

Lacrimosa dies illa

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Scene One

The beach, waves crashing, darkened house, roller shutters down. No dog barks. No cat meows. No baby cries. No one is at home.

Rush, run, dash to a suburban emergency department.

Drive carefully.

Turn your mobile off, the nurses shout at me.

I can't. I have to text. I have to call everyone so they know. I need to let them know.

Grief-gorged eyes.

Mine or yours?

Don't take me to the hospital, my mother pleads without words as she looks up at me from her trolley. Not that hospital. They stick you with needles and kids treat you like a slab of meat. I don't want to be an experiment. That beautiful androgynous man with the Transylvanian accent. He'll be the death of me.

There is no music in this episode.

Resounding silence.

Whatever happens.

There is no need for guilt.

Red light.

Scene Two

The city. Emergency department. Waiting room.

I sit next to a man with a beetroot face.

I've been here for five hours, he says. Heart aches.

I ignore him.

You look angry. No one likes an angry woman.
Go away.
I'm sick.
Then stay.
Are you sick?
No.
Your mother?
Yes.
Very sick?
Yes.
This will be the worst day of your life, I know. I've been there.
I know.

Scene Three

Pink curtains. Eight beds in the ward. The morning after.
Restless night.
I'm going to lunch, I'll be back soon. You need your rest.
Don't go.
I'm hungry.
I call up a friend and we eat sushi. I talk about everything else.
She will get better soon. It's happened before. Brain haemorrhages are a part of life. A team of rehabilitation staff. Doctors. Soon I will wake up at home and hear her laboured breathing. Just like the last time this happened.
Back at the hospital.
Roll of eyes.
Weakened.
Face flattened.
No control over facial muscles. Any muscles.
Pale.
Pink.
Cold leg.
Pale, pink, cold leg. Urinary incontinence. 111 beats per minute. Her heart is going 111 beats per minute. My heart is usually at 72 beats per minute but I don't feel it right now.
She tries to speak.
130 beats per minute.
Groan.
Her tongue is unable to move.
140 beats per minute.

Don't worry, I tell her.
I know she wants to ask me where my brother is.
Boys are far less complicated, she always said.
Travelling in Spain, Santiago de Compostella, Allicante, Madrid.
Somewhere Spanish. Maybe he's in Mexico. He doesn't have a mobile phone, but he checks his mail every second day. He is sleeping through his final peaceful night.

Scene Four

Chinatown. Uncle Billy's Restaurant.
I'm allergic to MSG but I feel closer to her when I eat here. It's been almost 24 hours since she last ate, since her last meal. I've just met a man who I know will one day be my husband, and even now, I am thinking about him and trying to figure out how or when I will ask him out. Now is as good a time as any, but fledgling love is discordant with dying. The plastic bowls are cheap and burnt. I have no appetite, anti-inflammatory pills eating through my stomach lining. I look at my broken wrist but doesn't it hurt anymore. I order salty fish porridge, her favourite.

I never took my mother here, nor anywhere, for dinner. We weren't really friends. I think about the beetroot man in the waiting room. If she pulls through she will be a vegetable for the rest of her life, and I will have to quit my job and be a full-time carer. If she doesn't pull through, what will I write in the eulogy? We weren't really friends. I hardly knew her because she was at work all the time. The only real conversation we had was when I stole a porn magazine from the newsagency and took it to school to show my friends. Breasts, I warned my friends, and hairs in strange places. This is our destiny...
Mum was called in to the headmistress, mortified.
Mother is a puritan.
Afterwards she kept asking me why I did it.
Just because, I said.

Scene Five

Hospital car park.
Full parking lot. Anxious wait.
I have driven my neighbour here to say goodbye to my mother.
We wait for an obese couple sitting in their red car to finish eating their full-size Subway.

Are you leaving?

Yes.

Twenty minutes later. The woman steps out of the car, throws her wrapper in the bin and squeezes back into her seat.

Red car leaves. I prepare for a reverse park. Brown car passes.

Brown car takes our spot.

Didn't you see us waiting there? I call out.

No.

This was our parking spot.

They ignore us.

