

Bittersweet

(excerpt)

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It was a bright and sunny day and everything was really, really happy and- HALT! Sorry to say, our story will most definitely *NOT* start like that. In fact, it will start at a sad time. A loved one's funeral, actually. And this how it will begin...

It's a hopelessly gray and foggy day. Rain pours down from the heavens as if they, too, mourn him. Well, the heavens shouldn't be the ones mourning Nicolas Yew, we should be. They're the ones receiving those comforting hazelnut eyes, that big, big heart. They're the ones receiving the great man we just lost. The father we just lost.

People everywhere shake in the cold, crying quietly. The steady rain fall turns to hail that pound our hunched backs as if trying to make the ceremony sadder than it should be. A baby wails loudly. No one has a single warm article of clothing. It was foretold on the news that it would be a windless, sunny day. Instead, we have freezing rain and gusty shoves of wind.

But I can't think of anything at the moment, let alone the cold as goose bumps crawl up my arms and legs like ants. My grief for my father has long since taken off with my sanity. No one should have to live without a father.

“Sebrina,” a voice shakes me from my trance. “You need to say your speech!” Aidan Pinnir my loyal best friend nudges me a little too hard in the ribs and I trip my way out of the pew. How long I had been sitting there blank-faced, I’m not sure, but I feel my cheeks burn cherry-red all the same.

I walk up row after row of people in black garments, wanting the red carpet that covers the aisle to swallow me up and put me out of my misery.

The walk to the podium seems to last forever, like walking up a mountain to reach its summit. But when I finally make it, I wish I hadn’t. The priest holds out a small mic and motions for me to begin. One hundred tear-stained faces settle on me and I hope that I won’t say anything stupid.

I manage a fleeting half-smile. I have always been able to make a speech anywhere anytime, but now that skill seems to be seeping away like blood from an open wound.

“Um, good afternoon friends and family,” I start, feeling stupid. This was never going to work unless I spoke up and got to the point.

“Nicholas Yew was never a strong student in school, but as he grew, he became the man we all loved. Even if he was a stranger or an acquaintance to you, it was always easy to look through his composed appearance to his goofy, happy self. I, for one, loved him so much. He was always an open book never to be closed. His facial expressions were endless, his made-up words were endless. Anything seemed possible with my dad. He will be missed by a lot of people.” I finish. I feel a twinge of pride that is swallowed up by grief

as I pass a sobbing person. I make it to my pew and sit down and a single tear slips out my closed eyes and down my face.

The rest of the funeral passes in one big blur. We all leave to our separate paths, separate homes on separate roads. *We* all leave... *We*... What a strange word... We need, we want, we dream. And I think about this all the way home, where I go straight to my room and onto my bed where sobs violently rack my body until I fall asleep to a strange dream.

The air is warm and the sky is bright, beautiful and welcoming as a warm fire on a winter night. I skip along the sidewalk as if nothing happened and nothing will happen because my life is perfect. I skip all the way to Aidan's house six doors down, but as soon as my foot touches the pavement on his driveway, he runs out, tears dripping fast, clutching his stomach, his wrists, his face as if he will fall apart otherwise.

"Why? What did I do to deserve this?" he screams at the top of his lungs. The birds singing sweetly in the trees fall silent and take off in a flurry of wings and feathers.

"Aidan! What happened? What's wrong?" I run to him and wrap my arms around him. He doesn't answer; he just sobs even harder and collapses to the ground, bringing me with him. We stay there on his driveway and I try to understand. What could've made Aidan, calm, joyful Aidan so desperately sad?

And then it hits me: a death. Someone very important to him has just died. I feel like I have just been punched in the gut. I whisper a quiet question into his ear, "Who was it?" Aidan looks up, finally calming down, and utters a single soft and heart-broken word: "Dad".

I wake drenched in sweat.

The next day is all *deja-vu*. All the same things happen as they had in my dream the night before (except for me skipping down the sidewalk with a bright sky above me). Everyone is once again sobbing and covering their faces like they had at my dad's funeral. Aidan's dad had died the exact same way my dad had; in his sleep. I had cried so hard already that my body cannot conjure up any more tears. My eyes are glassy and my mind blank but for one thought: I am not a prophet or anything magical, so why did I dream everything about this day? I'm so confused that I almost don't notice the two glossy white tombstones that are placed next to each other, so close that they're almost touching. The names engraved on them are clear: Aidan and Sebrina. This was not in my dream. I stop myself from walking over to them. *It's just really hard, two deaths of people you were close to in a row*, I think. I shake my head a little and continue to walk at the same pace as everyone else at the funeral. Aidan's mom had decided that the funeral would be outside, as her husband had been a botanist so she found it fitting.

