all over the United States, living out of a van, in search of "home"—a place where the cosmic energy was just right, the scenery was awe inspiring, and the human connection was potent. That's how she found Alder Creek.

"She may have had a short life, but my mom knew what was important, and she didn't stop until she found it," Rayne told me, more than once.

Once Grandma found her utopia, she borrowed all the money her parents could afford and opened the very first coffee shop in Alder Creek. I work in that café now, though Rayne sold the business to a woman named Marnie after her mom died. Rayne isn't one for baking scones and making lattes. She knew Grandma would want the café

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passed on to the right hands, and Rayne's hands were built for other purposes.

Rayne is well known around our town for working magic. She is a bodyworker, a healer, a true kind of witch, before men took control of the word and made it ugly. A witch with long brown hair streaked with gray, and strong pale hands, and eyes the color of twilight, a mix of dark blue and brown. Rayne has an energy about her—a knowing that some people are just born with. People want to be around her, in her presence, because her energy simply makes them feel better. That's why I've never minded when she holds me captive in my room, playing vinyl and telling me stories. I watch her and imagine her as a child, sitting with her mom as she passed along her wisdom. If my grandma created Rayne, I would let Rayne mold me. Give her clay, and she'll sculpt something beautiful with her magical hands. Plus, I love the music.

I was five years old when my parents gave me my first guitar. My dad, Christopher Westmore, found it at a garage sale. It was small, perfect for a child. He placed it in my hands and said, "I got it for free 'cause it's so beat up. But I think there's still life in it. See if you can find it, Amoris."

I had that guitar tuned, shined, and singing within days. I taught myself how to play listening to the Beatles, Nina Simone, Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan. With each note and each chord, I felt like I was learning the soundtrack of my life, becoming who I was meant to be.

When I turned twelve, Chris bought me a Martin D-28. "An upgrade," he called it, though the guitar was used, the wood worn down in places where players had plucked and strummed. By then, I could play, to some degree, nearly every album of my grandma's—within reason, I'm no Jimi Hendrix or B. B. King.

"Maybe it's time you start writing your own music," Chris offered.

Easy for him to say, he's an artist. He creates for a living. Chris surrounds himself with chaos and wild ideas. He doesn't mind a mess, which his art studio confirms. Somehow he sifts through it all until

a concrete painting emerges. But the idea of writing music petrified me. Whatever song I wrote, whatever notes and chords and riffs I put together, could never equal the genius of the albums I'd grown to love, and to play. My own ideas and thoughts were incoherent most days, so far from brilliant they verged on ridiculous. Embarrassing, really. No, it was much easier to play someone else's genius. There's beauty in imitation, and every once in a while, a cover song can even rival the original.

That was my life—a cover song. It still is. But I'm OK with that. Better than OK. I prefer it. Aren't we all cover songs, in a way? I was sculpted from Rayne, who was sculpted from her mom. Breaking from that tradition sounds lonely. Imitation may lack in creative genius, but it's a lot more inclusive. And let's be honest, I'm no John Lennon. Who would want to be? Murdered at forty, shot by a lunatic? I'll take the safety of another person's genius over the danger of creating something my own. Plus, I like my life as it is. It's a good life. It would take a lot of convincing to give that up for the uncertainty of a pencil in my hand and a blank piece of paper.

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Alder Creek is busy today. Cars with out-of-state license plates, mostly from Texas and California, line the streets of our quaint downtown. People are in a hurry to grab the last Zen of the summer in our mountain oasis. But despite the crowd, a week's worth of my tension eases as we approach the two gray-and-white duplexes of the only home I've ever known. Its overgrown garden, creaky screen door, chipped paint, and basketball hoop with a net hanging on by a thread—it might not sound idyllic, but trust me, it is. I can practically smell the palo santo burning in Rayne's bedroom, cleansing the air of any bad energy that might have seeped in through the cracks. My trip to New York was only a week long, but I'm desperate to get out of this car and run up

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to my bedroom, or sit under twinkle lights in the Zen fairy garden in the backyard.

My grandmother nicknamed our house Shangri-La when she bought it. Back in 1975, Alder Creek wasn't much of a tourist destination, more a hideaway from traditional society—a place where counterculture thrived.

