

Marlboro Mirrors

Nick has pockmarks on his stomach, dark circles of tissue, scars from his childhood. He's never told me how he got them, and I've never asked. It's not my place to wonder about those things. Sometimes, when we're curled together in bed, he lets me run my fingers over them. He gets really quiet when I do it, but it makes me feel closer to him. I don't want him to think I don't see them, that I don't know about them, because I love him, and they don't change that.

Sometimes, he won't let me touch them. That's okay too. I know they can't be from something he likes to remember, so some nights, when we make love, he keeps his shirt on, or he lies on his stomach so that I can't see them or access them. I don't like it, and he knows it, and it's really only because he is so *beautiful*, with his skin all one color, like his body is wrapped in soft creamy ribbons, that I really don't like not having being able to touch him, or getting to see him go all flushed and gorgeous as he clings to me.

But those times don't come often, and we spend our days and nights together, and he smiles more than he doesn't, and when I'm sitting up reading, he'll lie with his head against my knee watching late-night cartoons and let me stroke his hair. He doesn't live with me, but he might as well because he has a key to my apartment and he often spends the night. His shampoo and body wash have found a place next to mine in my shower, and half of my closet is filled with his clothes. I don't mind any of those things. They're things I've always hoped for our relationship, and I'm happiest when he's around.

We're spooned together in my bed, and I'm pressing kisses to his shoulder, and he's giggling and pressing back against me, when his phone starts ringing. I look over at the clock. "It's almost midnight. Who's calling now?"

He reaches over for the phone, takes a deep breath when he sees that screen reads *Aunt Millie* and flips it open. "Hi. What's going on?" A long pause, too long for any normal conversation. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm still here." He sniffs slightly, and I can't tell if he's crying or trying to keep his breathing even; either way, it's not a comforting sound. "Okay. I'll be on a plane tomorrow. Yeah. Alright, I'll let you to know. Okay, bye."

I kiss his shoulder, rub his arm lightly. "You're going home tomorrow? Did something happen?"

"Yeah, my mom died." He says it with an ease that makes it hard to comprehend for a moment, and then he's out of the bed and pulling on boxers so he can go to the computer to buy a plane ticket.

I sit up, watching him as he sits at my desk, his legs folded on the chair, laptop balanced on his knees. His face is full of calm; I don't ask him if he's okay, because I know he'll lie to me anyway. "May I come with you?"

He looks up at me with a smile that makes me feel like everything's crashing and doesn't speak. A few moments later, when he shimmies out of his boxers and climbs back into bed, he kisses my cheek and says, "The flight's at nine-thirty, so we'd better go to sleep so we can get up early and pack and go."

I turn off the light and slide down under the blankets. I pretend I don't feel his tears against my neck because I know he prefers it that way. Once he's asleep, I wipe them away.

He doesn't talk much about his mother. I know his parents are divorced, and he's lived with his dad since he was eight. Last winter, after we had a snowball fight on our way back to the apartment from class, we sat in the snow, and he told me about the time that he built a snow fort with his mom. The smile on his face that day was different than any other I've seen, and then he asked if we could go home, and he wouldn't speak again for a long time.

We boarded the plane fifteen minutes ago. He gave me the window seat, and he's asleep against my shoulder, his arm slipped through mine. It's not a long flight, only an hour, but it would have taken almost six hours to drive. He's been quiet and jittery since we woke, and I'm not surprised. I wasn't surprised when he joined me in the shower and just kept me pressed against the wall for a while, kissing slowly. It's something comfortable and familiar for him, being close to me, and I'll do anything I can right now to keep him happy. He wakes to the sound of the pilot announcing the plane's landing but I don't try to speak to him, allowing him time to rub at his eyes and yawn and remember where we are and why we're there, and I know he has when he tugs at my shirt and draws me down to press our mouths together.

Our plane tickets to take us home are for two days from now. The funeral is tomorrow. The calm with which his family is handling the affair leads me to believe that it isn't a surprise. His relatives seem surprised to see me, but when they notice the way Nick clings to me, they don't comment on it. Maybe it's for the best.

Nick looks good in black. I sit on the bed in his old room, watching him as he stands in front of a full-length mirror and his aunt pins his suit in the right places so that she can tailor it tonight. She comments that he's lost weight. He doesn't say anything in response. He just stares at his reflection, and I don't like that I can't read his eyes.

