

Cello was so fascinated with death that maybe he understood it.

It wasn't like he *wanted* to die, he was just grossly enamoured with the idea of it all. The same way dogs are fascinated with chasing. Whether it be their tail, a stick, a ball, food; they never cease to want more. For Cello it was chasing the things he didn't understand, and nobody understands death.

I learned this on our way to Tamaulipas when we saw a train of black Hearsts perusing down the road; a funeral was taking place.

“Would you look at that.”

he stared at the black shiny funeral cars, whistling lowly.

“What?”

“A ceremony is about to happen Alma. We should go.”

“What?” I said again.

“Come on, why don't we go?”

“You want to spend the day at a funeral?”

“Why not?”

“What do you mean why not? Why would you want to go to a funeral?”

“It's the ending of a cycle. And y'know what happens after the end? *New beginnings*. It's a beautiful thing.”

“That person is none of our business, and I hate funerals anyways.”

“That's only because you've never been the outsider attending. Don't kick it until you try it.”

“Those sound like somebody's famous last words...”

“Precisely. Lets go.”

Death made me uncomfortable, but I was curious as to what Cello saw in it.

“Well, alright then.”

He turned his blinker on and got in line behind the parade of funeral cars. We followed them down the road, up a hill, past a massive field of graves, and into a parking lot.

People poured out of their automobiles with flowers, dark colors, speeches prepared, all moving in silence. We brought the deceased nothing at all. Instead we followed the mourning people whom we did not know, down a cobblestone path where grass was weaving its way through the loose cracks. Every step we took made a crunching sound. I kept my head down. I was the only one who

wasn't wearing black. My bright blue shirt and long white skirt did not fit the setting. Chello wore black, he blended right in. There were flowers scattered on graves and in the grass. The cobblestone paths went up and down and around the massive graveyard, it was still, peaceful, sacred. The sun lingered on my back and the breeze helped me stay cool.

At the front of our ant trail, the casket was being carried by four big men. I felt Cello's arm brush against my shoulder and I shivered. Our fingers touched, our hands found each other like magnets. I felt a deep tingling below my navel, in my gut. We clasped each others fingers and I listened closely to the crunchy grass. My whole body vibrated, this meant something didn't it? I exhaled carefully, I did not want Chello to know how my nerves were reacting to the feeling of his smooth hand.

The Casket was placed carefully in the grass to the left of a rectangular hole that had been dug in the ground. It was maybe seven or eight feet deep. The priest stood in front of the casket, waiting, as everyone crowded around it.

"This is a Christian funeral"

Chello whispered in my ear, his face getting dangerously close to mine, still holding my sweaty palm in his. He squeezed. Our shoulders were kissing. He leaned in closer. His lips were so close to mine.

"Since the grave is newly dug, it doesn't need to be blessed. Freshly dug earth is considered blessed already, the body is going back to where it came from. Back into the dirt. The earth will swallow it up as it rots and becomes nothing more than a skeleton. But the body isn't what matters, it's the *soul*. The soul goes somewhere sacred, Alma."

I didn't say anything.

The priest recited a prayer, el espiritu santo, and one which I had never heard. Everyone stood around silently praying with their eyes closed. A teenage boy standing next to me shed a tear. Chello closed his eyes and silently mouthed the words. I only knew one prayer by heart. I recited it in my head, changing the words ever so slightly to be a prayer for the body before us, the empty presence.

“Angel de mi guardia, dulce compania. No desampares a este espiritu, ni de noche ni de dia. Dios es nuestro pastor, y nada nos faltara. Y en lugares de delicados pastos, hara que esta persona duerma en paz.”

Amen. Everyone said this together. The priest said that at that time, anyone who wanted to share their last parting words could speak. He signaled to the men who had carried the casket to open it. They struggled to get it open, lifting the heavy mahogany top up.

I expected the body to be old, tattered, wrinkled with life and movement. Instead, (to my surprise) inside the big wooden casket, there was a young woman. She had long brown curls that fell around her beautifully made up face. Her lips were thin, her skin was dark, her eyebrows were drawn on. She had blue shadows on her lids, and a silk sleeved dress covered her body. Her hand was crossed over her heart. In her fingers lay a white rose. She looked soft. My heart sunk a little bit.

An old woman with silvery hair and pleasant big eyes nudged the skinny teenage boy standing next to me.

“Andale, niño.”

She smiled, encouraging him.

