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## A Piece from My Room

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First place winner

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## A Piece from My Room

It's really all just a collection of memories. Our lives that is. Like dusty trinkets toppled in cobwebs, all with a specific place upon shelves in a single windowed room. The only light creeping in through the paned glass, filtered through snow showers of silvery dust. Covering the uneven shelves are little cowboys and replicas of landmarks; all miniaturized and preciously frozen in time. Dark outlines in the peacefully, dust filled woodwork show places where forgotten, or discarded, memories had lived. This room is only visited on long nights and gray days when you hoped to absorb some of the beauty and wisdom filled air, but nothing can be fully taken from this room. It's strange, to accept the idea that our entire existences are all just sitting in our rooms. No locks on the door or window. Only a wooden room filled with glass menagerie strewn all around it.

There's a section in my room of shelving that is particularly shadowed. We all have it. The dark corner you choose not to notice while visiting. Yet pieces of that deep, night covered corner always seem to find a way to taint the other fragments in the room. Dark shadows reflecting off of the shiny new surfaces of other memories that have been gently placed about.

My lonely corner would contain an I.V. needle, a single pill, and sorrow. Sorrow in whichever form it decided to take that day; sorrow hovering over the gloomy corner, slowly eating away any light. Deep scarlet, juxtaposed against the sickly ivory white of a failing body, and the gray of

despairing eyes and weeping hearts are the only colors allowed in that region. Those are the colors of three years of my life. They illustrate the backdrop of my transition from a childhood cut short, to the unwelcoming reality of the full consciousness of adulthood.

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As the sun illuminated the glowing whitewashed walls of my room I rolled over. The intoxicating smell of death covered in artificially sterile fumes infiltrated my lungs. Trying to cough out the smell, I shifted again. The weather of that day did little except provide some source of irony. The brightly lit sky didn't allude much to me about what the future would hold. Other than the automated vocals of my I.V. pump chiming every minute, my room was completely motionless and noiseless. My arm was throbbing from the I.V. needle; I tried not to look over at the vein in which the needle disappeared. I swallowed down new waves of nausea.

I often get caught up in the symbolism of life. And the weather really did do little for my literary purposes that day. That's fair though; just because it was a rather gloomy day for me, doesn't mean that it needed to be for the rest of the world. My sorrow from that day should not have been inflicted upon the rest of the greater Milwaukee area.

The face of the Brewers' sign was glinting white and blue at me from over the tops of buildings. It was the only sightseeing I was allowed; otherwise I was kept hostage in the children's hospital. I raised my bed using the remote. Softly rumbling, it caused both my parents to rise as well. The two of them obviously drowsy; they looked as if I had awakened them out of reality and into a nightmare. Faltering smiles dashed

across their faces, smiles just for my benefit. All they seemed to do anymore was think of me.

“Good morning sweetie. How are you feeling?” My mother mumbled, sitting upright her obvious need of a shower was written all over her muddled hair dark sunken in under eyes.

“Fine,” I quietly responded. A lie, but it was already hard enough that I was the reason they were stuck there in that hospital room. Hospital room. One of the most solemn combination of words that our language owns. A room where people go when they are dying. Dying and are either trying to get better, or to just die more quickly. Those are the only two options here. Loved ones are reduced to scuttling remains of themselves, exhausted with worry and incoherent from a lack of sleep. Feeble attempts to ensure the comfort of the occupant of the room usually seem to boost their morale. Some. But it’s never enough.

The morning rolled on as slowly as pills roll down your clenched throat. Pounds of antibiotics and fluids were pumped into me each waking moment; all with the hopes of keeping my body working for a few moments longer. I was not greeting death at the door, but he was at least outside, pounding to get in. I had a fever of 103, unbroken, headaches with such a strong grip I could not stay awake for more than a few hours, and inflamed organs that made the thought of food as undesirable as the thought of the needle stuck in my arm.

Stretching out and pointing my feet I prepared to face another day of clueless doctors making rounds to tell me everything that I already knew. A horrible ache had spread throughout my lower back as I slept through the night. An ache so deep and

cultivating in despondency it was almost unbearable. It was a result from my bone marrow biopsy. The pain was another constant reminder of how helpless I was to improve my condition. It felt like choruses of tribal beats were pounding deep into the center of my calcified woodwork, slowly rumbling and shaking my innards to the core.

Light conversation about finding some means of food jumped back and forth between my parents. Their talking fluttered around like lost monarchs in the fall, unsure and unsteady of where to go next. It had no real purpose, other than to just fill the empty space between them. The large gaping chasm that was abrasively apparent due to the lack of my body's ability to function how it was designed. I looked down, almost ashamed, as my morning meal arrived via a smiling assistant. Knowing I would not be able to even make a dent in the seemingly endless mounds of overly fragrant food before me, I tried to smile back. As the lid on the platter of the main dish was pulled off, all the trapped food-scented particles were released and fluttered around my face. Disgusted, I attempted to not breathe in the poisonous scent so maybe, just maybe, I could eat that morning, but my attempts were futile. My stomach had already made up its mind. I was done. No breakfast for me.