Tonight, he lies in bed with his shirt on and doesn't answer the questions I ask him about how he feels or the comments I make about liking his family, particularly his little cousins. My voice changes when I beg him not to shut me out. He just rolls over onto his side, and I spend the night staring at his back.

Nick was asked to write a eulogy, and he declined. For the sake of appearances, he steps to the podium for a reading from the Bible, and I can't help but think about how beautiful he looks, his jaw too strong and eyes too proud to show sadness. The photo of his mother framed and on its stand beside him is so beautiful; it holds that same clandestine smile Nick often has, like they're sharing a secret with you. I don't know if he would take it as a compliment that he looks like her.

When he comes back down the stairs from the altar and sits beside me, his fingers lace with mine, and he presses his lips to my neck and leans his head on my shoulder. I feel a little better because even when he drifts away from me, he has ways of drifting back. He leaves me again to bear the coffin, and there's something about his shoulders that makes me feel like he'll be carrying it long after it's in the ground.

Nick keeps wiping at his hands, trying to get the dirt off of them, but he's only making it worse. Some kind family friend offers him a wet wipe from her purse, whispering an explanation that she has messy little ones, and I smile gratefully at her and gently cleanse his fingers and palms. He barely seems to notice. His eyes don't leave the coffin as it's lowered into the ground.

The grievers slowly start to drift away, but Nick remains standing there, staring at the pile of soil that makes up his mother's grave. He leans into my side when I put my arm around his shoulders and then he's crying, and it's the first time he's ever openly cried in front of me, and I don't know what to do except to hold him as he clings to me, sobbing against my neck. "There shouldn't be so much sun today." He tells me, and I agree and lead him to the car.

That night, he sits with his legs folded on the corner of the bed, staring at himself in that same full-length mirror. Something like a smile brightens his face when I sit down behind him and press a kiss to the side of his neck. "I look like my mom." He says quietly. "You were thinking that, weren't you? When you saw the picture?" I nod. I don't speak because he hasn't spoken much in the last couple days, and I don't want to ruin it. "She's been sick for a long time." He picks at his fingernails. "I mean, the cancer has been in the past couple years, but mentally, she's been sick for a long time, since I was little. They took me away from her, sent me to live with my dad." He lifts his arms above his head and tugs at the back of his shirt, pulling it over his head and dropping it to the floor beside the bed. He leans back against me, takes my hand and lets them rest over his scars. "When I was about six, when I still lived with her, she would tuck me in at night, tell me a story, ask me if I brushed my teeth, like all moms do,

you know? She smoked a lot, and she would always have a Marlboro in her hand, and one night, she pulled my shirt up and just started..." He shrugs, and I can piece it together. I hold him close. "She said, 'You need to know what it's like to feel pain.' And I just cried and cried, and then she left."

I pull him into my lap, drag his eyes from the mirror by kissing him. "That's awful." I say softly. I don't know what else I can say. I don't know what else is appropriate.

He just shrugs, and I know that my answer is adequate because he tucks his head in against my shoulder and continues talking while I run my fingertips over his scars, like it'll make them go away. "It took them a couple years to realize that she wasn't taking care of me. She never hurt me directly again, but... I could go weeks without a proper meal or end up at school in a long-sleeved t-shirt in December because she neglected to buy me a winter coat. I was lucky that I was able to go live with my dad. But sometimes, I look in the mirror, and I know I look like her, and I wonder if it's because she's my mother or if it's because... she made me feel pain like the pain she felt. I wonder if that one night, that pain, made me who I am."

I kiss his cheek and comb my fingers through his hair, and I know by the little sigh he lets out that he's closed his eyes. I appreciate the calm with which he's speaking, the fact that his voice isn't dead like it has been, and I know things are getting better. "You do look like your mother." I comment quietly. "But your mother didn't look like you." His eyelashes flutter against my neck. "You've still got joy in your face, and that's the difference. She let her pain override the joys of her life. You can still see them."

He doesn't say anything in response, and I feel his hand curl against my chest, which comforts me because it's something he does when he's looking for something of me to hold onto.

He sleeps curled up against me, with his cheek pressed to my chest and his lips parted slightly, and I know he's not done crying; he can't be. But we go home tomorrow, and from there, things will look brighter, and the pain will fade with time and maybe he'll let me kiss the scars.