**Assembling Our Pieces**

“Can I help you?” asked a cheery voice on the intercom when I pressed the button.

 “Hi, I’m here as a volunteer. Nolan Gray,” I replied.

 “Oh, hello Nolan. Please, come inside.” A click came from the doors and I proceeded to let myself in. I was greeted with an overwhelming whiff of old person smell. Suppressing a groan, I headed to the front desk to meet the intercom voice’s owner. She plastered an overly sweet smile on her face and said “Thank you for helping out with us here at the Florence May Retirement Home today! Your assistance is very much appreciated. Just sign in here and grab a wristband. Dolores will be out shortly to give you your assignment.”

“Ok, thanks,” I responded indifferently. I hadn’t come here willingly; my dad complained how I just sat around all summer and wanted me to get out of the house. After filling out the sign in sheet and strapping on a blue wristband, I took a seat.

 My phone vibrated and I checked the screen to find a text from my boyfriend Ike that read “Good luck volunteering! Try not to fall asleep.”

 A smile nearly spread across my face when a voice saying my name snapped me back to reality and my lips fell back into a poker face. I glanced up to see a middle-aged woman with black hair streaked with gray pulled back into a professional bun. This must be Dolores.

 “How are you today?” Dolores said, her voice bright but her face stern as she held out her hand.

 I shook it and answered habitually, “Ok, how are you?”

 “I am quite fine,” was her response. She then lead me to the main room of the retirement home where all the elderly were gathered. The place looked like something from the nineteen fifties, with blandly geometric couches and rounded wooden tables that screamed old fashioned. A pair of rocking chairs inhabited every corner. Old portraits of random people and objects were hung up around the walls, I guess to give the place more of a vibrant feel, though they didn’t really accomplish that.

 My eyes scanned over the elderly people scattered throughout the room. A group of old men playing what appeared to be poker sat closest to where we were. Fanning further outward, there were old ladies gossiping about whatever old people gossip about and sipping tea out of some needlessly fancy teacups. Everyone seemed to have a clique, almost like some sort of high school cafeteria. Dolores then pointed to one woman who sat alone at a table in the farthest corner, assembling some sort of jigsaw puzzle. She may as well have been on a deserted island surrounded by various cruise ships.

 “Over there is Meredith Covington. She’s one of the more, should we say, independent ones within our home. I would like you to work with her,” she told me.

 *Of course,* I thought, *of all the elderly people you could force me to hang around, you give me the recluse.* I looked at Dolores and she stared back with tight lips and raised eyebrows. I held in my sigh, nodded, and shuffled over to Meredith’s table.

 I sat down across from her, feeling the chair’s cushion sink beneath me. She didn’t acknowledge me in any way, but instead just continued doing her puzzle. I sat there in awkward silence, unsure of what to do, for I had expected her to at least give me a greeting. After about a minute of nothing happening, I cleared my throat. The lady moved only her eyes to peer at me over the top of her rectangular glasses. Now that I was closer, I could take in her features more easily. Her hair was as curly as a ginger’s and almost completely white. Her eyes nearly boring into my soul were brown, though they looked thoroughly faded. It’s very likely that they were much darker in her youth. Wrinkly skin was to be expected from an old woman, though hers was also surprisingly pale, as if she hadn’t been exposed to natural sunlight in years.

I shook myself from my thoughts and finally said “Hello, ma’am. My name is Nolan, and I’m a new volunteer here. What’s… What’s your name?” I could feel myself getting shakier with every word. I’m usually not afraid to start conversations, however talking to an old person was a lot different than talking to another teenager.

 “Meredith,” was all she said before resuming her puzzle. Another few, almost unbearably awkward moments of silence passed by again. I eyed her puzzle and, from what was completed, could see various types of flowers, the outlines of a little fragmentary cottage, and a stream running alongside it. It was a painting of some sort, and the art style seemed rather familiar to me.

 “I was assigned to work with you,” I told her dumbly in an attempt to get her to talk some more. Her only response was a single distracted nod.

 This woman was starting to tick me off. I didn’t even want to be here in the first place, and her unresponsiveness was making this job even more unbearable. I let out a sigh and searched my thoughts for something else to say. I found nothing, so I pulled out my phone instead. In my peripheral vision I could see Meredith eyeing my phone, though I couldn’t read her expression.

