

Snow in Summer
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Category: Fiction

The faux tile floor squeaked under the tip of his sneakers as he swung his leg back and forth. She should've been here by now. He adjusted in his worn, padded chair and shifted his gaze from the pale gray door to the sleeping woman on the bed next to him. Tubing emerged out of her body like parasites.

"Ok, food's here," the nurse's wide, smiling face finally appeared at the door as she carefully balanced two different trays. "We got some mashed potatoes and toast for the lady and some mac and cheese for the gentleman."

"Thanks, Tasha," he returned her smile wearily. "You didn't have to get me anything, though."

"Hey, you're a growing young man, and I know how you boys like to eat," Tasha winked at him. "Do you need any help, hun?"

"No, I got it, but thanks," He received the trays from her, balancing one on his lap while he set the other on the sleeping woman's side table.

"Alright, but you let me know if you need anything," Tasha began to walk out before stopping in the doorway. "You keep your chin up, ok, hun?"

Normally, her broad, catchy smile would've tickled him to the depths, but lately all he could do was force a grin and nod. When her blue scrubs disappeared around the corner, he turned to the tray on the table and pried off the covers. Placing a tender hand on the sleeping woman's bony arm, he leaned close to her ear.

"Mama? It's Toto. Mama, wake up. It's time to eat."

He waited a few seconds before he gave her a gentle shake, to which she slowly opened her eyes. "Is the food here?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Yes, ma'am," He spooned some mashed potatoes up and held them to her chapped, quivering lips. "That's it..." He gently pressed the food into her mouth.

She swallowed hard. "How long was I asleep?"

"A couple of hours." Carefully, he brushed some stray hair away from her mouth before sliding the next spoonful between her lips.

"Toto," she choked a bit on the food. "Toto, did you take your test? Please tell me you took your test, Toto." Grasping his arm, she began lifting herself.

"Shhh, Mama, shhh," He cradled her head as he laid her back down. "Don't worry about it. I took my test."

A visible peace flooded every premature wrinkle in her face. "That's good, baby. That's good. You're gonna be a great doctor someday." She allowed him to place a small piece of toast in her mouth.

A soft tap brought their attention back to the door.

"Hey, Toto. Hey Mrs. G," He was a tall young man with thick eyebrows and wavy hair that pulled back from his tan skin and handsome face. From his hand hung a white plastic bag stretched to its limit by several food containers.

"Diego," It was the closest thing to an exclamation Mama had made for days. "How nice to see you."

"Thanks, Mrs. G," As Diego walked over to the bed, he met Toto's eyes. Diego blushed and his eyes darted away as he let out a nervous laugh. "Um, I brought you Olive Garden. I know how much you like it."

"Really?" For the second time, Mama's voice rose to an exclamation. She reached out trembling hands toward the bag, but Diego placed it softly in her lap. He knelt beside her,

opposite of Toto. "There's some of their good lasagna and those little donuts you like with the berry dip."

"Here Mama, let me help you with that," Toto began to pull away the plastic bag from the carryout boxes.

"No," she made a valiant effort to jerk away from him. "No, someone will help me. Go hang out with your friend."

"Mama, I can't do that. You need me." Toto tried to ignore Diego's pleading look from the other side of the bed.

"No," Before he could stop her, Mama had pressed one of her wiry fingers into the call button for the nurse. "Go."

With a sigh, Toto rose from the chair and began walking out. Diego followed him, allowing him to go first through the door.

They walked together in silence through the hospital halls. Each room had a different TV show playing. It was almost like flipping through the channels.

They seemingly both knew where they were going because they somehow ended up sitting on a wooden bench in the garden. The hospital rose up impressively all around them and a glorious fountain splashed in front of them. To the left was a bronze statue of Christ holding a girl with a bandaged leg.

"You—you didn't have to do that," Toto gazed down at his foot.

"It was nothing. I was going past Olive Garden anyway," Diego attempted a chuckle. "Um, I got you this too. I know you like them." He held out a pack of Starburst, his face reddening as he braved a shy smile.

Toto took it. "It's been months since I've had these, I think," he said.

"I kinda figured. You, uh...you deserve something special," Diego stammered. "I mean, for all the stuff you've had to do and all."

"It's nothing. She's my mother. Anybody else would do the same," Toto shrugged.

"We missed you at the test today," Diego said quietly.

"I was needed here," Toto's answer was curt.

There was a heart-thumping silence.

"So is this the way you're going to talk to me now?" Diego looked down at the ground. "I'm only trying to help you, Toto."

"I'm not...no...It's just...Look, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to be rude. It's just been tough," Toto felt a strong pang in his chest when he looked at Diego's downcast face.

"It's ok. I understand. So..." Diego hesitated. "How is she doing?"

