

Cradle to Grave

“So, do you have any plans tonight?” Her coworker, Calvin, asks as they oversee the mass of bodies in front of them. Two needed to be prepared for showing within the next few days, while the other four either had a close casket funeral or cremation planned. What a long afternoon it would be for her.

“Are you seriously asking me that now, in front of the deceased?”

He scoffs, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. “Trying to have a conversation to ‘lighten the mood’, as they say.”

“Who?”

“Who knows and who cares?”

His response satisfies her enough to begin one of the bodies. The family of the deceased dropped off clothes and other belongings to dress them in for their funeral. Although many families don’t think about the cleaning of their loved ones, this one was kind enough to send a vanilla body soap. And in her opinion it was much more meaningful than the unscented ones the morgue provides.

As she cleans the body's skin gently, Calvin decides to mention something as he cleans another body for showing. “You never answered my question, Mara. Kinda rude.”

“-- I’m going home and spending the next couple days with my fiance,” she replies, turning the body on the stomach to clean the back, “We have some off days from work together for once.”

“He’s in the medical field, yeah? Something with kids.”

“Peds. Specifically newborns.”

“Does he enjoy it?”

The faint interaction reimburses in her mind, one that happened somewhat recently. He’d just finished a ten hour shift at the hospital, stumbling through the door of their apartment with nearly swollen eyes. That shift there had been three deaths in the pediatric center: apnea, seizure, and stillborn. All of them had been under his care and that guilt was eating him like maggots.

It took Mara nearly two hours to get him to eat something before helping him unwind for the night. Even then he wasn’t all there, mumbling into her chest about their souls walking away from him. She calmed him by stating she saw them pass by at the morgue, and that they were at peace now.

“Sometimes,” she manages to get out, returning her focus to the body. This one had been dead for a handful of days but managed to still look a little living. Wasn’t too dirty besides the blood splatters around the stomach that the ER missed when stitching the wound up. Hair oily and resembling straw at the moment, while the face had just a little hint of blood underneath the almost paper skin.

After the bodies get their bath, Calvin preps for an embalming process for his body. The family of Mara’s body refused the chemical treatment, making the process one step easier than before. Although by this time tomorrow, the body will not appear as fresh for the funeral.

Persevering, she begins to wash the hair at the same time Calvin makes the incision along his body's neck. The elmbalmer, which resembles one of those Ninja Creami ice cream

machines, begins to pump the body full of chemicals, most ending in the suffix '-hyde'. This replaces the blood and allows a temporary stop of the decay process.

We shed our protection gear in the changing room before heading to the break room to eat. Embalming takes around an hour and a half, possibly longer, while the hair air dries. Besides, the mid shift workers finally came in, watching to make sure the embalming process goes accordingly.

The unscented soap lathers from their fingers to their elbows to ensure cleanliness, occasionally a wet wipe will be used on their face if they can't feel clean enough.

"Whatcha eating Mara?" Calvin asks, popping open a container of egg salad with some slices of bread on the side.

She glances down at her lunchbox, reading the sticky note attached to the lid of her bowl.

HAVE A WONDERFUL DAY!

LOVE YOU CROW ♡♡♡

"Mac n'chesse. Last night's leftovers," she states, pulling the message of her food and placing it in her backpack.

Stirring the tough cheese leaves Calvin enough time to run his mouth again. "He calls you Crow?"

"Yes."

"That's cool. Why'd he choose that?"

The fork stops halfway to her mouth as she stares at him dumbfounded. "You must be joking."

His eyebrows furrow, a nervous smile spreading from one side to the other. "I'm not."

"The black hair and eyes paired with paler than snow skin doesn't give it away?"

"Being unreasonably without melanin cannot be the only reason for being compared to the bird of death. Unless it's a jab at your line of work."

Mara shakes her head softly at the thought. "No, he respects me too much for that."

"Then what is it that makes you his Crow?"

"-- When we first started going out, he noticed my interest in shiny objects: rings, earrings, clips of certain pens, even sewing needles. So he let me 'steal' his jewelry and started calling me Crow."

Calvin smiles and quotes, "'What's mine is yours...,' as the poets say."

"*Measure to Measure*. A Shakespeare piece." She doesn't correct the fact that he left out the whole other section of that quote. "...and what is yours is mine."

"Only nerds read Shakespeare."

"And only losers eat egg salad with a spork."

An agitated groan escapes him, making her laugh. "They were out of spoons at the dollar store and I didn't feel like driving twenty minutes, at one in the morning, to Walmart for some trashy plastic silverware."

"So you settled on sporks? That's a low bar, even for you Calvin."

"One more word about the spork and you'll be wearing the egg salad as a hat for the rest of this shift."

With a sly grin she eats the rest of the food before having to return to the bodies. The protection gear slips on easily as she has done time and time again, and she enters the preparation room with Calvin.

His body had undergone the embalming process without incident, so he began to stitch the incision up as she began the last step of preparation: styling. Hair, makeup, and clothes. Luckily both their families had brought an outfit and picture of how they would like their loved ones' to appear at the showing.

Mara looks over the photo a few times, trying to capture every detail of the deceased before. A neutral eyeshadow with light mascara, little blush along the cheekbones, and a muted pink lip. Hair would be curled with a middle part, paired with a white headband. White church dress and silver cross necklace was all the family brought to dress their body in.

She'd asked them about shoes but had received a shake of the head instead. Something about their child never wearing shoes anyways, since she was always outdoors. She enjoyed nature to the fullest extent, always running bare foot in the open fields or when climbing trees. Although her family had been horrified when they found her body impaled by a branch, having slipped when climbing. Her body had been dead for two hours by the time the ambulance-

"Mara?"

