

## Anything But Rational

A raspy throat clearing silenced the idle chit chat in my otherwise loud math class. Everyone glanced up from their friends or their homework as the principal's nasally voice boomed over the PA. "This is a very important announcement. At this time, all students and staff in the building are to rise in a moment of silence for the sudden and unfortunate death of Maia Carleton." -There was a collective gasp- "She passed away yesterday. May her soul rest in peace."

Silence filled the room as everyone rose. A loud silence. A numb silence. It lasted for a full minute. In that one minute, two girls burst out crying, a boy punched the wall, another boy ran out of the room and someone fainted. Students glanced at each other with shocked, horrified expressions, wordlessly asking each other, the world and whatever God they worshipped, "Why?" Everyone was shaking, muttering and crying but even as my knees crumpled beneath me, I couldn't help but laugh. Fools. What did they expect, for people to live forever?

*2 years ago*

*I walked into class without seeing or hearing anything, letting the crowd of student's guide me. The world seemed black and white, colourless. A good representation of how I felt inside. As I approached my desk, Maia Carleton stepped in front of me.*

*She placed a single white rose in my shaking hand. I looked up at her and she gave me a sad smile. "May your mother's soul rest in peace, Sarah." And even though white was just a shade, it was suddenly the brightest thing in the room.*

Maia Carleton, I thought as I stepped over a puddle of dirty water on the ground, was a pretty name for a pretty girl. Pretty girl who didn't look both ways before crossing the street and now wouldn't look at anything ever again with those blue eyes. I stopped walking, turned around and stared at the small puddle I had just stepped over. Maia Carleton seemed to smile at me from the murky depths and I could hear my therapist's voice clearly in my mind. *Denial is the first part of the grieving process.* I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Denial was saying no and when I thought of small, kind Maia Carleton being crushed beneath car wheels, all I could think was *no no please no*. But feeling the word no flow through my bones and hitch my breath wouldn't bring her back. The tear that slid down my cold cheek slowly dropped through the air and splashed into the puddle, erasing the mirage of those pretty blue eyes.

*1 year ago*

*"Your hair looks nice."*

*I turned to the soft voice behind me and raised my eyebrows at Maia Carleton. "Is that so? It looks like this everyday."*

*She shrugged, brown bangs bouncing with the movement. "I don't know about everyday. I just know it looks especially nice today." She winked at me and I let out a startled laugh.*

*"Well," I said. "Thank you. You have really nice eyes."*

*"I know, Sarah." She smirked at me. "They look like this everyday." I laughed again, shaking my head as she gave me a wolfish grin.*

"You don't need to wear black," a boy in workshop class said, voice deep and scornful. "She's been dead for a week. Besides, it clashes with your hair."

I looked at him, then at the hammer I held in my hand and then back at him. He wisely took a step back.

“She has been dead for a week,” I said softly, taking a step toward him. *Anger is the second part of the grieving process.* “But you could be dead within one.”

His eyes widened, feet automatically moving more back even as a sneer formed on his unattractive face. “Shut up, Sarah. Don't pretend like you even care. You're probably happy-”

The hammer slammed into his half built birdhouse before he could so much as blink. It *shattered*, delicately carved wooden pieces flying through the air and one struck him mere inches from his left eye. He screamed; shock, fear and pain combining into one terrible, drawn out sound. Probably exactly how Maia Carleton had screamed when she saw the car coming towards her. When she realized that it wasn't going to stop. And then I was trembling violently, the hammer's unforgiving weight dropping from my hand, her scream still echoing in my mind.

*6 months ago*

*I stopped at the bottom of the stairs, turning my head slightly. Maia Carleton was sitting at the corner of the stairwell, knees drawn up to her chest, head resting on her knees, tears pouring down her face. I took a step back quietly, not knowing what to do and wondered if maybe it would be better to just sneak back upstairs. But I had somehow already walked up and sat down in front of her, criss cross applesauce.*

*“Hey, Maia Carleton,” I whispered.*

*She looked up at me, eyes clear, blue, sad and seemed to not see me at all. “Hey, Sarah.”*

*“What's wrong?”*

*She closed her eyes. “Everything.”*

*“Do you want to cry on my shoulder instead of your designer jeans?”*

*She chuckled and moved, letting me slide in next to her and rest my head against the wall as she rested hers against my shoulder. It was silent for a few seconds and then she started talking. Talking and crying for hours while I just sat there with her, listening and letting her cry.*