 Her eyes wandered back to her puzzle and she said “Instead of playing those pointless games on your cellphone like all the other volunteers that work with me, why don’t you work on my puzzle with me, Nolan was it?” I took another look at her puzzle, slightly more complete than before.

 “Why?” I asked.

 “I find it helps to pass the time much more efficiently, and you seem to be quite impatient.”

 I simply sat there, unsure how to respond to that. I felt like I should have been insulted, however I couldn’t deny that it was true. My phone buzzed with a low battery notification, giving me practically no option at this point. I let out a defeated sigh and picked up a random piece from the table. Meredith and I worked on the thing for a good couple of hours, in silence, all the way until the end of my shift.

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 I had been volunteering at this retirement home every weekday for a week now, and all I had done was jigsaw puzzles with Meredith. To be honest, I wasn’t very good at them, but I doubt anyone would have been compared to Meredith’s literal decades of experience. We didn’t talk much as we did them; there’d be the occasional question or statement here and there, but nothing too in depth.

 The constant silence as we worked on the puzzles was overwhelmingly awkward sometimes. Meredith constantly wore a completely blank expression, making it pretty much impossible to tell what she was thinking or feeling. I felt like she judged my every move, thinking less and less of me with every mistake I made. Since I knew my dad would just tell me to suck it up like he does whenever I ask him for social advice, I asked Ike what I should do to make my volunteer hours more bearable.

 “Well you mentioned that you find the puzzles’ art style familiar, right?” He asked.

 “Yeah, every puzzle she does seems to be by the same artist.”

 “Why don’t you ask her about those puzzles, then? She’s clearly passionate about them, and if you recognize them you might be able to relate to her.”

 I shrugged. “If you say so.”

 “Trust me, I was raised by my grandparents. I’m an old person expert.” He gave a thumbs up and an exaggerated smile, and I tried and failed to hold in my laugh.

 I ran the conversation over and over in my head as I walked over to Meredith’s table. Sure enough, the puzzle she was doing today had the usual art style it always did; light brush strokes, an emphasis on shading and light, homey realism. I waited a good twenty minutes or so before attempting my rehearsed conversation starter.

 “So, your puzzles all look the same,” I stated, immediately realizing that I messed up the wording. She gave me a quizzical look, and I stuttered as I added, “I-I mean, not that they’re all the same picture, or anything. Just, like, art-style wise, y-you know? Like, the art. Is the same, I mean.”

 Meredith seemed to suppress a giggle, which is perhaps the first sign of emotion I’ve ever seen from her. She nodded and replied “Yes, they are all by my favorite artist. Thomas Kinkade.”

 The name certainly rang a bell, and I ran it through my mind until all the pieces finally clicked. Thomas Kinkade, painter of light. We still had my mother’s old collection of his pieces up in our attic.

 “My mom loved Thomas Kinkade. She used to hang his paintings all throughout the house.”

 Meredith nodded once. “A woman with good taste.”

 She went right back to assembling her puzzle after that. I bit my lip and tapped my fingers on the table as I thought of anything else I could add to the closest thing we’ve had to a conversation. Nothing popped into my mind, so I gave up, lazily picked up a random puzzle piece, and halfheartedly tried to find where it fit.

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 “Nolan! Wake up!” My dad yelled from my room’s doorway the next morning. I groaned and rolled away from him, not at all ready to get up out of bed. I had been up all night reading *Call of the Wild,* one of my favorite books.

 When I refused to get up, Dad rushed over to my bed and yanked the covers off me. “Come on. You’re going to be late at this point.”

 “It’s not like I took this job willingly,” I grumbled, mostly to myself.

 “Excuse me?” Dad retorted.

 “Nothing! I’m getting up.”
 “Good. I’m off to work. Remember to lock the house when you leave. Have a good day, son.”

 “Yeah, yeah, you too.”

 My relationship with Dad was fairly complicated. When I was a toddler, we were super close. He’s the one who got me into reading, since he himself thinks reading is a really beneficial and fun activity, and he would take me out on adventures throughout the town almost daily. However, my mother died when I was around five, and ever since then we’ve become rather distant. That was mostly because he started having to work more in order to support us, since my mom was originally the one with a job and he the stay-at-home parent. We mostly still got along whenever we crossed paths, but we never interacted for very long. After he left, I got dressed, grabbed *Call of the Wild* in case I got a chance to finish it while at Florence May, and headed out on the fifteen minute walk to the retirement home.