The graveyard, the same one my dad had been buried in, is small and beautiful, with ten neat rows of tombstones, each one a little different than the one before it, each

with a small bouquet of flowers in front. A small picket fence surrounds it with a little wooden gate at each end. As soon as you step through one of the gates, the sweet smell of flowers hits you and brings tears to your eyes. It feels like a sacred place. I used to love coming here when I was little, dancing up and down the rows of tombstones and smelling a flower or two, but now only sad memories cloud my mind.

Just like they had in my dream, one by one everybody scoops up one shovel-full of dirt and empties it onto the coffin as its lowered into the dirt like an elevator going down to the bottom floor. Finally, the coffin is covered and I no longer have to look at it. My heart feels like a stone; so battered and flung around that it no longer has any feeling. I smell flowers and I lift my hand to rub my eye and find it wet.

I walk with Aidan in silence out of the cemetery. We are close to the gate when I remember the tombstones.

“Aidan! I need to show you something before we leave.” He walks behind me, his every step heavy and his eyes focused on the ground. We approach the tombstones and I run the rest of the way, part of me hoping it was my imagination, the other half wanting to read what’s on them.

By the time Aidan catches up I’m reading the note that’s written on both of them. It says: “*Your fathers*” on mine and, “*are alive*” on Aiden’s.

My mind explodes. *What? But... We just buried them! How can they be alive?* I have so many questions.

“Can this day get any weirder? First the dream, now this?” I ask no one in particular.

Aidan’s walking around the tombstones to where I stand. He reads the note.

“That – that must be – that must – be fake! Somebody must – somebody must be – be tricking us!” Aidan stammers.

I want to believe Aidan. Someone had to have been tricking us, maybe someone at the funeral, but that doesn’t add up. It takes time to make tombstones. Our *dads* don’t even have tombstones yet! They’re still being made and they won’t be ready for three to four weeks, at least. We had just placed flowers, piles and piles of flowers while we wait for the stones.

I believe in magic – I always have, which is why my imagination is wandering through the possibilities. A fairy? Too small. A dwarf, maybe? They’re good diggers. Or maybe a fortune-teller! His or her assistant could have places the stones here. This seems the best possibility. I let my mind open up to mystical creatures, something that I haven’t done in a very long time. I used to get teased for believing in magic, so I stopped thinking about it. Until now.

“Aidan, it can’t be a trick. No one can make a tombstone so fast. It must be true! I don’t know how, or why, but I want to believe it, so I will. Our *dads* were – are strong and healthy; I refuse to believe they died.” I say in the most soothing voice I can muster.

“Come on, let’s go home and think on it.”

I wonder how a dream so vivid and clear and *memorable* to make a whole day one huge *deja-vu* could show me so much, yet so little. I go straight to bed after dinner and fall into a deep, confused sleep.

I wake up the next morning and get ready for the day with purpose, something I have not had for a while. The sun seems brighter as it peeks through my curtains, making patterns on the floor. I walk to my door and open it, not noticing the small piece of paper that falls from where it had been balanced on the top of the door, making no noise as it drops to the floor behind me.

The day goes by in a blur, like the funerals. We (Aiden's family and mine) go for a picnic by the river that runs swiftly along the line of mountains and makes a semi-circle around the town where we live. I cling to that sliver of hope, that quarter of quarters with all the hope I've ever had that our dads truly are still alive.

After the picnic we walk around the whole town, accepting sympathies from people we pass and stopping to stand around something that reminds us strongly of them.

That night when my mom and I return home, I'm practically dead on my feet. As I shuffle into my room, my foot brushes something on the floor. I look down to see what it is. It's a perfect square of paper. I pick it up and turn it over. The note is written in loopy, swirling,

perfect handwriting. It reads: *The man who lives at the top of the mountain holds your fathers captive.*

I can't seem to move my feet fast enough to the phone. My fingertips almost touch the phone when it rings. I pick it up so fast I almost drop it when its Aidan's number that reads on the little screen.