Shangri-La comes into view. Mr. and Mrs. Hillsborough pull into the driveway, and I thank them for taking me along on their trip. For buying my plane ticket. For the Manhattan dinners and lunches and sightseeing that must have cost them a small fortune. All so I could properly say goodbye to my boyfriend, Zach, their son, who's now officially a freshman at Columbia University.

"Don't be a stranger," Mr. Hillsborough says as he brings the car to a stop.

"I won't."

Mrs. Hillsborough reaches back and places her hand on my shoulder. "Thank you," she says, catching me off guard.

"For what?"

"For being so good to our Zach. He cares about you a lot."

I smile, but I hate to admit that it feels forced. I blame fatigue brought on by unfamiliar travel. "He makes it easy to be good."

At that, I scoot out of the back seat. I don't want to be too hasty, but I'm exhausted, and the smell of Rayne's pecan pie is wafting out of the kitchen window, making my mouth water and my heart melt. It's her mom's recipe. Rayne may not be a natural baker, but she can make a mean pecan pie. It must be a homecoming surprise. I didn't think I could love my mom any more, but at this moment, I do.

Zach's mom rolls down the window of their Volvo. "Think about Thanksgiving, Amoris. I know Zach will be anxious to see you. And don't be put off by the expense. Our treat." She winks at me, her light sandy-brown hair the same color as her son's. I can't think about Thanksgiving. School hasn't even started. It's eighty degrees and the

leaves on the trees are still green. I give the Hillsboroughs a nod and a smile, and they finally pull away.

After a busy week in New York City, followed by a long flight home, I've never been happier to see Shangri-La. The light is on in my dad's art studio next door, the hum of music vibrating out the open windows. After her mom died, Rayne built a matching house right next to Shangri-La, with an art studio for Chris on the first floor and a rental apartment on the second. I contemplate knocking on the studio door, but the pecan pie is too tempting. My dad isn't very social when he's deep in his art anyway. That's why Rayne built the second house, that and the income they get from the apartment. I can see Chris later, when the weed has worn off.

When I walk in the door of Shangri-La, Rayne stands at the kitchen sink, washing dishes. Her long salt-and-pepper hair is pulled into a loose braid down her back. I've always envied her straight, manageable hair. The less I touch my curly hair, the better.

My mom turns, slinging the dish towel over her shoulder.

"So. Did you see the Statue of Liberty?" she asks.

"Check."

"Go to the top of the Empire State Building?"

"Check."

"The Met?"

"They had a Matisse exhibit that was amazing. I brought Dad a pamphlet."

"He'll be jealous." I can tell she wants to ask me about the most important part of the trip, but she pauses, leaning back on the sink. "Did you . . ."

"Brought a daisy and everything. Just like you said. Laid it right on the ground next to the memorial. Zach took a picture on my phone." I show Rayne, and her eyes fill with tears.

"Grandma would have loved that."

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My usually lenient, carefree mom had one very specific condition when she agreed to let me accompany my longtime boyfriend and his family on a trip to New York City. I had to visit Strawberry Fields, Central Park's circular memorial to John Lennon, and put a daisy right next to the word IMAGINE in the center.

Rayne hugs me, her familiar earthy scent mixing with the smell of pecan pie. I feel overwhelming relief at being home.

"Do you want to move to New York City now?" she asks.

"Never," I say.

"Never say never," Rayne chides.

"I think it's safe to say never in this case. It's a cool city, but it's not for me. Every day seems to be garbage day there."

"And how is Zach?"

"Nervous, mostly."

"That's to be expected," Rayne says. "And how are you?"

"Exhausted."

Rayne examines me, gently caressing my long, curly blond hair, a trait I can thank Chris for. My brother, River, has Rayne's straight hair. All he has to do is wash and go, whereas I have to use special products to give my hair the finished look I want. "Is that all? You know you can talk to me. This must have been a tough week."

For a moment, I have no idea what she's referring to. And then it hits me. I just left the only boyfriend I've ever had on the other side of the country. I should be devastated. A pile of tears. Heartbroken, missing him already. But all I really want is my bed and my guitar and my records. I attempt to muster some sadness, but only find guilt. I'm happy to be home, not devastated. What does that say about me?

