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The Burial of Daniel Nachtman

Darcy Joyner

Everything was carefully planned by Mr. and Mrs. Nachtman.

A short ceremony. A closed casket.

Mr. Nachtman wrote a short speech on behalf of the family. Steadfast as always, he did not shed a tear.

Mrs. Nachtman sat completely still next to her children, now missing another.

The three children watched silently as people began to filter in. Some came up to the family with looks of pity, offering condolences to Mr. and Mrs. Nachtman. Their eyes never stopped on the children.

Helena, the youngest, sat with her hand firmly in her older brother's. Her feet hung off the edge of the pew. She stared around the cathedral, watched the lights shine into her eyes and followed the walls up to where they bent and connected at the ceiling. Everyone around her was sad. It was because her big brother died and was laying in that coffin. She was trying to be sad, too. She tried to cry like all the others, but she wasn't sad. Daniel didn't feel dead in the same way her grandfather was dead. Grandpa got old and see-through, with purple veins that laid under his skin, and he stopped getting out of bed. Then they all gathered around his pale body and wide open mouth, and Mom made Helena kiss him on the forehead to say goodbye.

But Daniel just went away, and he never came back. So he didn't really feel dead.

From the corner of her eye she saw her mother's shoulders shaking through her breath and Jacob sitting to her right, his jaw clenched and his eyes far away. She always thought that Jacob was identical to Daniel, but looking at him now she didn't see Daniel's face anywhere in him. Her brother Samson had been clutching her hand for so long that the clammy sweat had grown comfortable. She saw the quiet stream of tears that ran down his cheeks as he stared ahead.

Samson didn't want to cry. He tried to control his breathing to hold down his sobs. He tried spacing out to numb his tears.

Why is this happening? he asked himself. *How could God possibly be so cruel?*

Beneath the lid of that coffin was his brother, sealed away and gone.

Was Daniel's body going to rot away in the ground? Would they throw away his bed and all of his things, or shut them away in a box somewhere? What if Helena died next?

What if he did?

Jim Waters — Photograph

St. Alphonsus

Tears burned their way down his face. He couldn't hold it in and breathed out a sob. Helena squeezed his hand, which turned his stream of tears into a relentless flood.

One day, he might go to Helena's funeral, or maybe she would go to his. Maybe he would get sick and die before everyone else like Daniel, and, like Daniel, he would have no choice but to let it happen. If he didn't, then he would have to watch his mother die and his father die, and he would be able to do nothing but say goodbye to them. Samson wasn't sure which one was worse. Maybe the worst part was that he couldn't choose. He prayed for there



Zofia Oles — Photograph

Amsterdam

to be a heaven so that he didn't have to really die—and so he could see Daniel one more time.

Samson's stomach twisted into itself as he saw Mr. Gregory, the funeral director, make his way onto the modest stage at the front of the room. The coffin loomed behind him as he shuffled his papers and began.

"It is this morning we gather with heavy hearts. Today, we mourn the loss of Daniel Nachtman. Beloved son, brother, and classmate, devoted member of the church. For the last fourteen years, I, along with everyone here, have watched Daniel grow up beside his loving family..."

He paused as tears rose to his throat. The hair of his beard quivered with his lip, and he continued, "But today we must say goodbye. I'm sure none of us expected to be here. We often take for granted what we have, never knowing when it will be gone. I know we did not take the time we had with Daniel for granted. Now, we must keep Daniel alive in our hearts, and in our memories. We will celebrate Daniel as he was in life and rejoice in the understanding that he is safe in the kingdom of Heaven. Please join me as we bow our heads in prayer."

Clothing shifted among the silence and the room became still.

Jacob's hands trembled as he clasped them together. His breath was short, and his head was light. He hadn't slept since Daniel died. Not really. The blinks of rest he managed to get frightened him awake and left him drenched in sweat.

They know, he told himself, they all know.

With his head frozen in place, hung down like all the others, he *knew* that everyone was staring at him. He could feel it.

How can they tell?

Was it in his face? Did they see it behind his eyes?

Or is there still blood and dirt stuck on him somewhere that he can't see or wash off?

The noise in his head was interrupted by Mr. Gregory's thanks, and everyone raised their heads. Glancing around, he saw that no one was looking at him. Everyone was looking up at the stage. Jacob watched as his father was ushered to the podium to deliver his speech. He had written one on behalf of the family.

Jacob saw his father on the stage, gathering his thoughts. The wrinkle in his forehead and the purse of his lips sent Jacob back to that night.

"Jacob..." his father had sighed at the sight of the corpse when Jacob shakily led him to the old chapel.

It was stiff and pale, but it still looked like him. Blood was crusted onto his delicate face and cracked lips. It had soaked and burned into the clothes. The body was slumped up against the wall, right where Jacob left him. Vivid daylight poured in through the broken stained-glass. What was once a holy portrait now shattered open to look like a mouth with crooked teeth.

Seeing the body bathed in the light of morning—it left no secrets. Muscle sliced open, now cold and unbleeding. Jacob retched out a cry and gripped onto one of the old pews to hold his buckling legs.

"You don't get to cry," his father said, grabbing the back of Jacob's shirt and pulling him up. "How did you let this happen, Jacob." Father never asked, he required answers.

Jacob shook silently, trying to form the words before he yelled for them. "It—it was an accident..." he whispered, "I didn't mean to do it..."

"Who does that matter to, Jacob? Does it matter to Daniel?" He threw his hand to the body. "It doesn't matter to me."

"I'm sorry," he pleaded, his thoughts came out as coughing sobs. "I don't know what to do..."

His father stared at the body for a moment and stated, "Well I suppose you'll have to bury him."

Jacob looked to him with terror. "What?" Tears sprung from his eyes and his chest crumpled from the words. He lost control of his breath and his voice and began to heave, "I don't want to do that, Dad, I don't want to do that, *I don't want to do that.*"

"I'll get a shovel, Jacob." His father left his side and started to walk to the chapel doors.

"Dad—Dad no...Dad I can't, I can't, Dad—I can't do it," Jacob raced after him and clung to his arm.

Father whipped around with scorn blazing in his eyes. He gripped Jacob's wrist and let his nails sink in. "Yes, you will, Jacob," he commanded through his teeth, "I will get. A shovel."

He released Jacob's wrist and he stumbled away, clutching the marks that were dug into his skin. Once the door closed behind him, Jacob collapsed to the floor in a heap and cried. He cried so hard that he screamed.

Alone in the chapel, Jacob was with his brother for the last time.

He tried to wash the dirt off.

He ran a bath with water so hot that his insides boiled. He held his head beneath the surface and tried to breathe in. He couldn't gather the will to do it.

By the time Jacob finished scrubbing his skin, it had become pink and raw, and the water had grown cold. When the bathtub drained, he wrapped himself in a towel and sat on the floor.

He wasn't ready to go back to their room.

Mom had called him and Daniel out of school that morning, but Jacob had to go to school the next day.

Apparently, Daniel got sick, so he missed class.

By the end of the week, the family announced that Daniel had passed away in his sleep. They said that the doctors didn't know what caused it, and they would be holding a funeral for him a few days later.

After Jacob buried him, his father said he would take care of the rest.

Everything was carefully planned by Father and Mother.

A short service. A closed casket.

An embalmed sheep inside to weigh it down, courtesy of Mr. Gregory. No one asked questions when Father Nachtman needed a hand.

Taking the stage, everyone looked to him with misty eyes. Stepping in front of the coffin, Mr. Nachtman began his speech.



Chaos
Tania Blanco Mixed Media Collage