

Quicksand

by Ma. Rosario Clarizza Limbo Catingan

For my eighteenth debut, I waltzed with men I have never encountered before; stared at their empty silhouettes with a smile on my face while I listened to their high-pitched birthday greetings. They seem to know me well, I'd even go as far as to say that they care for me— except, amongst those blank expressions, my eyes stray towards the crowd, hoping to find you there, sitting with a serene smile on your face. Your bellowing laughter crosses my memory, but instead of nostalgia, a prickling feeling washes over me. I can't seem to recall how it felt to be in your arms; how it felt when you would take my arm and pepper it with kisses. But I remember how you called that first month I was gone. I remember our little moments together in front of the television, watching wrestling shows and occasionally, old movies filled with slapstick comedy that I normally don't find funny but with you, I laughed freely. I remember the consolation after every scolding I got from my mother, the way you told me to stop my heaving and to wipe my tear-stained face. Your calloused fingers felt rough on my skin, but soft on my withering hope— and I remember the biscuits, the jeepney rides together, the pranks, the soft whisper of your fears and your never-dwindling encouragement.

And I see all of what you have done for me.

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When I was seventeen, my grandfather died. It came as a shock to me, knowing the strongest pillar of my support system was no longer around is extremely hard to accept. When you grieve, life stops for a moment. Grief takes a hold of you in a chokehold— it's leftover love that's misplaced, lingering aimlessly inside the expanse of your universe. The feeling of being unable to move on while everyone else advances is difficult; how come someone's death only affects a number of people? Why doesn't their world stop? Why do I have to carry the weight of his absence by myself?

I was helpless, demotivated and everything felt heavy.

"Ayes, do you want to eat?" my mother asked me on the morning of his funeral.

I took my eyes off my phone and I stared at my mother's face. Her eyes held a weight I had never seen before— she wasn't wearing any makeup, for a change. Who knew funerals could strip people off of self-expression?

"Yeah, I guess so," I replied dismissively. My appetite was little to none. How could I eat when the person who cooked my favorite meals was already gone?

I dragged my heavy legs towards the dining table; all of my relatives were spread out and doing their own thing, the one thing they all had in common was that they were all chatting merrily and going about their chores like it was a normal day. I despised it. My entire being was suspended in time, yet other people are already moving on? How unfair was that?

"Here, it's your favorite, Adobo"

My mother placed the plate full of my best-loved viand— the waft of the pork engulfed in a special blend of spices and simmered soy sauce forced itself through my senses. The sour notes made its way to my nose, bringing me back to when I would wake up to the smell of Adobo being cooked in the kitchen when I was younger. The thought of having it as my first meal of the day never failed to make me jump out of bed, stomach gurgling so loudly it would make my grandfather bellow with laughter as he mixed his magical concoction.

I sat still as my memories came flooding in; ever since I arrived at my grandfather's funeral I haven't been able to cry. It felt like I was clogged up and there was no plug that released what needed to be expressed. But at that moment, staring at the brown sauce contrasting the white marble plate, the agony shot through my entire body bringing a heavy mass of other emotions with it.

I couldn't stop the sob that forced its way out of my mouth— my grief poured out in a flood of uncontrollable tears. I could hear nothing but the sounds of my wailing, gut-wrenching even to my own ears. I felt my mother's warm arms enclose around my disheveled body.

"It's going to be okay soon. I promise."

I knew her promises were empty. Pain from losing someone never goes away, you just get used to the feeling of being in misery until your body decides to numb itself from the onslaught of hurt.

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It has been four years since my grandfather passed away. Life moves on while I hang around, watching people pass me by in a blur. In my highschool graduation ceremony, I plastered a smile on my face as my mother's makeup-filled face squished her cheek against mine for a photo. Yes, I was happy but my eyes would wander into the crowd of graduates, yearning for a familiar silhouette whose hands carried the scent of soy sauce.

I have since learned that in the process of losing someone, they take a piece of you with them. The memories attack you like an unprecedented curse, uncontrollable and they remain an incessant pulsing at the back of your head. More often than not, choices get corrupted by what death left behind— the what ifs, what could have beens, the maybes. Time and grief come together like quicksand, a slow process of being eaten up by forces stronger than you.

But I have also realized over time that grief is proof that you were loved and you have loved. It symbolizes the cycle of the human condition: we carry the lessons we've learned from those who have passed, and we use it as a driving force to carry on. It turns the pain of losing someone into something that makes us more human— more vulnerable.