"Yeah . . . goodbyes are hard," I say. "But we have plans to FaceTime later. And I was already texting him when we landed so . . . it's not too bad."

Rayne touches my cheek. "Thank goodness for modern technology."

The oven timer rings. Rayne pulls out the pie and sets it on the counter to cool.

“You know, you didn’t have to do that,” I say, eyeing my favorite dessert and knowing that Rayne only bakes when pressured. “I’m fine, really. Zach and I will figure it out. It’s all good. Not that I’m complaining you made a pie for me.”

Rayne pivots toward me, looking guilty.

“Oh . . .” I say, feeling slightly stupid. “The pie’s not for me.”

“You know the pie is always for you, sweetheart.”

“But . . .”

Rayne takes off her oven mitts and clasps her hands in front of her. “I have a surprise for you,” she says. “We have new tenants moving into the apartment next door, and I think you’re going to be happy about these ones.”

“Let me guess. Deadheads? Crystal healers? Gypsies?”

Rayne holds her finger up. “My favorite healing blogger just wrote an article about the word ‘gypsy.’ We shouldn’t use it. The correct term is ‘Roma people.’”

“Stick to the topic, Mom,” I state. “Not Grandma and Grandpa Westmore.”

“No. You know they don’t like coming this far west. But you’re getting closer.”

My brain isn’t firing through the exhaustion. I have no idea who Rayne could be talking about. Who would be worthy of an afternoon of baking indoors when Rayne could be spending this sunny day in the garden, giving the flowers pep talks or coaching the growing vegetables?

“I give up,” I say.

Rayne examines me from across the room. “I can’t believe in a year from now, you’ll be graduated. Off to new adventures.”

She’s delaying. Rayne knows damn well I’m bound for the local community college. I have no desire to leave Alder Creek.

“Who is it?”

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Rayne crosses the kitchen and spins me around, her hands massaging my back, kneading into the knots that have formed. “You’re so tense, Amoris. Are you sure New York was OK?”

Sometimes it’s a disadvantage to have a bodyworker for a mom. I swear she can read my emotions simply by touching me.

“It was fine. Long flight. Dirty city.”

Rayne continues kneading my back like it’s bread, pressing and rubbing until a bit of the tension is gone.

“That’s better,” she says. “A bath with some Epsom salt and you’ll be all relaxed.”

“A bath does sound kind of dreamy,” I say.

“Put some rose oil in it.”

“Anything else?”

“And wash your hair.”

I snap out of her magical massage trance. Rayne still hasn’t answered my question. “Mom, who is moving in next door?”

She pulls plates from the cupboard, six in total. We’re a family of four.

“Kaydene and Jamison should be here in about an hour,” she says.

“Jamison.” That name hasn’t crossed my lips in years. Saying it now feels almost foreign. My back and shoulders tense up worse than before.

“Don’t forget about Kaydene. She’ll be living there, too.”

“In *our* rental apartment.”

“That’s the one,” Rayne says with enthusiasm, buzzing around the kitchen now. I don’t move. My words are gone. “You used to *beg* to live next door to Jamison when you were little. You two were so cute.”

The entire flight back from New York, I was looking forward to home. Going to work tomorrow at the café. Seeing my friends. Sleeping in my comfortable bed. Holding my guitar. Being back where I belong. In New York City, you can barely see the sky between all the buildings. Night and day mesh together in a blur of artificial light. In Alder Creek, we’re illuminated by a blanket of stars almost every night.

Rebekah Crane

But I haven't come home to the same place.

"How about that bath?" Rayne says, patting me on the butt.

I drag myself to the bathroom. But as I sit on the edge of the tub, waiting for it to fill, adding Epsom salt and rose oil, my shoulders are tense again, and I know that the bath won't help. I wish it was that easy.

Last night as Zach and I sat in his dorm room, searching for the right words for whatever comes next between us, I didn't think my life could get any more complicated. But all that mess was supposed to disappear when I got home. My life fits together when I'm in Alder Creek. Nothing feels irreparable. But I wasn't expecting this. I wasn't expecting . . . Jamison Rush.

I submerge myself in the bath as a deluge of memories washes over me. But I better not linger.

The Rushes will be here in an hour.