My right hand hovered over the flickering flame, slowly dropping lower and lower. There were burn marks already covering my left hand but I felt no pain, surprisingly. The relief, the hope that I might be able to do something was overwhelming. I knew I wasn't thinking straight. I knew I wasn't being rational. I was being anything but rational. Magic wasn't real and burning myself a hundred times in a rundown church wasn't going to bring her back. But I had to try. *Bargaining is the third part of the grieving process.*

There had to be someone up there looking over us all who would realize that no, this wasn't right, no, she was too young, no, she was missed by too many, no, she couldn't *not* live. Because how could I, a girl who had wanted the same things, talked to the same people and walked the same roads still be somewhere on top and breathing while she was six feet under, not breathing. My hand dropped down onto the fire and as the flame seared my skin, as the hope faded away, the only sound I could make was one, awful whimper.

*1 month ago*

*A hand pulled the book I was reading away from my face and I glared at Maia Carleton as she read the synopsis at the back. She sat down, brushing the grass off the rusty bench and put both her feet up. “It seems like a good read.” I glared at her some more and she laughed, voice loud and bright enough*

*that I smiled, just a little. But then I realized that maybe her laugh was a bit too loud, a bit too bright. I put my hand on her knee and she just shook her head.*

*"My puppy I've had for five years died three days ago. Cancer."*

*I sucked in a breath, stomach tightening. "I'm so sorry."*

*"No, no, it's okay," she said, blinking fast. "It was a quick death."*

*This time I shook my head. "But he's still dead." She nodded, shoulders curving in on herself and suddenly she seemed so small, so vulnerable. I rolled up my sleeves, getting up from the bench and when she looked up at me, I just smiled at her.*

*"Come on." And she got up so willingly, so readily that I realized that maybe she was tired of death too.*

I ran my fingers over our cheerful faces, wondering how a class picture taken a month ago could seem like a lifetime ago. Maia Carleton and I were standing at opposite ends of the stage but we were both laughing at the joke the cameraman had said. Something about cheese. I couldn't remember it clearly now but what was crystal clear to me, what would never leave my head, was the fact that Maia Carleton was dead. She was dead, my mother was dead, her puppy was dead, my brother was dead, her dad was dead and I was alive. *Depression is the fourth part of the grieving process.* Some boy would trip tomorrow, some girl would cry, some couple would kiss, and someone would laugh.

But there was this unfathomable weight over me, this loneliness I couldn't put into words, this unhappiness that would never leave my side. Because they were all dead, together and I was alive, alone, not knowing whether or not I would ever laugh again. The picture frame crashed onto the marble floor and the glass pierced my skin, my blood and tears slowly dripping down onto our once cheerful faces.

*Two weeks ago*

*"Sarah."*

*The voice was insistent, exasperated and I pulled out my headphones, cutting off my favourite band in the middle of the chorus. "What do you want, Maia Carleton?"*

*She gave me a lame attempt of the puppy dog face. "Help with math."*

*I sighed loudly. "Fine."*

*"Because why would you divide the y by x when you know that-"*

*"Shush. Here. Look at this." She squinted at the paper I had hastily written on for a few seconds and then comprehension slowly dawned on her face.*

*"Oh."*

*I laughed, and she glared at me while I continued laughing, her face changing from fake outrage to a real laugh. "You're brilliant, Sarah."*

*"As are you, Maia Carleton."*

The sun was shining, the trees were gently swaying and the grave was uninviting, gray and cold. I collapsed in front of it, knees digging into the wet grass and closed my eyes for a full minute. In that one minute all the memories I had of her, all the times I had talked to her, all the laughs I had shared with her, Maia Carleton, flashed before my eyes. *Acceptance is the final part of the grieving process.* I opened them and on her grave stone it read; *Maia Carleton, beloved of many.* My heart lurched inside of me, a physical pain so intense I gasped, breathing in ice cold air.

"Maia Carleton, my friend, may your soul rest in peace," I whispered softly. I placed a single white rose on her grave, in the middle of the dozens of other flowers, cards and tokens of love. Because

she was missed, she was young, and she was loved. She was dead but she would forever be Maia Carleton, the girl with the pretty blue eyes and bright laugh and her soul would rest in peace. I rose from the grave and walked home, jumping over a dirty puddle on the way.