

A Park Between

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You only know people through the stories they tell you. You never really know anyone completely. Ironically, it took the death of a stranger for me to get to know my grandmother. Looking back, I possessed that rare type of aloof egoism that marks one's teenage years. It's doubtful that anything could have penetrated my own thoughts of graduation from high school and attending Howard University in the fall. I had already planned out my summer—lifeguarding at the club and spending my weekends at the beach with friends.

That death, however, and the secret that it revealed, shocked my family and me.

I remember daydreaming about a truce with my older sister Abigail. It never happened. To this day, there are no hugs at family reunions, and our children don't run off together and play in the sand. The last time that we spoke, the phone call ended with her shouting at me, "Mom's Alzheimer's must have really been bad to make you and that bitch wife of yours executors of her estate." That's Abby and me. To her, the crystal candy dish that she said she wanted isn't mine to give to her. So, she doesn't want it.

I don't remember all the details leading up to that day, but I remember everything about the funeral. The service was held at St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue—a location that immediately raised eyebrows since our family isn't Catholic. Abby, my father, and I

rode together in one town car; my mom and my grandmother rode in another. Although we were family, circumstances being what they were, we didn't impose ourselves by riding in the funeral home's limousines. I was tugging on the sleeve of my only black suit, which was the clearest indicator to me that I had grown a few inches since junior year.

"Don't touch me," Abby snapped at me after the car hit a pothole. Unfortunately, she had to be flanked in the backseat by my father and me because the driver wouldn't allow anyone to sit up front. He said something about insurance. Abby rolled her eyes, sucked her teeth, and superglued her hip and her shoulder to my father's. Inches of distance between us made all the difference to her.

Inside the basilica, white marble and lighting added majesty to the soaring stone columns that formed perfect gothic vaults. An illusion of grandiosity in the midst of coldness. Although it was springtime, I could almost see my breath. In this place, a person's insignificance is amplified by architecture intended to let you know that God reigns supreme—mankind's smallness in comparison to heaven above. It seemed fitting. This was the funeral of my grandmother's sister, Vivian, a woman whom I never knew existed. My mother never knew that she had an aunt, until just days before. A cold cathedral to a foreign religion seemed just about right. Especially when you are nestled in among five

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or six hundred strangers.

We followed my grandmother, who had walked about halfway down the long aisle when my mom pointed and said, "How about we sit here, Momma?"

My grandmother stopped, abruptly turned her head to look back, then turned back to look at the front row of pews just in front of the casket, gleaming alabaster draped in white calla lilies. She nodded her head and sighed, which looked to me as if her chest collapsed concave.

I sat between my grandmother and mother. My father, to her left, wrapped his arm around my mother's shoulder and kept rubbing her arm as if to warm her up. Abby, of course, as far away from me as possible, placed her purse between my father and myself, and proceeded to look around the sanctuary.

"Oh my god, isn't that Barbra Streisand?"

"Hush, Abby," my mother said through pursed lips and a side-eye.

"Oh Momma, you act like we knew her. We aren't really family." In answer, my father reached over and gently jabbed Abby with his index finger.

Looking over at Abby, I could see how easy it might have been for my grandmother to pretend as if she had a sister who never existed. I know that in that moment I could easily pick myself up and move to a pew clear on the other side of this church without a glance in her direction.

The bishop began the homily, and it was then I noticed that my grandmother had slipped over her head the black lace shawl that was around her shoulders. She pulled a string of ornate obsidian beads from a satin satchel, each bead separated by a smaller silver ball that linked them together. At the end dangled a small silver crucifix, Christ's body in bas relief, held in slender, knowing hands.

Wait, was my grandmother Catholic?

"Amen," we all said together, the only part of the prayer that was familiar.

Every funeral is the culmination of a story, and strange as it may seem, the prologue to an entirely new set of stories. When everyone who knows the deceased comes together to mourn, the procession of eulogies, each punctuated with tales about the dearly departed, starts to weave a more detailed and colorful tapestry. Who knew the colors Vivian's would reveal?

A slim white woman wearing an elegant sheath dress with peasant sleeves walked to the dais. Her head, covered with an ornate lace veil like my grandmother's, was bowed, looking down at her toes; the grace of her glissade seemed forced.

"My mother Vivian," she began, "was a woman of substance."

I whipped my head and whispered to my mother, "Did she just say 'mother'?"

*"Did she just say
'mother'?"*

My mom looked straight ahead as if she didn't hear a word I had said. I think that her breath was trapped by the lump in her throat.

So, Aunt Vivian's husband had jungle fever, because there was no way in the world that this second cousin of mine was black (like us).

The daughter went on to chronicle her mother's life. Studied art history, married her father Harold, opened a gallery, and lived on the Upper East side of Manhattan for more than fifty years.

