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Strands

Ashley Underwood

She wished for forgetting before she actually forgot. The smoke ate at her lungs in her sleep, making her cough while lying in the hotel bed. She whimpered, struggling against the covers, sleeping on the far edge of the right side of the bed, leaving the left side untouched. The pillow became wet against her cheek. She cried out, rolled over to her other side, and reached toward the empty side of the bed. When her bandaged hands met the cold covers, her eyes slit open.

"Brandon?"

Her eyes opened wider, blinking away the sleep. She focused on the flat bedspread and untouched pillow. She shook her head violently, released a strangled wail, and rolled away from the empty side of the bed. She reached down to pick up the doll she'd thrown on the floor while asleep. She pulled it in against her chest, curled her legs close to her body, stroked the patched-up dress, and loosened some of the mud from the yarn-like strands of hair with her raw and scratched fingers. Soon enough, her eyes drifted closed and her hands rested limply against the doll.

"Mom! Dad's home!"

She sat up in the hotel bed with a smile, a line appearing between her eyebrows when she looked at the unfamiliar curtains and cheap table and chair. She looked down at the doll in her lap and leaned back against the wall, absently moving her hand to caress the doll. Her eyes began to burn and she sobbed, her tears falling to the mud-stained fabric in her arms.

"Brandon! Tasha!" her voice carried over the rubble and debris that had been her town. The sky was black with reflections of emergency blue and red, the orange of fire, and spotlights. Ambulances from neighboring communities were moving carefully through the piles that had once been houses, stopping any time they saw survivors waving their arms frantically and screaming that someone was hurt and needs help.

Her eyes forgot the scene when she heard a scream. She quickened her pace, stumbling over pieces of wood in the dark, the fires only casting shadowy flickers. She ran down the street, past the bones of homes that had stood strongly for over thirty years, past the piles of metal, wood, and brick that marked the remains of the Wheeler house. She stepped around the rising tower of the fireplace and chimney and stopped abruptly, off balance. Shannon Wheeler was curled up around something, her cries and sobs rising over the popping of the fires and the sirens.

"Shannon?" she said, placing her feet carefully between the debris. Her neighbor didn't answer, but remained close to whatever lay in her arms. Stepping closer, she gasped, making out a strong male body, and shuddered at the glimpse of what remained of Benjamin Wheeler's face. She stepped away from the sight, shaking her head sharply, and turned to run back to a clearer section of street. She waved down an ambulance and directed them toward her friends' house.

"Wait," she called after the second paramedic. "Have you seen my daughter and husband? Brandon and Natasha McCail? He's 35, brown hair and hazel eyes. She's thirteen, looks like me except with brown hair. This is my street."

Her eyes dropped to the ruin of the ground when the only reply was an apology and a suggestion to check the response headquarters.

She called it The Dark.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been there, or even if she'd even been anywhere else. She had memories, but she didn't really know if they really were memories. The Dark was the perfect backdrop for her mind to play movies that could have been memories. Trees, sunlight, wind, love, loss, despair— she remembered these things.

Fire, wooden shards, and scraps of cloth were the only remnants of the house she had loved as home. She didn't notice the smell, the child of smoke and rain, but she saw the rubble and felt the ash falling on her skin. She blinked the wetness out of her eyes, and her panting joined the sounds of sirens and rain.

"Brandon!"

Her cry cracked at the end, and she paused to fight off hysteria.

For a while, she remembered what their faces looked like, trapped in a horrible death. The beginning was filled with grief, tears, and wailing to the darkness that was her world. She cherished the sounds of her grief, the feel of the wetness on her cheeks.

She used to swallow a tasteless pill that contained the perfect amount of vitamins and calories to survive on and one water ration a day. She used to love the taste of that water and that pill, but, after screaming and crying for so long, she woke up with her mouth stitched shut, her eyes unable to produce tears, and a tube leading directly out of her stomach. Soon she had to keep her eyes constantly closed. Blind, she didn't even know if The Dark remained forever dark.

She collapsed three steps away from the storm shelter and brushed the hair from her husband's face. She was scared to touch him, afraid his body might crack into thousands of little pieces. His skin appeared to be porcelain, a look of pain etched on his face. The picture of his death imprinted itself onto her mind, and she couldn't stop touching his hair. It was so soft between her fingers, those brunette strands, and they were the only things that looked familiar. The strokes of her hand were shaky, and she couldn't stop the tears from trailing down her cheeks.

She forced her hand away, trying to keep her eyes on his hair, and refused to take in the shard of wood that had skewered her husband. She tucked the information away, repeating to herself that the time for grief was after she found her daughter.

She closed her eyes tightly and prayed to anyone listening that they could grieve together.

She had a designated area in which to urinate and excrete other wastes. The hole was filled with a solution that nullified the smell, so the scent in the room never changed. The temperature was constant, and every time she slept, she was drugged and bathed so she had no body odor. She was perfectly hygienic, perfectly isolated. While in the beginning she remembered taste and smell, after so long in The Dark, she only knew where to plug in her tube to obtain sustenance.

Her voice cracked from screaming. David, the Methodist minister, stopped her first; next came Becky, Tasha's music teacher, yet no one could tell her where her daughter was. The town wasn't large, but her feet and legs ached; her yells became croaks. She could pick out people she knew, but most were worried about their own families and did not care for the woman shambling in the streets calling her daughter's name.

Sometimes, she crawled around the wall, touching the corners. She relished the different angles. The textures of wall and floor were the same, but the meeting of the wall and the floor was a beautiful right angle. After so long in The Dark, she could feel the imperfections in the walls, and she could walk straight to them.

She ran her fingers over the stitches on her lips. Over and over again, she searched the seam, looking for the differences in texture and pattern. She felt the different spacing between the stitches, felt the imperfections of the human hand, and knew

that her own kind had mutilated her.

