

Mary

My mother is a wonderful woman. All the hell she's been through she endured with an effortless smile. She suffered so much, at the hands of her parents and *him*, that horrible excuse of a man I refuse to call my father.

Religion in particular has helped her during the hardest times.

I knew she took medication, but it hadn't been an issue until *he* left us. We were okay. Sometimes cutting corners was worth it if it could just be us, together.

I had never imagined it would come to this.

We hadn't spoken properly for a week. I'd always come back from school and wouldn't cross paths with her until her shift ended. After that, she'd kiss my forehead and excuse herself, saying she was exhausted and still getting used to the extra hours. Of course, I understood and had let her be. I'd bring her dinner every evening and put it on the dresser next to her bedroom door. At least I knew she was eating properly and sleeping.

Still, I missed talking to her, like we used to during dinnertime. Her weary, kind eyes always eased all my worries. We'd say grace and dig into our modest meal, talking about anything and everything. That's why I'd planned to ask her to join me for dinner.

The hinges of the door shrieked with effort as she stepped into the house. I was napping on the couch like usual, waiting for her to come back. The shoddy floorboards creaked a similar tune of strain as she rounded the corner from the hallway to the living room. I greeted her and sat up so I could welcome her back. She approached me, but as we locked eyes, I faltered. They looked odd. A murky, far-away look had claimed them, like a thick fog. Still, I embraced her easily.

"Would you join me for dinner, if you're not too tired?" I asked.

She smiled tentatively and nodded, "Of course. I will cook today, you just relax. I have a big surprise for you, son."

I tipped my head at the odd way she called me, but was elated anyway.

Later that evening, she called for me, again with "son." I found it as odd as the look in her eyes, but still made my way back to sit at the dining table.

"Just a minute!" She called from the kitchen, and I took the time to remind myself how thankful I was that the third chair seated at the table would stay empty for a long time, hopefully.

She walked out casually, hands curled around the pot of mashed potatoes. Steam curled from the pot in great clouds as she eased it onto the table with that same smile. My eyebrows furrowed as I studied her appearance, still finding it strange. Her expression seemed strained, her crow's feet stretched uncomfortably and even some sweat beading at her temple, but that could just be the heat from the stove.

While I waited for her to finish setting the table, the cross on the wall beside our TV caught my gaze. It sat high on the shabby wallpaper, the plastic, metallic-washed Jesus staring at me. Though it would usually put me at ease, today it only caused feelings of slight unease and uncertainty.

After sitting down, she clasped her hands together and said grace. As we began to eat, I noticed she was pushing the food around her plate and staring at nothing in particular. A heavy silence hung in the air and I tried to make conversation, but she only answered tersely and got quiet yet again.

A few minutes later I had begun to feel faint. I waited for it to pass, but dark spots started to fill my vision as my thoughts became fuzzy and detached. I opened my mouth to voice my concerns to my mom, but my eyes widened as I realized she was staring at me, her face devoid of any emotion. Her blank expression was the last thing I saw before darkness filled my sight and consciousness escaped me.

Before I even opened my eyes, I felt the cold of the harsh wind biting my bare skin. I blinked myself awake. Crows circled the night sky and sang an overwhelming, deafening symphony, but it was barely audible next to the ringing in my ears. Everything came into focus, and I choked out a gasp as I realized my limbs were bound. My breaths went shallow and quick, coming out in small clouds of mist. I surveyed my surroundings, eyes frantic and wildly darting around. I was nude, save for a cloth around my hips, and bound by the wrists to the branch of a tree. I started to hyperventilate, calling out for help with a choked cry. I tried to pry at the rope around my wrists, but it only served to chafe at my skin painfully.

Then, I saw her.

She walked slowly, with a terrifying serenity to her gait. I finally wept, “Mom! Mom, help me!”

She did not respond. I shouted for her again, beginning to sob with a confused, petrified weakness in my voice, but she stayed quiet and composed. As she came closer, I continued to wail and cry, thrashing madly as the branch holding me creaked and shook with effort. She hushed me like a crying child. In her hands, she had a woven wreath of thorns and an aged wooden rosary.

I could only stare in complete, teary shock as she gently placed the crown of thorns upon my head. Then, she grabbed the rosary with both hands and whispered to me gently.

“My sweet boy. I had no choice. The heavenly father spoke to me. He said you must sacrifice your body for all our sins, so that the people may have eternal life with the Lord.”

I gasped and gulped down more tears, shouting and begging her to get ahold of herself.

“I am so sorry,” she said, gripping the rosary as she stroked my cheek, “You shall soon join His Grace in the light above.”

I wept in my confusion, wailed, and pleaded for her to let me down, to help me. I bawled and shouted for my mother to save me, but I could only watch as she knelt at my bound feet and gripped the rosary tight, so tight her bones could rip the ghostly white, taut skin on her knuckles.

She looked at me in silence for a long time before her heartbroken gaze fell to the ground. She clasped her hands in prayer and whispered,

“I believe in God, the Father Almighty...”

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