“Aidan I found-” He interrupts me before I can finish.

“I believe you now! I found a note that says ‘The man who lives at the top of the-’ I finish for him, “Mountain holds your fathers captive.”

“How did you know I was going to say that? You know me well, but not that well!” He asks.

“I got the same note. It must have fallen off the top of my door or something. You know what this means, right? We have to go and find them and bring them back.” I say.

“I was about to say the same thing. We should leave tomorrow at...9:00. Okay?” Aidan says.

“Okay.” I say.

I fall asleep to the sound of my mom's crying for the third night in a row and my heart aches for her, knowing that tomorrow I have to leave her. I try to tell myself that I will be saving my dad and Aidan's and that she will be okay. With that thought in my mind, I fall

asleep, the wind rustling the leaves in the trees and the moon shining bright in the cloudless, indigo sky speckled in stars.

The next morning I wake up early to pack a bag of clothes, food and a flashlight. I eat breakfast hurriedly and write my mom a note: *I'm going to find dad with Aidan. He's alive and so is Aidan's dad! I promise I'll be back soon with dad and Aidan's dad. Don't be mad or sad and don't think I'm crazy, please. I love you. – Sebrina.*

I'm about to place the note on the kitchen table when I hear footsteps coming from my parents' bedroom. They sound heavy as they get closer and closer. I smell my mom's shampoo. She's awake and if she finds me leaving with a packed bag slung over my shoulder, there will consequences. I hide under the table and fervently hope that she's too asleep to look down at me. I hold my breath and wait for her to pass on her way to the washroom. When I'm sure she can't hear me, I quietly remove myself from under the table and place the note on top of it before running as swiftly and soundlessly as possible to the front door. I pull it open and slip out before it can creak. Aidan is running towards me, a bag over his shoulder as well. We meet and sprint towards the mountains. We reach the stream and still neither of us say a word as we help one another cross it without getting wet. The rising sun circles around the mountains, creating a halo of gold. The river sparkles magnificently and the trees that dot the mountains change from green to yellow to orange and back again like a twirling disco ball. I smell spruce needles and the over-powering sweetness of decaying leaves.

I'm starting to feel the guilt of leaving my mom gnawing a gaping hole in my stomach.

"Stop. Please." I tell Aidan. I have to sit down. I pick a large boulder and make my way toward it. Aidan makes it there before I do and clammers up it in three large steps. He always seemed to be able to climb whatever, whenever he pleased. He always reminded me of Spiderman because of that skill. This reminds me of the day we met. He was sitting in a tree, watching intently at my parents and me as we moved in. My mom must have told his mom my name when she met her, because he called out from his perch, "Hi Sebrina!" I had looked around cautiously, not knowing where the voice came from and asked, "Who's there?" I was seven at the time and so I thought that he was some magical alien, but then seven year old Aiden scrambled down the tree and I knew that he had been the one who called out to me. After that we became best friends and we are still.

He helps me onto the boulder. "You okay? What's wrong?" he asks.

"I – I just felt... guilty for leaving my mom. She probably thinks that I went crazy or something because my dad – and your dad – 'died'. She probably thinks that it's her fault." My heart is close to breaking when we hear them crashing up to us, calling our names. Our moms had read our notes and were coming to find us already. We slip off the boulder and wedge ourselves behind it.

They call our names over and over, their voices echoing out over the mountain. Sometimes they sound close, sometimes far. Sometimes we catch a glimpse of a blue housecoat or a whiff of shampoo. They never give up looking for us, but eventually they

sound so far away that we can barely hear their voices. I want so badly to call out to them, to turn back. I know, though, somehow, that if we turned back, our dads really would be dead.

I motion to Aidan that we have to keep going. I see the guilt in my heart reflected in his eyes. And it is now; we both realize that is the start of our journey.

The trek is easy at first, but as we get higher our legs begin to burn and sweat drips down the backs of our necks. I look at my watch. It says 5:00. We've walked for seven hours, taking small breaks in between. I look over at Aiden. He looks like he's about to cry. I touch his arm gently. He looks at me. "Sebrina, what if this isn't really a good idea? What if our dads really *are* dead? And our poor moms..." He stops and sits down on the root of a tree, holding his face in his hands. I sit next to him and put an arm around his shaking shoulders.