She woke with the sun cresting over the edge of the world. Her hands were raw and tender, and her mouth was as dry as her eyes were scratchy. The morning sunlight cast a new face on the world—one that didn't hide the results of the storm. She had collapsed, stars overhead, and slept a few hours in seconds.

Her eyes scanned the devastation, and she saw a glint a few yards away. She crawled to it, her hands screaming at her, and focused on the golden spark in the mud. She pulled on the chain, wincing as the metal bit in to her skinned palms, and widened her eyes at the charm.

Stitches, corners, she felt the difference between her skin and the feeding tube. She dipped her hand in her excrement basin, and received a warning shock. No touching the solution. The stitches kept her smile inside her mind. She took her wet hands and ran them through her hair, running the strands between her fingers.

She emitted a sound that was something between a growl and a cry. She could do nothing else with sealed lips and dried eyes.

"Tasha! Tasha!" the voice that escaped her was barely audible, a scratchy remnant of her normal voice. She crawled faster, barely able to see through the tears in her eyes. Her hands scraped against wood and rock, mud and water, and her clothes were caked with filth. She almost didn't notice the strange strands that touched her fingers. She frowned, looking down at the packed mud, and dug her broken fingernails into it, trying to extract some of the strings. She grabbed a few, pulling lightly, and her gasp echoed in her mind when she realized she was holding hair.

She pulled a little harder, following the hair to its origin, hoping to discover a stranger's face staring at her through the mud.

There were moments in The Dark when she would fall asleep and wake up with the smell of antiseptic in her nose, the feel of a mattress against her back, and the room would be white and soft, instead of black and unforgivably hard. She could see and hear, and she would walk in this place, clothes once again resting against her skin, pictures of her family pinned against the walls, real food and water to taste in her mouth.

The white of the walls almost gleamed with the artificial light, and she had to squint after so long in The Dark. She remembered how to talk in these dreams, and the people there told her they were so glad she was having a good day. However, she would inevitably look at her family photo, pinned against the wall. She would notice the gleam in their hair and the love in their eyes, and she would fall asleep and wake up with the familiar feel of stitches shackling her lips.

The eyes staring up at her through the mud could have been her own, yet these eyes were almost bulging out of their sockets. Her daughter's eyes held the gray of death in them, and they were dry and coarse with dirt.

"This is not my daughter," she whispered repeatedly, as she began clearing the mud off of the rest of the child's face. Tasha had been covered completely by mud, buried alive. Whispers became desperate chanting as the mud revealed beloved features, a girl-child the image of her mother with her father's brown hair in place of the blonde. The chant became a sobbing plea as she touched the skin of her daughter's face.

She woke up one day with a shaved head. Her hands gleefully played over the new texture of shaved flesh barely covering bone. It was a new present, and with each day that passed afterward she reverently explored the new sensation of hair growing into prickly, then longer and softer strands of hair.

"Mrs. McCail? We're so sorry for your loss. We understand you've lost your family

and your home. I know this is a difficult time for you, but do you understand what we're saying? Do you remember collapsing at the funeral?"

She caressed the doll she'd found in the rubble. Her face was swollen and the bandages on her hands limited the feel she had when she petted the doll's hair. "It used to be yellow yarn," she said. "Like my hair. But now it's brown, muddy brown. Not at all like Tasha's hair."

"Mrs. McCail? You're unable to take care of yourself. You haven't eaten in days. You cannot continue like this."

She gazed at the doll in her lap. It had been her doll when she was a child, then Tasha's doll. "We're taking you to a nearby mental institution, so that you may recover from your grief."

She often rocked back and forth allowing her back to lightly hit the wall behind her, humming a tune she didn't remember knowing. It was always the same melody. Perhaps she had made it up, but until they removed her vocal chords she could hum. The sound echoed around her, and her mind's smile bloomed. These people had made a tomb with beautiful acoustics.

She walked next to the caskets, her hands clenched around the doll, up the hill and past other freshly turned mounds of dirt. The new headstones gleamed in the sunlight while the old were chipped and their finish worn by time. The two open graves were not touched by the sun and yawned as black pits in the ground. Some stones around her were overturned, the storm not even allowing the dead to be ignorant of its presence.

Water not yet soaked in by the earth made small rivers between the raised dirt of the graves. Plastic flowers, wilted with the weight of water, rested against the stones they were placed by. The procession walked toward those yawning pits. She did not look at the caskets, both of them glistening black.

She remembered looking into Brandon's casket, but her daughter's face reigned in her mind. The mortician had schooled the pain out of those familiar features, closed the bulging eyes, and removed the constant stare from her face. The skin had looked and felt like wax under her lips. She'd stood by that open casket, stared at that face, and had no tears. Her eyes were dry and scratchy, and her lips lay closed together, only allowing the smallest whimper to escape. Her bandaged hands contrasted starkly against the black of her borrowed dress.

The casket was closed now, resting on the device that would lower it down into the engulfing earth. It had been her husband's wish to be buried, hoping that one day their bodies would rest beside each other in death, but she'd considered cremating Tasha. She thought it cruel to place her daughter back in the confines of the earth that had suffocated her, but she'd decided, to show some sort of family unity, that they would be buried in adjacent plots.

The preacher said his words, and friends and family stepped forward to place white roses on Brandon's casket and small sunflowers on Tasha's. She stared at her daughter's casket as it slowly sunk into the earth. She gasped when she saw the lid lift open and the small body sit up, reaching hands toward her mother. Tasha's mouth stretched against the stitches tying it closed, and her eyes opened, revealing white shriveled raisins. A small keening sound came from her throat, and suddenly her head was bald.

She stared, eyes wide and breath panting, at the hair growing from her daughter's scalp. It was blonde.