He stared down at the tattered paper in his hands. I imagined that he had unfolded it, and refolded it, and scribbled out words, and written them back down, I imagined that he spent a lot of time preparing what he would say. He walked over to the casket and stared at the limp womans face. His face turned bright red.

“Mami.”

He began. His voice got trapped in his throat.

“Mami, You saved my life.”

His fingers were trembling, shaking the flimsy paper in his hands. He looked at the face of his beautiful sleeping mother, and knew she would never open her eyes and see him again.

“Perdoname Mami. Dios, Perdoname. I wish I could go back and take the bullet that they put through your chest. I wish I was there to give them the money you owed them. I wish they would leave us all alone. I wish a lot of things, but that’s not gonna change anything. My mother died so that I wouldn’t.

When they broke down the front door of the school, she knew something was wrong. We were in class. We all heard the breaking of the doors. She locked the classroom and told me to open the window. She told us all to get out. She told us all to run home. She told us to call the police as soon as we were far enough. I told her I didn’t want to leave. She told me she loved me. She told me if anything happened, she’d be watching me from the sky.”

He paused. His lip shaking, tears falling down his face. His voice squeaked when he spoke again. My eyes were watering too. We were all listening.

“I wish I could of been as strong as her. It breaks my heart knowing I’ll never see her again....but I know she’s in heaven now. I know she died so that we could have a chance to make a difference. I want to be just like you, Mami. I want to teach people, and help people, and do right by you. I’ll never touch a weapon. I’ll never touch drugs. I’ll do right by you Mami, I swear.”

He was shaking profusely now, tears streaming down his bright red face. He bit his knuckle and cried for a moment before continuing.

“I know you’re watching. I know. I can feel you here, and I know I’ll never be able to touch you again but- I want to say thank you for being the best mother I could ever ask for. I want to thank you for saving all of our lives. You made a difference, and I know none of us will forget the sacrifice you made so that we could live our lives like good, honest, brave, people. I will carry that with me until the day I die.”

He walked closer to her now, and stared hard at her face.

“I Love You Mami.” He bent over her and kissed her still cheek, a tear falling on her perfectly made up face and smearing her foundation a tad.

He walked back to the old woman and hugged her, letting his urge to sob take over. She rubbed his back and cried too, a melancholy smile on her face. I could tell she was proud. I could tell her heart hurt too. Many were crying now. I was crying now. Tears left grey tracks down my face and I bit lip to keep from shaking.

I didn't speak with such courage at Luke's funeral. I was almost entirely silent. I wished that I had. I felt incredibly overwhelmed, but not in a bad way. We were all so vulnerable here. We could all feel the impact of her death, but it was a death that meant something. It was sad, and overwhelming, but the bravery with which everyone spoke was real. The goodness, the rawness, the realization, the blessing that blossomed from the deepest parts of the people speaking, were coming from the deepest sections of their hearts. There was some sort of unity in her separation from the world, from all us, who came to mourn at her funeral.

This woman, Magdalena, died to save the kids she taught at her school. She stalled, she helped everyone escape, she died for a cause. She left a lesson for all those she taught, that they would carry with them for the rest of their lives. The old woman, the boy's grandmother, spoke. Many of Magdalena's other students spoke. Her friends, her family, they all had something to say. Some blessing for her bravery, some hope they would take with them from it.

I felt like my heart was going to explode. I thought of all the things I wanted to say to Luke. I thought of the dead woman who lay like a tribute, a sacrifice, for all of us who wanted to live honest lives, for those of us who wanted to spread that goodness, that honesty to those around us. God knows that's what I wanted.

The priest asked if anyone else wanted to speak. I did. From the bottom of my heart, and the back of my chest, I felt words surfacing. Words that had been silenced for too long. Chello's eyes were moist. He rubbed my fingers in his hand. I understood the beauty he saw in funerals now. I understood him a little better now. I had to speak. I couldn't stand by anymore, that was the whole point of this journey, to do.

"I would like to speak, if that's all right."

I felt my face burn pink as all teary eyes turned to me. Chello looked at me completely astonished, wide green eyes, he couldn't have predicted this.

The priest nodded, approving my desire to speak. I approached the casket slowly like maybe something was still alive inside, and I looked at the woman I never knew, named Magdalena, who somehow had impacted me. I took a big breath.

"I have to be honest."

I began. My voice shook.

“I don’t know Magdalena. I never knew her. I don’t know any of you, really. Not a single one of you. I don’t know exactly why I’m here either, and maybe that’s disrespectful of me, but I just need to speak for a minute. Please bare with me, I know how ridiculous this must seem.”