I entered, signed in at the front desk, and walked over to Meredith, placing my book down on the table in front of me. She eyed the book as we worked on the puzzle, and after a few minutes stated, “An interesting book for someone your age to be reading.”

I hadn’t expected her to say anything to me, so she kind of caught me off guard. “Oh. Yeah. One of my favorites, *Call of the Wild.*”

She nodded and scrunched up her wrinkly old face curiously. After a few more moments, she asked, “Any other books you enjoy reading?”

I ran my favorite titles through my head, trying to pinpoint ones that an old lady like her might recognize. “Um… *Lord of the Flies*? That’s a good one. Oh, and *To Kill a Mockingbird,* I guess.”

“Hmm,” said Meredith, “You know, I have quite the collection of classic books myself.”

“Oh, do you?” I replied nonchalantly.

“Yes. I kept each one I gathered throughout my years.”

“Huh. That’s…pretty cool, actually.” I hesitated before adding, “What are your favorites?”

She pondered the question for a bit before answering, “I have an attachment to *Alice in Wonderland.*”

 “I see. I haven’t read that one.”

 “I own an original copy that I inherited from my grandmother.”

 My eyes widened at the mention of an original copy. I’ve always longed to collect as many original prints of classics as I could. “That’s insane. When was it printed, like 1880?”

 “1865,” Meredith stated with a slight smile. She hesitated before saying “I could lend you a copy of a book you wanted to read sometime.”

 “Really? You’d trust a clumsy teen with your antiques?”

 “They’re already pretty worn from their years. And besides, what’s the point of me owning them if they just sit on the shelves collecting dust?” she replied. A smile crept along my face.

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Since we first discussed our mutual appreciation of books, Meredith has loaned me two of her originals; *Alice in Wonderland* and *Dracula*. We would discuss the books as I read them during our puzzle-assembling time. The more we talked, the more Meredith would open up to me. She’s had a passion for jigsaws ever since her grandmother introduced her to them at the age of four. She’s done puzzles of up to five thousand pieces, and her favorite pictures to do are those of Thomas Kinkade’s paintings, because of his earthly use of colors that calm the viewer when they look upon his pieces. “Puzzles themselves help me to ease my stress and are also a nice way to pass the time,” she told me. Reading she also feels about in this way, and I agree with her.

 Today, as we were working on Thomas Kinkade’s *Nature’s Paradise,* I said to Meredith, “Why are you always separate from the other elders here? You never try to talk to them, and they never try to talk to you.” My question almost seemed to startle her a bit, for she paused working on the puzzle and her eyes widened ever so slightly.

She furrowed her brow, probably thinking it over, and after a minute turned to face me and said “You teenagers think that people grow out of their cliquey social phase after high school, but in truth nobody really does. I was the embodiment of that old cliché, where you’re picked last for team games in gym and sit alone in the library during lunch, all the way from elementary school to graduation. And even after graduation, I continued to be the social outcast at every social event. I never quite learned how to truly make friends.” Meredith let out a sigh. “But it’s not like I live in misery. I enjoy myself with my jigsaws and novels. I don’t need an army of friends in order to be happy.”

Her last statement especially got to me. Sure, you don’t need to be a popular jock to live a happy life, but not having a single friend at all? I couldn’t even imagine what kind of life that would be. I wasn’t sure of what to say or do. Do I console her? Do I reach out and give her a pat on the shoulder and say everything will work itself out? As I thought of what to do, my eyes scanned over the puzzle pieces, and I picked one up. I studied it carefully, then again looked throughout the puzzle. A little hole close to the center appeared to be the exact shape for it, and the colors of its surrounding pieces aligned with the piece’s pattern. I reached over and put the piece in its place, then looked up at Meredith, giving an awkward but still genuine smile.

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I enjoy doing puzzles with you,” I said. She smiled her brightest smile yet.

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“Nolan,” Meredith said out of the blue as we sorted through the pieces of Thomas Kinkade’s *Seaside Haven,* “Why exactly did you start volunteering at this rundown retirement community?”

 I answered, “My dad wanted me to get out of the house for the summer, and this place is within walking distance of my house.” She nodded.