I stare out at the view. I see our little town. *It's too much*, I think and look somewhere else. In the distance, a circle of oak trees and rocks surround a giant... Is that a tree? The branches stretch so high they seem to touch the clouds and are as wide and full grown trees. It would take at least ten full-grown adults to wrap their arms around the trunk. It's massive.

"Aidan, look! Up there! If we can just make it to that tree, we can settle there! C'mon!" I tell him.

We walk... And walk... And walk... And walk, until finally we make it to the majestic tree.

It seems to sparkle and glow in the dimming light and its branches' tips twinkle like stars.

We're too tired to do anything but drop our bags heavily and crumple tiredly to the ground. I have only just closed my eyes when I hear a thump so quiet it's almost inaudible. I crack my eyes open a little, just enough to make out an outline of a human as majestic as the tree we were under.

I awake the next morning to a crackling sound and smell food cooking. I rub my eyes and notice that I'm covered in a blanket of sorts made of some kind of fur. *Where did this come from?* I wonder. I sit up and look around for the source of the food smell. Aidan is sitting a foot away from me next to a fire talking to the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. She's lanky and tall, her arms and legs bulging with muscle. She looks young – maybe sixteen. Her beautiful face had a perfect nose, full lips and almond-shaped eyes that seemed to change from light blue to soft lilac. Her tanned olive skin complimented her face and her hair – her hair. It falls in silky waves all the way down her back. When the sun reflects off it from between the branches of the tree, it shines and glows and dazzles my eyes.

I gape, slack-jawed at her, envy and awe growing inside me and spreading like germs. She's just so beautiful and I would never be that beautiful. I've never felt envy like this before. It gnaws at my stomach almost as much as guilt the does.

When she speaks, her voice is almost as beautiful as herself. "Ah, you're awake! You must be hungry." She heaps food onto a plate woven from sticks and hands it to me.

"My name is Ericka, by the way. And you are Sebrina. We were just talking about you." She motions to Aidan. He blushes.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. You question where your notes came from, I assume. That was me. And your next question will be, 'why not just come tell us?' Well..." Ericka looks me in the eye as she says, "The man holding your fathers is a very powerful man... I used to love Him and Him I, but then something changed. He became very angry and used his magic to bind me to this mountaintop, where I've stayed. I saw Him take your fathers and knew that I had to tell you somehow that they were alive and here. So I sent clues using my magic. We have to go and get your fathers before it's too late."

She crouches. A second later she jumps so high that she disappears into the thick branches and foliage of her tree. I barely have time to stand up to look for her when she jumps back down silently, carrying three flasks filled with liquid that sloshes around inside them.

"Let's not waste time. We'll reach His hideout in two days if we leave now. We must hurry."

We set off for a day of walking at a manageable pace. No one speaks – there is nothing to say. We find a place to camp the night and we eat a small dinner before falling asleep.

I grow even more envious of Ericka the second day. But as much as I want to, I can't dislike her because she's so nice and she's helping us.

I catch Aidan smiling at her while she's not looking and it's a smile much wider than he's ever smiled at me. He even has a skip in his step. I don't know when I became so protective of Aidan. I don't like him... He's my best friend... But maybe I do... Just a little...

I'm about to tap his shoulder for some reason when I come back to Earth, my hand hovering above his back. I feel so embarrassed that I look up at the sky to think about what the heck I was trying to do, that I stumble into the little pond he and Ericka had walked around. Great. Just great. My feet are now soaked and my cheeks are burning.

The scenery around us has softened into lush green valleys and sparkling rivers. The sun shines out from around a cloud, making the last day of our trek warm and bright.

Ericka halts us. She walks up to a jagged rock in the middle of the field in which we stand.

“You must listen carefully: we have reached His hideout, and there is only one way in, which is here. You must make sure to hold on to each other tightly before placing your pointer finger on these two sharpest points of the rock and press them until you draw one drop of blood.”

We do exactly as she instructed, holding hands and drawing a single drop of blood. The rock suddenly splits in half and a sketchy looking elevator creaks its way up to us. Its doors groan as they open to admit us. We step inside and the doors shut behind us. We descend slowly down a seemingly endless, dimly lit tunnel. The elevator slows and shudders to a stop and we step out. The floor of the hideout is made of tree trunks and the walls are smooth rock. There’s equipment everywhere. It covers sixteen long tables and where there’s not equipment there’s books.

