

Christopher Malo

*Snow*

“There are three things I will never be able to forgive myself for,” he said, stretched out on the cliché couch in Dr. Eglet’s office. “I can’t remember his voice, I didn’t hug him at the wake, and I didn’t go to the funeral.” After years of therapy, he had been able to whittle it down to these three things as the source of his self-loathing misery. This trio had fueled his destruction for years. While they may not have manifested in ways that were immediately perceptible, all his shrinks had noted they were at the core of his anti-social and self-destructive ways. Aka: his drug addiction.

Awareness alone had not changed anything. In fact, when he spoke of these three things, there was a disconnect between the words and acts. Years of court mandated therapy had trained him to earn points by correctly identifying what haunted him. Then he'd play victim by not being able to “take ownership” of the resentments. The victim role really just allowed him not to take responsibility for his decisions.

“Interesting observation,” Dr. Eglet said. As the good doctor began his psycho-babble, his adversary looked around the room. He tried to appear as if he was taking the psychiatrist’s words in, but in reality, he was distracting himself from thinking about the two grams of coke in his pocket as he looked at the academic degrees in their frames, bookcases filled with books and journals set against the bland beige walls, and the lamp in the corner giving off a soft light. The man with all the letters after his name finally got his attention when he heard him say, “I’m sorry, but that’s all the time we have today,” as he extended his index finger and pushed his glasses up the incline of his nose. “We can pick this up again next week.” Perfect. Whatever.

The car raced through the traffic almost as fast as his heart pumped blood through his body. After sitting in the parking lot of Eglet's office and doing more lines than he'd originally planned on, he navigated toward his mother's house for dinner. He hadn't heard anything Dr. Eglet had said, but instead was stuck on the things he had said. The voice. The hug. The funeral. What the courts never seemed to get was that while they thought sending him to a doctor to talk about things would help, it really only hurt. Instead of burying that shit, it brought it to the surface. And when it came to the top, all he could think of doing was burying it again under a mountain of snow.

Dinner at his mother's was a weekly routine. He loved his mother and sister, but dinner was also part of a game they played called "denial charades." Each acted a part out, with no acknowledgment or talk about the things really going on in their family.

"How did your test go?" his mom asked his sister, each in their assigned seat and assigned role around the table.

"Fine, I guess," Gabby responded. At 15, she had slept with a dozen boys and caught the clap. Twice.

"I can't believe it was eleven years since dad died on Tuesday," their mother said. "Can you pass the mashed potatoes?" This was her unsuccessful attempt at talking about "things." Pretending to be talking about something, but in reality, not saying anything. He learned his detachment techniques from her. They were probably passed down in the genes.

"Crazy," was all he could muster. The date was forever seared in his brain. September 25th. Even though each year, he was aware of the day as it approached, he didn't do anything to memorialize the anniversary. It just was what it was.

“Today would have been the funeral,” his mom added. This one stung and caught him off guard. The statement wasn’t meant to land anywhere in particular, but managed to find its mark in whatever fissure Dr. Eglet had managed to open up a few hours earlier. He pushed the food around his plate with his fork. Cocaine killed his appetite anyway, but now he retreated into places in his head he rarely visited.

“I wish I could remember more about dad,” Gabby chimed in. Where he secretly harbored the root of his evils, Gabby had always been vocal. By all accounts, the result was the same. She searched for her dad in neighborhood boys’ pants. He looked for his father at the bottom of empty bags. No one would expect his sister to remember much. She’d been so young when he was alive, and died.

“I’m sorry, Gabs,” their mother said, stopping to make eye contact with her. “It was such a difficult time. Between dad dying and the preparations to the funeral... I remember all I wanted to do was get through the day. When the three of us were in the limousine on the way back, I remember wondering what life was going to be like. What-”

“Mom, I didn’t go to the funeral,” he said correcting her. From the distant place his mother was traveling in her head, she came back and now fixed her gaze on her son.

“Of course you did, honey,” she said, slightly cocking her head in mild confusion. “What makes you think you didn’t go?”

“I remember telling you I didn’t want to go. And that you said that was ok. I went to Rob’s house that morning instead.” A hint of panic began to set in. The framework for a decade of beliefs, definitions and actions were suddenly under scrutiny. “Remember?”

“You went over to the Burns’ the day after daddy died. But you went to the funeral. You don’t remember sitting on Uncle Dave’s lap?”

More shifting. The foundation was starting to crack.

“Remember how on the way to the cemetery you talked about how it was your first time in a limo?”

Words were failing him. The best he could manage was to let a barely imperceptible, “No” escape his lips. Gabby had stopped eating and watched the exchange silently.

“We rode over together. Uncle Dave and Aunt Eileen picked us up here, we went to the funeral home, then you, me and Gabriel rode to the cemetery.”

“You’re wrong, ma,” he whispered. Despite the chemical stimulant coursing through his body, he was being sapped of strength.

“When was the first time you remember being in a limo?” she said, challenging him. He thought about it. Immediately he dismissed any time post-high school. He’d been in one for prom, but that was obviously much later. And there was no recollection of excitement that night for being in a limousine for the first time. His brain sifted, uncovered, blew dust off memories he hadn’t thought of in years. And somewhere in there, he saw what looked like the corner of a photo, obscured by whatever was resting on top. He pushed those things to the side, pinched the corner of that picture, and slowly loosened it from the pile. What he saw shocked him.

It was his mother, eleven years earlier. Looking prettier. Younger. A hairstyle no longer in fashion. Dressed in black. His sister, cute. Innocent. A velvet dress, white stockings and patent leather shoes. Him, dressed in a suit. Awkward. Lost. Dated glasses obscuring the sadness in his eyes. They were standing in front of a limo.

Without his permission, a wave of memories begun to envelope him. What started at ankle level was quickly rising. Uncle Dave and Aunt Eileen showing up at the house. Uncle

Dave taking him in the bedroom and telling him he was the man of the house now. That idea confusing him as a ten year old. The ride to the funeral home in the back of their car. With the water at chest level, the recollection of family members at the funeral home. People trying to dote on him, and feeling painfully awkward, not knowing the protocol for these situations. There must have been some signal, because everyone started to go to their cars. The water passed above his mouth, as he remembers climbing in the long, black, shiny car. He had never been in a car so spacious. When the water level rises above his nose, he was no longer able to breathe as the memory of sitting on his uncle's lap, with his sobbing mother to his right and Gabby in her lap, drowned him.

Like the bleachers facing a pool, rows of chairs filled with spectators focused everyone in the same direction, looking at the deep cherry colored box with ornate brass handles that served as a vessel for his father's dead body. It was impossible to deny anymore. Staring transfixed at the casket, the priest trying to justify everyone's pain. And he remembered, as they sat there, it started to-

“Snow. Don't you remember how it started to snow?” his mother asked. “It was so strange for October.”

He stood from the table, looking straight ahead, and slid his hand into his pocket. When he felt the comfort of the corner of the pinched off baggie, what was left and what remained, he walked out of the house without saying a word.