I rested my relentlessly throbbing head on the pillow behind me. No one had the energy to reprimand me for pushing my food aside. You can't scold a child in the hospital. Humans have these strange unspoken and unacknowledged rules that we all have to follow, especially the ones that are rooted in pity. For a long time that was the only emotion that people seemed capable of expressing toward me. After the diagnosis it all got worse.

I decided to keep my eyes closed that day. The sunlight only seemed to aggrandize my headache more, making it impossible to concentrate on the words of my parents, each one carefully planned and thought out. Attempting to listen to them gave me a hollow nostalgia. A desire, more like a need, to go back even just three weeks ago. Three weeks ago so I could look around and soak everything in again. Soak in all the smiles that had then turned vapid in my clouded memory, take in the smells now turned foul, and just listen to all laughs and words that I would never get to hear again. I realized, even at eleven years old, sitting in that hospital room, that life would never come to me the same, because whatever the illness was that was eating me alive, it was serious. I had gathered that much. No one would come right out and say it, except me. I realized, in the most melancholy of ways, that everything was shattered. All the tiny fragments of my life were just lying around me, waiting to be put back together again. Even if I were able to put all the splinters again into one piece, the cracks would still be present.

The diagnosis came like a downpour in January. It was frightfully unexpected and straight out drenching in shock. No amount of weather forecasts or professional warnings could have prepared any of us for it. As the rain met the snow, it casted steam and fog all about us, there was nothing I could do but sit and stare as that freak of nature was playing out before me.

As soon as my doctor walked in that morning, I knew it wasn't going to be a good day. Muting the TV, like usual protocol, we all turned to him. His face was the epitome

of regret and mournfulness. On some deeper level I knew. I didn't know which exact type or how serious, but as soon as I saw into the depths of his tearful eyes, I knew. It's hard bearing the burden of knowledge. I no longer wished to go as far back as three weeks, but merely just three minutes. That was all I asked for. Three more minutes of solid, steady breathing. Three more minutes free of tears. Three more minutes of beautiful, wonderful ignorance.

He was hardly able to ask my parents to go out into the hall with him. They numbly followed, my mother already crying. Walking out hand in hand, they all of a sudden looked so young. They looked like two kids unknowingly diving straight into their worst nightmare. Straddling the line between reality and the idea of "things that don't happen to us", they finally crossed over from just parents to the parents of a child with cancer.

As the door closed behind the three of them, time stretched and slowed. Each breath lasted a minute, and each minute lasted an hour. Left completely to my own devices, I panicked. I was not five; I knew perfectly well what he was telling my parents. That I might die. That I would have to fight to keep air in my lungs and my soul intact. He was telling them that I would have to battle harder than any child should ever have to for their life.

Each heartbeat of the clock echoed in my head, bouncing off of all my hurried and feverish thoughts. My breathing became louder than all; the only sound beating it out was my heart. Rapidly repeating itself over and over like a snare. Loud and metallic.

Once they reemerged, my mother's face was blotchy and red like a stained, white tablecloth. My father couldn't even look at me. The doctor ushered himself over and

slowly bent down to face me. None of them could fully look me in the eye; it was as if I had done something to shame them.

“Miranda?” he shakily addressed me. I had nothing to say back, so I just stared. “I ... I have some bad news for you. You, you have...” And you all know the rest. I don’t remember much of what he said after. Everyone’s voices and sobs just turned into an insistent buzzing, as if a fading fluorescent light had been placed in my head. My dad read and my mom cried.

There is not much else to say about that day, except, the girl. Forced to escape from my room and go on a walk, I chose to go alone that day. Trailing my only friend in the world along behind me, beeping the entire way, I walked down the hall and back. On my way back there was a girl, also walking along with her I.V. pump. She was a bit shorter than I was and bloated from some concoction of toxic medicines, given in hopes of curing her. Patches of dark hair were missing from the top of her head, making it look like poorly patched quilt work. Slightly hunched, as if in pain, she trotted along with multiple tubes feeding into her. Yet, despite her disheveled state there was a smile plastered upon her face, but not by force. It seemed as if the neon orange liquid infiltrating her veins had put her on a euphoric high. She was bursting from the seams from absorbing all the happiness of that day, but there was still an element of brokenness to her. Her smile didn’t reach as far as it could have, and her eyes still carried ghosts of past horrors. She was doing the best she could. Like we all were in that place.

Later I was told that she was receiving her last treatment that day. Not yet even having had my own first taste of chemo, I was bitter. I folded my arms in resistance to her happiness and survival; I hated her. I thought it was cruel of God to have dangled her

in front me, to show me what I would be reduced to at the end of my struggle. It stung so badly because He was also giving me a slap of spitefulness by taunting me with someone who was at the end of the longest journey while I was just starting mine. I wanted nothing to do with that girl; I don't even know her name, but today I'd like to thank her.

Often during my treatment I would look back on her. Her image soon turned from a reminder of hate to one of hope. She showed me what a real soldier looked like, what a true warrior was supposed to be. After being brainwashed with pictures of shiny bald perfection and hopeful, never ending smiles, I felt that I was fighting cancer wrong. I never looked beautiful, but neither did she. She showed me that it was all right to look like shit once in a while. Your hair is going to be patchy, your posture wretched, and your smiles broken. Just by being there that day she told me it was all right to be upset. It was all right to be so terribly angry, just as long as you were still able to find a smile.