Ericka points to the hall on our right and holds a finger over her lips. I turn to see what she pointed at. A door off to the side of the hall is open a crack. I can just make out a man with ruffled chestnut hair and a lab coat holding a vial up to his face. He’s young like Ericka and very handsome. And perfect... I start to lose my train of thought.

I force my eyes away from the man and I can think straight again. Ericka and Aidan are running quietly to the wall at the back of the cluttered room. I move swiftly to catch up to them. Ericka’s holding a door open for Aidan and me. We go through it.

The back wall of the room holds two man-size glass jars. And inside them are our dads, their eyes closed. Aidan and I rush forward at the sight of them, unable to stop ourselves.

“How do we get them out?” I ask Ericka.

“With this.” She says. She hands us each a little corked bottle of shimmering sand.

“Take off the cap and throw it onto the jars.” We do as she says. The glass disappears and our dad opens their eyes. I rush to my dad and wrap myself in his arms. Aidan does the same to his father. I’m so caught up in the moment and in the sound of his rough voice that I forget about Ericka, forget about where we are.

“Gentlemen, I am Ericka. It is a pleasure to meet you. Your many questions will be answered, but not now, as we need to escape. If you would follow me -” She turns to the door we came from, but it is nowhere to be seen.

“He knows we’re in here! We’ll have to go through here.” We turn to the second door in the room and Ericka holds it open for us. We find ourselves in a cave. A metal bridge spans across a ravine full of lava that flows, menacing and swift, underneath it.

A hatch in the roof of the cave opens and out comes a massive humanoid machine made of the same metal as the bridge. We all make it safely out of the way in time to avoid being crushed by a heavy hand. I catch a glimpse of the man controlling it. It’s the man I saw before in the lab coat. I am once again hypnotised by him and I don’t notice that I am the only one that hasn’t moved out of the way until my dad dives at me and we stumble out of harm’s way and onto the bridge. Aidan’s dad follows us, not knowing that Aidan’s not behind him. He and Ericka are backed up against the wall where the door we came out of has disappeared like the first one did. There’s only one more exit now and the man is not going to let us pass him to get to it.

The man's attention is on Aidan and Ericka who are now hopelessly cornered. The machine reaches for Aidan but Ericka jumps in front of him. The machine picks up Ericka instead and the man doesn't seem to like that. The machine shakes her, hard, and her head smacks off the edge of the bridge with a sickening thump, rendering her unconscious.

"No!" The word rips out of Aidan and me at the same time, our voices resonating off the cave walls so loudly it hurts our ears. The man inside the machine has it worse, though. Inside his glass container it's echoing especially loud. The man covers his ears, dropping Ericka and staggering back two steps. The machine's foot slips and falls into the lava beneath the bridge. We don't waste any time. My dad scoops up Ericka and we make a beeline for the only exit. We end up outside the hideout and we keep running down the hill we came from, determined to get as far away from it as possible. We reach Ericka's tree, panting and sweating in much less time than it took to get from the tree to the hideout as we had been running downhill. My dad lays Ericka down in the roots of her tree, making sure she's comfortable before collapsing to the ground from exhaustion. We all lie on the ground, still as stones until we hear Ericka's voice.

"Thank you, sir, for carrying me all the way back down." She addresses my father first. "It has been wonderful to meet you all," she tells us before continuing, "I'm sorry to have to leave you this way. I have enjoyed our adventure." She looks at Aidan. "You take care of Sebrina, okay?" He nods, tears in his eyes. She looks at me. "Live life to its fullest. I

will forever be with you all..." And with that, Ericka takes her last breath and dies peacefully under her tree.

When we return, we are embraced, scolded and kissed. We tell our story to a crowd of people and then migrate our way back home. Aidan grabs my arm in front of my house.

"Sebrina, I – I have something to tell you. I – I like you." He looks at his feet, blushing furiously. I don't miss my chance. I cup his face in my hands and kiss him on the mouth. "I like you too."

Our story was bittersweet; deaths sprinkled here and there, happiness and sorrow mingling together, but in the end, it was a happy ending. Aidan and I argue occasionally but we always resolve our problems and we get married when we are of age and out of university. We call the beautiful baby girl that is born two years later Ericka in honour of her and the sacrifice she made to save our fathers.