Toto inhaled deeply. "She's fighting." Something caught in his voice. "The doctors say it won't be long now."

Slowly, almost painfully, Diego inched his hand closer to Toto's and laid his fingers on top. "I'm sorry, Toto. I know this must be hard."

"Don't!" Toto suddenly jerked his hand away and jumped up. "You don't understand."

"But I want to!" For the first time since he arrived, Diego raised his voice. "I want to understand. Why won't you let me?"

Frigid, icy tears began to spill out of Toto's eyes. He batted them away as the wind chilled them against his cheek. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me. Just give me a chance. That's all I'm asking."

"It—hurts—too much," Toto was suddenly aware of his sobbing. "Diego, I..." He felt his soul buckle underneath him. He looked up and Diego gently held out his arms.

For the first time in months he felt safe. Held in those strong, tender arms, Toto felt his whole body relax. He could feel Diego rubbing the back of his neck and his shoulders as the weight of the last year came out in strangling hiccups and bitter tears.

“Toto,” Diego slowly pulled him away and lifted his chin. Their eyes met, and Toto felt pierced by those wide brown eyes staring back into his. “Toto, I care so much about you. Let me help you.”

Toto bit his quivering lip. He had never felt so much struggle in his heart. “I can’t,” he managed to croak. The tears began to slide down his face again.

“Why?” Diego looked like he’d been stabbed in the heart.

“Because,” Toto pulled away from the other man’s hug. “Because of Him.”

Diego followed Toto’s gaze to the bronze statue just a few feet away. “Jesus?” he said.

Toto nodded. “It’s not right. I can’t love you like that. As much as I want to, I can’t.”

Diego took his arm. “You really don’t think He wants you to be in this much pain, do you?”

Toto started to speak, but the words didn’t come out.

“He’s love, isn’t he?” Diego looked back and forth between the statue and Toto.

“Wouldn’t He want you to be happy? Come on, you don’t think you can change this about yourself, do you?”

“Stop,” Toto shook his head. “I don’t know what I think. But I do know that Mama is dying. That woman gave up everything for me. She stuck by me even after my father left. So I gotta see her again. And if that means that I can’t—be with you, or anyone...then so be it.”

“Toto, no. Anyone who would keep you from seeing your Mama just for finding love...”

“Diego, no.”

“Look at Him!” Diego jabbed his finger toward the statue. “Look at the way He looks at her! Is that the face of a man who wants anything but happiness for her? Is that the face of a man who would keep her out of heaven and from her parents because she grew up to be different?”

“I can’t risk it.”

Diego brushed his sleeve across his face. He plopped down on the wooden bench. “So what are you gonna do? Who’s going to be there for you when she’s gone? Who are you going to have Thanksgiving and Christmas with?”

“I got a few relatives in Vermont. I’m sure I can go up there.”

“They’re a couple of old aunts and uncles. You told me yourself,” Diego’s nostrils flared with passion. “You need someone to be there for you when they’re gone. You deserve that! You deserve someone to come home to and cry to...” he swallowed. “Even...even if it’s not me.”

The silence that followed was only broken by the two o’clock strike of the nearby church tower.

“I should go,” Toto whispered. He turned and began to walk away before stopping dead in his tracks. “You should probably forget about me.”

“Never,” Diego replied quickly. “I can at least be your friend.”

Toto did not reply. He walked silently through the sliding glass doors, past frail, bald women in wheelchairs and men dragging along their oxygen tanks. The odor of cleaner was pungent, even inside the elevator that he took.

When he arrived at the room, Tasha was wiping off Mama’s face. “All done, Mary,” the nurse said. She gathered the tray and dishes and began to exit. As she passed by Toto, she said, “Who was that nice-looking young man?”

“Just someone I go to college with,” Toto brushed it away.

“Well, he’s cute, hun,” she laughed. “If he asks, give him my number.”

Toto forced a chuckle. “I guess so.” As Tasha left, Toto sat down next to Mama again. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” she sighed. “But the food was good—” she couldn’t finish. She began hacking and coughing violently. Toto quickly reached for the call button, but she stopped him. She suppressed the coughs after a few seconds.

“I’m glad you’ll have Diego when I’m gone,” she said. “He’s a good friend. Those are about as rare as snow in summer.”

He felt his heart rip in two. “Mama, don’t talk like that...”

“Promise me something, Toto,” she said. She grabbed his arm and pulled him in.

Toto felt the pain rising in him, up from his stomach, into his heart, and all the way up into his eyes, where it threatened to spill.

“Promise me you won’t be alone. Promise me you’ll find yourself some nice girl to build your life with when I’m gone,” Mama rasped.

Toto looked into her sunken eyes. He leaned into her shoulder as the tears began once again.