 “It seems like an odd choice for a teenager,” she stated. I shrugged.

 “I didn’t want a place that would be too far a trek.”

 “Do you not have a license?”

 “I do, but money is tight, and I’d rather not have to pay for gas more often than I do.”

 “Really? What does your father do?”

 “He’s a math teacher at the local middle school.”

 “Interesting. What about your mother?”

 I hesitated at that question, but then figured there was no point in hiding the truth. “My mom is dead.”

 Meredith raised her eyebrows at my answer. “Oh, my. I’m so sorry, Nolan.”

 “It’s ok,” I waved it off. “She died from cancer when I was five. My dad and I have been able to make it along by ourselves, even with some hardships here or there.”

 Meredith frowned at that. “Still, no child should have to go through something like that.”

 “I guess so. Stuff like that just happens sometimes.”

 We worked on the puzzle for a while in silence when Dolores walked into the room with her usual artificial cheeriness. “Attention seniors! Remember that Florence May’s annual family day is a week from today. Be sure to invite your children, grandchildren, and any other relatives you want to include. There will be music, games, and delicious food!”

 Meredith didn’t acknowledge Dolores once as she spoke.

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Today was the aforementioned Family Day at Florence May Retirement Home. They had games set out on all the tables, a mix of old music from the early 1900s and current pop music blasting through the room, and an assortment of treats laid out along the room’s perimeter on white-clothed tables. Children were scattered everywhere, talking and laughing with their grandparents and stuffing their mouths with cookies and other sweets. Among all the chaos, there sat Meredith, in her usual lonesome corner, working on her puzzle. I zigzagged throughout the crowd over to her and plopped down in the chair beside her.

 “It’s quite crazy in here today,” I said, having to raise my voice to be heard above all the noise. Meredith nodded with a lazy smile. “Do you have any family coming today?”

 “I never got married, so I don’t really have anyone to invite,” was her answer.

 “Oh, I’m sorry about that.”

 She shrugged and replied, “It’s not as if it bothers me.”

 As everyone continued to party around us, Meredith and I sat in our corner, assembling our puzzle together. *Our puzzle,* I thought. It was the first time that I thought of it in that sense. I looked at the box to check again which painting it was that we were doing. *Alice in Wonderland,* part of Kinkade’s Disney collection. The image showed Alice, sitting near the tree that holds the entrance to Wonderland, looking at her reflection in a stream. Beneath the stream was pictured Wonderland, with all its iconic oddities such as the White Rabbit, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, and even the Mad Hatter’s tea party. The section with Wonderland was so much more colorful and vibrant, contrasting to the upper half that contained Alice, with its muted, natural colors and scenery.

 It felt almost like the room we were in. In one section, you had giddiness, celebration, and loud passion. Then you had Meredith and I over in our corner, with a more calm and contained kind of joy. And you know what? I was alright with that.

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“The world is so fantastical, you know? Like, the rabbits all have their own language and culture and it just captivates me every time.”

 I was talking to Meredith about the most recent book she lent me: *Watership Down* by Richard Adams. I had watched the infamous animated movie when I was little, and, having been scarred from that experience, I had not at all expected to be as engrossed in the book as I was. It took Meredith about an hour to persuade me into reading it last week, and I admit I’m glad that she did. The story was unlike any other that I had read before.

 “You see?” said Meredith, “I know what I’m talking about with these things. You should listen to me more often.” We laughed together, the puzzle beneath our hands barely even being formed because we were too distracted with our book talk to work on it. After we settled down, I heard my phone buzz, so I picked it up to find a text from Ike. He was asking if I could come over that night. I proceeded to type out my reply.

 “Who are you talking to?” Meredith asked as she tried to get a look at my screen.

 “Oh, just my boyfriend, Ike. He’s asking about—” I froze in the middle of my sentence, realizing that I just revealed my homosexual relationship to her. I knew that many old people weren’t as accepting of the new support for LGBTQ+ as our generation was, mostly because of the time period they grew up in. With tight lips, I nervously looked up at Meredith.

 However, instead of a nasty reply, Meredith said casually, “Well, isn’t that something. Nolan and Ike. You know, I may not be the best person to be giving out romantic advice, but I always found that no man can resist a good cuddle.”

