

## **The 5 Days of Grief**

**By Isabel Price (15)**

### **Day 2 - December 26<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

The smallest bed remains unmade yet still warm. I check it every time the sun comes up before the bigger ones get up. I shove my nose under the fluffy blanket that lies on top and just breathe deep. That's where her smell is hidden best. It's getting thinner now. Not completely gone. Just thinner. Her scent lingers there wrapping around the doorframe and clinging onto the pillows, trying to make a mark that was never meant to be made.

The smallest shoes still sit in a pile at the front door. Never touched, never moved. They face the door as if she stepped out of them and will soon be back to step right in. I wait there. Just in case. I wait there often. I am exceptionally good at waiting.

The smallest backpack still hangs from the coatrack. Books and pens and pencils and rulers still rest inside waiting for her to come and pick the bag up and head off to school. Nobody uses that coatrack anymore. It's left empty. Always empty.

### **Day 1 - December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

She has not come down for breakfast. This is unusual, she's always ready to give me the crusts of her toast.

The tallest one shouts her name once. Then twice.

I wait politely at the bottom of the stairs, tail wagging. Morning is the best time, it's hopeful and fixes the messes of the night.

The tall one climbs the stairs.

Step.

By step.

By step.

He pauses outside her door and knocks ever so softly. No response, so he knocks again.

Silence.

He steps into her room and what comes out of him is not a word.

It is a sound that does not belong to a human body.

I run upstairs when he collapses against the wall. His hands are rapidly shaking, and he makes that noise again, the broken one. I try to push past him to get into her room, but he shouts at me in a way he's never shouted at me before.

I don't understand what rule I have broken.

The air changed all at once. One night it was thick and loud and by the time the sun rose the next morning it wasn't. It was empty and quiet. My home, all off a sudden, became a house. All the big people move through this place carefully like one wrong step will make the whole building cave in on them. Well, that's only the ones that move. The biggest person in the house hasn't moved, he's sat outside her door all morning and all evening waiting, just like me. But still, her door remains closed. No one dares to look inside; they just watch the door. Waiting for it to creak open and her to step out in her school uniform complaining about her frizzy hair again. By nightfall, the house is empty of her voice, and the tall one still sits on the floor outside her room. I bring him her shoe, but he just drops it and doesn't dare to look at me. Why won't he look at anything?

### **Day 3 - December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

The once loud house has remained silent since that day. The strangers leave and shoes disperse. Conversations shrink into whispers on the street. But the silence stays.

The tall one does not go off to work. He doesn't dare to open a window or open the curtains. Light presses hard against the windowpane but slowly begins to give up. Her door remains closed. Not carefully or gently but firmly. As if attempting to prevent something inside from escaping. He won't sleep in his bed anymore; he just lies on the carpet right outside her door. I do too. I lie right beside him, listening to his heartbeat, to his breathing, to him whisper her name gently. He whispers it into the air, into his hands like a small confession he is scared to accept out loud.

#### **Day 4 - December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

The days no longer even have edges – morning arrives meaningless and night falls without a warning. Clocks continue their small, faithful ticking but nobody listens. The tall one forgets my breakfast a lot now, but I do not remind him, he forgets to eat too. He still sits at the table where she used to swing her legs and just stare at her empty chair. Once, he even pulled it back out as if she had left it crooked. He made sure it stayed that way

Her scent is beginning to leave the house. It tries to cling stubbornly to the pillows and collar of jackets yet, no matter how hard it tries to fight it, it's slowly losing. The air is refusing to carry her anymore. Her room smells of dust and the sweetness is beginning to thin. There is less of her with each new day. The tall one even washed her sheets yesterday; I tried to stop him. I barked at the machine that was helping get rid of any evidence of her scent, but he shouted at me to stop. I've never heard my name sound quite like it did then. It wasn't a shout of rage or fear or sadness; it was something different. Something he's never quite felt before.

He walks past the mirrors and doesn't dare to look up; he stands outside her door but doesn't dare to reach for the handle. Sometimes, he presses his forehead against that door. His shoulders shake but he makes no sound. I push my nose against his hand, but he just pulls away. Not out of anger but because he is somewhere I simply cannot follow.

He even gets startled at small things. Humming of the fridge. Creaking of the floorboards. Once he even shouted her name over and over again because he thought he heard her voice, but the house answered him with nothing. He laughed then; it was a truly terrible sound. Another time, I carried her shoe to my bed and he found it there. For a split second, I thought he would be glad. Instead, he sat on the floor and held it against his chest like something fragile. He said he was sorry.

Over.

And over.

I do not know what he is apologising for and I don't know who he believes is listening.

Usually, he stands in the kitchen clutching onto her phone. Every now and again it lights up, messages from other small voices, memorial instagram posts, voicemails of regret coming in like a constant stream. He never answers them, he won't, he can't. He just stares at the screen until it goes back to darkness. Sometimes, he will stand there and whisper "*I didn't know*" over and over again.

I do not know what he did not know.

I don't think I ever will.

Tonight, though, he opened her door again and stepped inside. I stayed still at the bottom of the stairs watching for a reaction, for anything. He did not try to turn on the light or move anything within the room. I stayed waiting on the stairs, but after a while I heard crying. Not loudly but not the way he did that first day. This was quieter. Worse. He sat in there long after the sky turned dark and when he finally came to stand, he swayed. Slowly swayed. He looked back at me like he couldn't recognise who I was and for the very first time, I grew afraid of him.

#### **Day 5 - December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

The house no longer smells like her; it reeks of paint. The tall one stayed up for three days without a single minute of sleep. He scrubbed all the walls. He washed all the floors. He opened every single window until the curtains hung like tired flags. He took down all her drawings and certificates. He peeled her name off her door. He folded her clothes into different boxes and sealed them with tape.

I waited for him to stop. He never stopped. He removed her bed and the room just echoed when I stepped inside, there was nowhere left to find her. I circled once and then again, the air refused to answer. That night, he didn't sit outside the door because there was no door to sit outside. He slept on the sofa with all the lights left on. His eyes were open, but I do not think he was really seeing anything.

Then the sun rose again and morning came; he gathered all the boxes and carried them all to the car. I slowly followed along, tail low but ready, prepared to go where the pack went. He filled the boot and closed it up and just stood very still. For a moment, I believed he was going to call for me. Instead, he and the other tall lady got into the front seats and the two short ones piled into the back and slammed the doors.

The engine started.  
I ran to the window.  
They never looked back.

As the car rolled down the street and never slowed, I realised something:  
The house is empty now  
Not quiet. Empty. I lie in the hallway now where the door used to be.

Still, I stay.  
I am exceptionally good at waiting.