Two short Italian women with big hair in bright red cardigans.

It crosses my mind that this could be my future husband's relatives.

This was our fucking parking spot.

I get out of the car.

Don't you swear at me.

Shit.

Don't you swear at me.

We've been waiting for a long time.

Maybe your mother is dying too, but right now my pain is more than yours and so is my guilt.

Don't you swear at me.

I shout at them. The coarsest word in the English dictionary, rhymes with hunt. I've had a bad day.

My friend, our gentle Vietnamese neighbour charges out of the car and thumps their car window.

I'll call the police, the woman says.

Call the police, my gentle friend shouts.

Yes, I will call, the woman's friend screams.

I'm going to call too, I say and take out my mobile and pretend to read out the number plate.

They drive away, far away, from the gentle Vietnamese woman and the potty-mouth Chinese girl.

Scene Six

Interior. She is alone in the room. Dying is a private affair.

Chest infection. Bed sores.

Both are common in the elderly and the dying, but the dead only have the latter.

She knows what is going on.

Limited speech. They try to give her jelly food. The therapist asks me if she is socially isolated.

We hadn't spoken for months.

Scene Seven

Entering the house of Adams.

Morticia on pot. Condescending schizo.

What do you mean no op no op no op? she gnaws.

She is my mother's long-lost sister.

Palliative care, I say. I don't know what the word for that is in Chinese, or Arabic for that matter.

Why do you only tell me now? she chews.

Uncle Fester is at work.

Why are you alive? I wonder. Because your mother had sex with your father... that's why.

There is no eighth scene, nor ninth, nor tenth.

It ends after a week. She dies on a red sky morning and I walk over to the cathedral across the road. I don't enter because I'm not sure if he wants me in his house or even if he exists. I've never really considered him until now, so I sit on the doorsteps and wail. A nurse walks past and tells me that it does get easier. She lost her son ten years ago in a motorcycle accident. That's life, she says and gives me a hug.

The sky turns orange and she tells me it's because my mother is in heaven knitting me a multi-coloured scarf.

I am allergic to wool.

On the Monday she was still fighting.

She knew she needed to pee but didn't want to pee in nappies in front of her daughter.

She could understand me and signal her needs to me.

On Tuesday I thought she'd make it.

She was hungry on Wednesday and asked me for food. The IV was still in her arm so I pointed to it, explaining that it would keep her alive and well nourished.

On Wednesday my brother returned and I called my aunt anything I could come up with in every language I knew. My brother spent all of Wednesday night with her and in the morning they took out the IV. The

nurses wet her lips with some water. She was rotting from the inside and starving to death like the hungry black children she used to see on the nightly news.

On Thursday and Friday she hung in there and I said I wanted to spend the night there too, but she shooed me away with a pained look in her grief-gorged eyes. They injected her with morphine not long after that.

Coda

I quit my job, my life. Use my housing deposit to wander, aimlessly. I go to France where there are old cathedrals in every town, but I never step within their doors. I wander around the outside on cold mornings waiting for the sky to change colour, but it only ever transitions from pale blue to dark grey. I focus on learning French and try not to think about the dead or the dying.

One day I find myself inside St Cecile's, the red-brick Gothic cathedral of Albi. I'm only there because the owner of the pensione I'm staying at has given me her ticket to a performance of Mozart's Requiem. Mozart's final work, the only one he never completed. His mass for the dead. The woman tells me that she knows I'll enjoy it because I have told her that when I was young I used to play violin in an orchestra, or at least I think that they are the words we exchanged.

This is the first piece of music I have sat down to listen to since my mother died. Despair, grief and yearning from two hundred years ago fill the cathedral, weave through the pews, between the crypts, candles, along the aisles and in and out of the confession box and bounce off the even older stained-glass windows. Up until this stage in my life, I have only ever attended concerts in halls where the seating, panels, doors and even the ventilation has been designed to replicate a digital sound recording.

I begin to understand why people have for hundreds of years worshipped their God in these skyscrapers. I weep silently and hear my loss. It is then that I realise that my recent desire to collect more words are a poor man's substitute for music and a distraction from what I am now beginning to recall.