She blinks, suddenly aware of how chilly the morgue is at this hour. Calvin has his hands in his body's hair, giving a rather bubbly cleaning session. His eyes zero in on her as he asks, "Are you okay?"

"Yes! Yes I'm fine, just got distracted," she admits, setting the picture down beside the clothes. He watches her as makes her way towards the young girl's body and begins curling her hair. After a moment he continues to spread the shampoo through the hair, although his gaze always glances over at Mara.

"Were you thinking about her?"

The question catches Mara off guard, almost leaving the curling iron in the hair too long. "Yes." She tries not to, knowing how dangerous her mind is. This line of work doesn't need people who get attached to dead bodies. But this was someone's daughter, sister, and friend.

"What happened?"

"She was climbing a tree on her family's property and slipped. A branch pierced her lung, stomach, and liver."

Calvin hums in recognition before adding, "My guy was a drug overdose. That's why his family was dead set on embalming his body. Wanted to flush all the 'bad' drugs out of him."

"Mine doesn't want her wearing shoes, because she never wore them."

"Did that make her fall?"

"According to the autopsy, yes. But she didn't suffer very long." She doesn't mention her blood painting the tree and raining on the grass below.

"He passed in his sleep. Didn't feel a thing. At least that's what they told his family for a little bit of closure." The man had a brain aneurysm and felt every part of his body shut down, one by one. "And perhaps for me too."

"That's a nice way of looking at it Calvin," she admits, throat growing scratchy with every confession.

The room goes quiet as her brain goes on autopilot for the next hour. Mixing the given makeup with wax and oils to ensure wear through the ceremony. Dressing the girl in her clothes and sliding the headband neatly into the curls. And finally placing the freezing chain around the neck, allowing the symbol to lay in the center of her collarbones.

Their shift ended at about five that night. Both corpses lay in their respective caskets, waiting for departure tomorrow morning. Both of them separate momentarily to change and collect their personal belongings, but meet up once more at the caskets.

Calvin puts a hand on her shoulder and asks, "Do you want me to wait until your fiance shows up? I don't mind waiting."

A smile graces her face. "I'm alright Calvin. He'll be here soon."

"Get some rest when you get home for me, okay?"

"I'll try," she settles on, knowing it's no use to lie. Calvin may be human, but he wasn't completely stupid. Mara has met plenty of them already and will surely see more soon enough. He is what Vitus calls a 'good one'. "Drive safe."

With nothing more than a simple squeeze of comfort, she's left to her own devices. Not very long after footsteps can be heard heading towards the bodies. The morgue was closed.

A man approaches the overdose's body, staring down at him with a look of disapproval. "I can't believe they found me so quickly," he says, almost in shock.

"Your brother received your text quickly," she admits, rocking back and forth on her feet. "He called 9-1-1 as soon as humanly possible."

The man shakes his head then asks, "How long?"

"They arrived sixteen minutes after your brain stopped."

"I had that text ready to send, 'bout an hour before I took the pills." He turns his face just enough to see her out of the corner of his eyes. "Tell me, if I sent it sooner, could I've—"

She nods, lips pursing together. "It's possible, yes."

Turning away, he faces his corpse once more. Tears gather but never fall from his forest eyes. He then questions, "So you don't wear a cloak and wield a giant scythe?"

"Left it at home today," she jokes, making the man burst into a fit of laughter. Once he calms down, she rests her hand on his shoulder, making him look up at her. "It's time Jack."

"I know."

"Your family loves you so much. You will be missed."

John simply nods. She gives his shoulder a soft squeeze before he leaves once again, leaving her alone for about ten seconds before a weight pulls on her sweater. Mara turns to see a young girl holding onto the feather-like fabric. "Abigail."

The girl nods. "Yes ma'am."

"No need for the formalities, I come as a friend," Mara coos, earning a soft smile from the girl. "Would you like to see yourself?"

Abigail nods and the older woman leads her to the edge of her casket. The girl leans forward slightly to see better, taking in her still form. "I look beautiful!" She exclaims, before turning her gaze towards Mara. "You did amazing."

"I try my best."

"Look at that, you even left my feet bare!" She mentions, as if it was the most important detail in the world. "I hate wearing shoes. They suffocate my toes soooo much!"

"You don't say."

The girl's eyes suddenly go soft, tears falling quickly. "I'm scared."

Mara lowers herself to the ground, kneeling at Abigail's feet. "You have nothing to be scared of. You'll be at peace."

"But I left my parents alone! I didn't mean to fall- I really didn't!" She cries, body shaking with every breath.

"They know that. They know how careful you were when you climbed that tree. You've done it since you were seven years old."

"Then why did it happen?"

"Sometimes— sometimes accidents happen and we can't do anything to stop that," she admits, taking the girl's hands in her own. "You did nothing wrong."

"They love you so much."

"You can rest now."

The girl suddenly drops to the ground, wrapping her arms around Death's waist. And Death embraces her with warm arms, never wanting to let go. The worldly soul dissolves into nothingness, leaving a cold adsense in its place.

Mara remains on the floor as Vitus walks up to her. She lifts her head just slightly to take him in. Blue scrubs wrinkled beyond ironing and a faint linger of that ER smell engraved on his skin. His blonde locks tied up in a messy, rushed bun. Black skin glistening with sweat from his recent shift.

Life itself holds a hand out to her and asks, "Ready to go home Crow?"

Death nods, taking Life's hand and rises from the ground. He places a gentle kiss to her lips before leading them out of the building. Once they reach the car, Mara asks, "You're making dinner right?"

Vitus smirks, "I make everything— of course I'm making dinner."