*Men Don’t Cry*

*Victoria Pantelis*

Fate is a curious thing**.** It’s powerful and unpredictable and sometimes callous. It carves its cruel path and makes you walk blindly along it, continually forcing you to circumvent its endless obstacles. Fate is inevitable, incalculable, but most importantly, inescapable.

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I’m sitting cross-legged at the end of Mum’s bed, watching her being eaten alive. She is being consumed – slowly but surely – by the disease. By the invisible killer, unstoppable and unrelenting. A robber of time. A robber of life.

It makes me mad how unfair this is, but life isn’t fair, and I should have learnt that by now. I carefully slide off the bed and fix the blankets, so Mum’s bony back and slim shoulders are covered. I study the way her chest rises and falls with each laboured inhalation and think about how every breath is for us. Mateo and Gabe, her only two children. Her only two people left to fight for. I say a silent prayer that her fragile heart never stops beating and then my eyes sting with tears and I quietly leave the room, because if I don’t, I will cry and Gabe hates it when I cry.

Gabe is five years older than me, and he says that men don’t cry. He says even if you are sad, you have to pretend to be happy because no one should see you upset. The day Mum was diagnosed, I cried. A lot. Gabe came into my room and sat on the floor with me, handing me tissues until my tears ran dry. He said that crying makes you weak and that I should just ‘man-up’ and deal with it. He said crying wouldn’t help anything and that it was pointless and stupid. Then he stuffed a few tissues into his pocket and left, his eyes glassy and faraway, but not a single tear slipped down his cheek because he is a man, and apparently men don’t cry.

I open the back door and head outside, where it smells like sunshine and fresh honey. I stop by the shed and grab the watering can and weeder, eyeing the packet of seeds on the bench. I leave them where they are though, because they’re for tomorrow. I walk to the back of the yard, to the patch of soil besides the fence, and kneel down. Just above the soil’s surface, three vibrant, green stalks crane their necks to the sky. One of the seedlings is still young, one has grown a few buds and the other has bloomed a single, pink flower. *Dianthus caryophyllus.* The carnation, with its pink, fringed petals layered delicately like sheets of tissue paper. The first one I planted.

I started the garden to mark the weeks Mum lived beyond what the doctor told her she would. Tomorrow will be the fourth flower I plant. The small garden isn’t visible from the back door and Gabe rarely ventures into the backyard, so no one knows about it except me. And that’s the way I like it. If Gabe saw the garden, he would frown and shake his head and tell me it is stupid. So, I plant my seeds in secret, pray that Mum keeps on fighting and will the flowers to keep on growing.

The day the doctor told Mum she had two weeks to live, she looked Gabe and I in the eyes, held our hands and promised us she wasn’t going to die. I held onto her words and made myself believe them. But I shouldn’t have been so naïve. She may have lived longer than two weeks, but a*ll* promises are eventually broken.

When Gabe taps my shoulder early the next morning, the sun is yet to rise and there’s a piercing chill in the air which makes me shiver and pull the covers tighter around my body. Gabe taps me again and I groan, turning over, but there’s something urgent about his touch. Something insistent. Something pleading.

My sight is still fuzzy from sleep, but when I lift my head and look at him, my stomach drops. Something’s wrong. I sit up and study his silhouette – shoulders hunched, hair mattered, head bowed. He steps closer and I try to read his unfamiliar expression. It’s a concoction of sorrow and fear and confusion. It’s *pain.*

Mum fought for four weeks more than she was meant to. Gabe reminds me of this while he sits next to me in bed, staring down at his lap. His voice is quiet and gentle, and I can tell he’s trying his best to make the news easier to bear, but there *is* no good way to hear that your mother is dead.

I feel strange. I’m angry and upset but weirdly calm, and it feels like I’m stuck in a hazy dream which is soon to abruptly end. So, I get out of bed, tell Gabe I’m fine, and try to act as if my world is *not* about to be drowned by a wild tidal wave of woe.

The air outside is sharp and bitter, stinging my cheeks and grasping at me with its icy fingers. I collect the packet of seeds from the shed, walk to the garden and sit on the dewy grass. I hold the seeds in my hands and trace my thumb over the name on the packet: *Helianthus Annuus.* Sunflower seeds.

“Mum would like them,” Gabe says as he sits on the grass next to me. I didn’t even hear him come out. He doesn’t tell me the garden is stupid and he doesn’t object when I shake a few seeds out of the packet and drop them into his palm.

“Plant them with me,” I say in a small voice.

Gabe puts one arm around my shoulder and helps me plant the seeds with the other. We don’t talk and when we finish, we sit in silence. My cheeks burn, but not from the cold, and before I can stop myself, the tears come hot and fast. They run down my face and onto the soil and I don’t try to supress them. Gabe doesn’t either. He swipes the back of his hand over his eyes and turns his head away from me. But even through my tear-stained vision I see a small drop fall down his cheek, delicately and slowly, running down his face until it drips off his chin. I hug Gabe then, hard and properly, and he hugs me back. We sit together on the grass, crying for Mum but also for each other. Crying like men. Because men *do* cry.

(Inspired by Francis Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*)