**Medium Chestnut**

I wonder if she thinks of her husband while I’m dyeing her hair. I don’t do it as well as he did for her. Is she picturing him when she closes her eyes? The thought freezes me. I wait, brush in the air, to start breathing again. She looks so at peace with her eyes closed like that. I might be imagining it, but it seems like she’s almost smiling. As if getting dollar store box dye globbed down onto her roots is the most relaxing thing in the world. So I oblige her, continuing my work.

It was impressed upon me when I was mixing in activator that dyeing her hair is one of the only times my grandmother willingly takes off her necklace. I was told this twice in succession, just to make sure that I’m aware that this is a rare occurrence, and she does not part with it for less. I already knew as much. Even when she takes it off, she is careful with it, laying the chain down first and the tag gently on top somewhere it won’t get wet or stained.

I glance at it, taking in the laser-engraved image of my grandfather that sits on the dog-tag. It’s one I’ve seen before but can’t quite place. I’m sure it’s framed in her house somewhere. He’s in a suit, so I have the thought that maybe it’s him at one of his daughter’s weddings. The lack of background makes it impossible to tell. The chain is, mercifully, not typical of a dog tag. It has the air of something that was hand-selected; a silver chain that twists around in spirals. Delicate enough to look like proper jewelry but sturdy enough to hold the weight of the metal tag and a charm of the Virgin Mary. I hate the sight of it.

My grandmother shifts slightly, recalling my attention. The spot I’ve been working on is already turning chestnut, a sign that I should have moved on several strokes ago. I use the tail of my comb to gently lift the next section of hair up and over the last, flattening it slightly. Maybe hate is a strong word. There’s just something about it that seems wrong. For all the love that my grandmother clearly has for her late husband and all the dedication still so present in her life, the necklace just doesn’t seem to do them justice. It doesn’t capture the way my grandmother talks about him, or the way she looks at him still. Part of me wants to steal it in the night and replace it with something more precious, something that doesn’t feel so cold. *Of course*, I think, *it’s never cold to her*.

I lean down to wipe a bit of dye from her ear. I want her to look her best for the pictures she is going to take tonight. She doesn’t know it yet, but there will be many. The brown lifts and I set my rag back in the sink, being careful not to stain it, too. I think I’ve gotten all of her roots, but I continue parting hair to be sure. My grandmother opens her eyes and looks at me. I do too. We eye my hands, sporting gloves so covered in dye that it’s leaking onto my wrists, as they hover a few inches above her head. She doesn’t even come up to my chest. Our gaze travels to her hair and she nods, telling me that I’ve done a good job. I know I don’t compare to him. My shoulders fall and the bottle of dye goes with them, bouncing once as it hits the tile. Shit.

I’ve dripped dye onto the carpet. My mother is going to kill me. Why do we even have a white carpet in the bathroom? As I drop to my knees to clean it, my grandmother stands, reaching for the plastic bag she left on the counter. It takes her a second to register that I’m on the floor, frantically dabbing the fabric with the rag I’d snatched on my way down. She lets out a long and soft “ooooh” of concern, and we both look to the doorway, as if expecting to see my mother standing there already. Luckily, the door is closed, and I’m able to return to my dabbing in peace while my grandmother slowly wraps her hair in the bag. I notice then that the rug isn’t the only casualty, and that I’ve somehow managed to stain the wall as well.

My grandmother’s hair needs to sit for 40 minutes, which is enough time that I am able to wander off while she waits for it to take. I don’t wander far, slipping into my room which we’ll be sharing while I’m here. Anyone would hardly be able to tell that my grandmother has been sleeping here. The bed is pristinely made and the nightstand is bare, though I suspect it isn’t empty. The one sign that is visible is a small, framed picture on my desk. It’s only and inch or two from my bed, and I realize that she must have been sleeping on her side of the bed here, too. This picture is one that is much warmer to me. My grandfather is in a striped, brown polo which looks well-worn and he’s looking, but not quite smiling, at the camera. He stands alone in the frame, and I imagine his wife taking comfort in his presence as she falls asleep.

The final step is to wash out the dye. When my timer goes off, I lay down the frame and slip back into the bathroom, pulling the browned gloves back on. My grandmother notices and shakes her head. She insists she doesn’t need me for this, that she can wash her hair on her own. I don’t know if he did that for her too. The thought holds on too long and I find myself being gently shooed out of the bathroom.

Perhaps it is a good thing that my grandmother so loves pictures. Thanks to them I can be certain that I was indeed present at her surprise party. I can say that I was the one who brought the cake out from the fridge and laid it down in front of her, cut it, even. For something that I’m sure happened only seconds ago, my brain has remarkably little record of it. The pictures confirmed I exist.

My grandmother, overwhelmed by the prospect of the vacation she is being whisked off on in the morning as a present from her daughter, is ready to go to bed and I, overwhelmed by the prospect of having to drive back home in time for classes and meetings the second they’re gone, elect to join her. If nothing else, it will at least help me avoid my mother’s disapproving gaze (the carpet stain didn’t lift after all). As I am here, I am given the priority to sleep in my own bed. My mother tried to say that I should sleep on the cot, but my grandmother wouldn’t hear it. She sat down stubbornly before anyone could have another say in the matter. I lay down and curl into my sheets, staring at the wall. They smell like her. I turn to roll over and pause slightly, catching sight of the glint of a pane of glass from next to my grandmother’s new bed. I hope I would have made him proud.