"She loved things of beauty, her clients, her charities, and, of course, her kids." The

daughter sniffled, dabbed at a tear, and forced a smile.

She lived on the Upper East Side for fifty years? I think that my mouth might have caught flies if we had been outside. My mother squirmed a bit in her seat. My father's fingers thrummed softly on her shoulder. Abby was leaning forward, hands on the railing of the pew in front of her.

It was hard for me to reconcile that my grandmother and her sister lived on opposite sides of Central Park for decades. "Mom," I whispered, leaning in close to her left ear so as to be as far away from my grandmother as possible, "grandma never told you why you never knew about this aunt?"

"It's complicated. I'll tell you later," she said to me, hurriedly and in hushed tones. She never had the chance.

After Vivian's daughter stepped down, another man passed her on the stairs. You could tell that he used to be tall, but the bend in his back had probably reduced his height by a couple of inches. He was carrying a folded piece of paper in his hand, which shook—maybe nerves, maybe Parkinson's. His eyelids looked heavy and slightly pink, but his blue eyes were piercing. Had he been wear-

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ing a robe instead of a smart, black Brooks Brother's suit, he would have looked like a wizard—white hair and beard.

"When I married Vivian, the world was a different place," he said, a slight rasp to his quavering tenor.

Aha, I thought, this is the husband. She did marry a white man.

He continued talking about their trips together and how proud he was of her art gallery. Apparently, this aunt was very accomplished, and that explained the boldfaced names in attendance. The perfunctory, grieving-husband eulogy continued until he looked in the direction of our row. I could have sworn that he looked straight at me.

"Evelyn," he said before a long pause in which tears streamed down his face, "your sister loved you so much. Could you ever forgive me?"

At that very moment, I heard a sound come from deep within my grandmother—a growling, mewling squeal of grief that seemed to pull her entire body down. She sobbed and turned to place her head into my chest and shook with deep breaths and heaves. As if contagious, my mother's tears welled up in her eyes and then overflowed like waterfalls cascading down a cliff.

Every head in the cathedral turned to focus laser-like gazes upon us—the chocolate family sitting in a sea of white faces, histrionic and loud (well, only because the acoustics of St. Patrick's are perfect). I saw people way down in the front row, stand up and turn around to see from where all this commotion could have been coming. My grandmother never seemed to notice; her cries escaped from her as if they had been trapped somewhere dangerous and wild, incongruous with the civilization in which we found ourselves in this moment.

We didn't go to the gravesite. Instead we climbed back into our town cars and headed back to my grandmother's apartment on the other side of the park. I would later find out that Vivian, my grandmother's sister, eloped with Harold, and being so fair skinned herself, my great-aunt lived her life as a white woman. It is what black people from back in the day called *passing for white*. I remember being surprised because although I had heard about it (I don't know when specifically), it wasn't something that I thought of as remotely connected to me. I guess that I was a bit oblivious to the fact that my grandmother had jade green eyes and café au lait skin herself.

Silence hung thick in the air on the car ride back. My mind kept swirling. How hard must it have been for my grandmother to give up her only sister, just to avoid a scandal? What kind of husband would demand something like this from his wife? Did Vivian's kids even know that their mother was black? I looked at the back of Abby's head. She had somehow managed to convince the driver to let her sit in the front seat. There won't be any animalistic, rage-grief sobbing from her at my funeral. For some strange reason, I assumed back then that I would be dying first.

And then it hit me. My grandmother and her sister loved each other, despite society, an overbearing husband, a secret and Central Park keeping them apart. Meanwhile, Abby and I have never seemed to love each other at all. There was no such thing as too far apart. For us, mere inches of separation could tell our story. That wasn't the great breakthrough, though. In fact, I wouldn't think about my relationship with Abby in any meaningful way until much later, after our parents died and it was just us. No, that day sticks in my mind because that day I considered someone

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else's feelings for the first time.

We never spoke about Vivian. Her family and ours never came to know one another. This wasn't a funeral reconciliation for a Lifetime television movie. There just wasn't anything between us to draw from—the ties that bound us had already been severed. The reconciliation needed to have happened when Vivian was alive. I bet that there was a hope that in their old age that they might sit together and tell stories, filling in the gaps of a half-century apart.

The very next year my grandmother died in her sleep at home. I think that she died of a sorrow so profound that her heart stopped beating.

I do wonder if they ever ran into each other casually. Maybe they eyed each other warmly, perhaps buying Guerlain from the perfume counter at Bergdorf Goodman—maybe in the 80s, once salespeople at Bergdorf's became accustomed to seeing a wealthy black woman like Grandma Evelyn. And as Vivian slowly shook her head and mouthed the word "no," I bet that Grandma Evelyn probably felt like a lodestone was dropped on her head.

I bet that, if you love your sister, then that probably has to feel like the most bittersweet moment in life.

I wouldn't know. ❖