 I sat there, stunned, unsure of how to reply at first. The last thing I expected from her was romantic advice for my gay boyfriend. After about a minute, I just started laughing. I laughed my heart out, clenching my sides when they started to hurt, and soon Meredith joined in as well. Heads turned in the direction of our little corner as we laughed like a pair of lunatics. Right as I began to settle down from my laughing fit, I realized Meredith was no longer laughing, but coughing. I instinctively reached out to try and console her, but she waved my hands away.

 “I’m fine. Why don’t get back to our puzzle?”

 I stared at her for a minute, unsure of whether I should be concerned. Then I shrugged halfheartedly and resumed work on the puzzle along with her.

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I walked over to Meredith’s table with my special surprise along with me. I wasn’t sure if Meredith was truly accepting of LGBTQ+, or if she just acted accepting because she supports me, but I figured having her meet Ike would be beneficial in either case. Ike and I sat down across from her, and Meredith startled at the sight of him.

 “Meredith, this is my boyfriend that I told you about. Ike.” I stated with a shaky smile. Ike, being the overly confident extrovert that he is, gave a happy-go-lucky wave and his signature bright grin, nothing but friendliness radiating off of him. My gaze switched anxiously back and forth between the two of them, waiting for a response from Meredith.

 “Well, hello, Ike. My name is Meredith,” she said after what felt like an eternity, reaching out her hand. Ike took it and shook it warmly.

 “Nice to meet you Meredith! Nolie here has told me a lot about you over the past few weeks,” Ike replied, eyebrowing me jokingly. My cheeks reddened at the use of his nickname for me.

 Meredith giggled and responded, “Has he? Well, he’s barely told me anything about you. How long have you two been together?”

 “A little less than two years by now, right Nolie?” Ike answered, looking to me for confirmation. I sighed with relief at how well their interaction was going and nodded. I let them talk with each other until it was time for Ike to leave for his work. Meredith gave me a peculiar look after he left.

 “He seems like a nice fellow,” she said, “although, you could have warned me that I would have had to interact with a new person today.”

 I tensed up at that last statement, until I realized she was being sarcastic. Meredith giggled at my expression and said “No need to get all worked up. I don’t actually support homosexual relationships at all, but I support you, Nolan. It’s your life, not mine.”

 I gave a small smile at her statement. “Well, thank you. I’m glad you at least support me.”

 Meredith opened her mouth to say something, but ended up unleashing a coughing fit instead.

 I stood up in a panic and said, “A-are you ok? I can go alert Dolores or one of the other staff members.”

 Meredith patted her chest, cleared her throat, and replied, “No, I’m fine. Really. There wouldn’t be much they could do, anyway.”

 I sat back down, still anxious about the situation. She seemed ok now, so I decided to let the bad thoughts go and join her in assembling the puzzle.

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 That was all over a year ago by now. I had continued to volunteer at the Florence May Retirement Home for the entirety of my senior year in high school and up until I left for college. I loved nothing more than to see Meredith, to work with her on assembling her puzzles, and to simply talk with her about my life. She was—and is—the most humbling person I’ve ever met.

 Now here I stand, looking down at this slab of marble that reads “Meredith Covington, November 15th 1933-May 2nd 2019.” It happened while I was away at college. I never got the opportunity to come down for a final goodbye. As I stand above her resting place now, my mind wanders back to that first day that I came to Florence May. I chuckle I how reluctant I was that first day, and silently thank my dad for forcing me to do so.

 I suddenly remember the bouquet of peonies I’m clutching in my hand, and glance down to it. Splashes of white and pink greet my eyes. Tears creep out of my eyes as I stare at the flowers. Peonies were Meredith’s favorite, and she, of course, owned multiple puzzles of them. A hand slips into to my free one, and I turn my head to meet Ike’s eyes. He offers a small smile of reassurance, and I return it gratefully. Finally, with a sigh, I bend over and place the flowers down in front of Meredith’s tombstone.

 Ike and I walk away in silence, and finally I can’t hold in the tears anymore. What feels like a waterfall trickles down my face. Ike rubs my back in an effort to comfort me. I wipe my eyes dry and straighten my back. Meredith wouldn’t have wanted me to cry. I fill my mind with those sweet old memories, take a deep breath, and let it out. I clutch Ike’s hand harder, and together we walk, out of the graveyard, to let Meredith rest in peace.