I took a deep breath again, everyone stayed silent. I felt so nervous.

“I do not know this woman, but I will carry her story with me everywhere I go, and in everything I do. I look at her and I see a good person. I feel good energy that she planted like seeds into each and every one of you, and I want to take it with me, I want people to feel that goodness in everything they do, and I want to keep it with me in everything *I* do. I’m sorry for being strange, for being here when I probably shouldn’t be, but I just need to tell you, all of you who spoke-”

I stopped and made eye contact with Magdalena’s son. He had tears in his eyes, but he managed to give me a little smile. His eyes told me to go on.

“All of you who spoke, all of you here, have that raw goodness in you. You have that desire to make positive change in the world, and I can feel it right here, right before me. I just need to say this because, you’re all so young! *We*, are all so young. We all have the chance to make a difference in life, to live the way people should. Doing right by others, and doing right by yourselves, ourselves.

I’m saying this because I can feel Magdalena here. I really can. I can feel her eyes burning a hole in my back, and I know I have no right to say what she’s doing, or where she is, or what she thinks, but, forgive me while I say that, she is *SO* proud of all of you. She is somewhere beautiful, and there is peace there. Her energy, it’s in the trees, in the flowers, inside all of you, inside all of me, and she is so proud, because she knows that you won’t leave this lesson, this goodness, this piece of her that she lived to leave with each of you. She knows each and everyone of you, of us, is going to feel it, and it’s going to change the way we do things in the world. I’m so sorry for your loss, everyone. I’m sorry if I’ve disrespected you. I will never have the pleasure of meeting this woman, but I’ve had the pleasure of being touched by her in a way I will never, never, forget.”

I had no words left. I felt God like vibrations weaving in and out of the grass, the earth, in through my soles, up my skirted legs, into the hairs on my arms, into the scars on my shoulders. I took a step back, joining the mourning people, who I did not know, who I would never really know, once again.

Chello was crying now. Full on crying into his sleeve. Magdalena's son cried too, harder. Snot dripped from his crow's nose, down over his lips. It didn't matter. The priest said a few last words and the casket was closed. The big men lowered it down slowly. While they did this, Magdalena's son, a boy only a few years younger than I, came up to me and gave me a hug. My lip trembled. I hugged him back. We were all a mess. He gripped me very tightly with his lanky arms. I squeezed him with my own.

"Thank you."

He cried.

"I know how hard this is. I'm sorry."

I cried a little bit too.

"Do you think I'll ever see her again?"

He looked at me like I had all of the answers. His cries had softened into sniffing.

"I don't know, honey. I don't know what comes after death. I just know that our energy goes back into the world. I don't know what we look like after we've lost our bodies. I don't think you'll see her the way you've seen her, I don't think you'll see her looking human again, but, I know you'll feel her again. I know you'll feel her energy, honey."

I spoke to him quietly. My eyes were dry now. The sun was burning my shoulders, I was tired. He let me go and looked at me with big round eyes.

"I feel her right now."

He said.

"Me too."

"What is your name?"

"Alma, honey. What is yours?"

"Matias."

"How old are you, Matias?"

"Fourteen."

"Are you afraid?"

"No. I just don't know what happens next."

“Me neither, honey. I’m here though. We’re here. I don’t know for how long, for how little, but here we are.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure, Matias. I’m not sure. The world is a confusing place, but, I think the key to living is happiness, and love. We’re here to be loved, to give love, to be happy, to give happy, to share this experience, to share knowledge that we’ve barely got a grasp on. We’re here to overcome fear, to feel it and overcome it.”

“Are you afraid Alma?”

I thought for a minute. If he had asked me on any previous day, I would have told him yes. I thought of my conversation with Angel about fear and understanding. I no longer felt the need to understand, only to participate. I smiled.

“All the time, Honey. But wanna know what?”

“What?”

“I don’t feel afraid right now. Wanna know why?”

“Because of my mami?”

“Yes. She’s given me hope for the world. Are you afraid?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s okay. Life can be very unsettling honey. It doesn’t last forever. Nothing does.”

“So what’s the point then?”

I thought.

I saw Molly and her big ‘fro in my head.

I smiled.

“The point is to find peace, honey. We’re on the pursuit of peace.”

He nodded. His lips curled up a little. I hugged him again. He thanked me. I told him I’d pray for him. He told me he’d pray for me.