

MY AMERICAN *Ghosts*

The air was thick, the sky dark and cold. As though the whole world was grieving with me. The church was layered with posters, pictures, and black. The world felt heavy, the air felt heavy, and my heart was empty. The warmth of the church touched my caramel brown skin but went no deeper. The air was stuffy. Full of scents I couldn't quite place. Layers of light swamped my vision. Blue on black, on red, and underneath it all, a light orange haze hovered in the air. The light was pushing me out of the way, forcing me into my seats. I felt trapped and suffocated in this new environment, like I was carrying a great list of unknown rules on my back.

As the speeches began, I focused on my sparkly black dress. There was no point in listening. Their words wouldn't bring her back. The glitter on my dress hurt my eyes. A painful reminder of my great-grandma. She always wore something covered with glitter, shiny and bold. Glitter, she would never touch it, feel it, feel brave in it again. Bile rose in the back of my throat but I shoved it down. As the speech continued my mind drifted farther away.

I had read about grief, pain, and loss, but the words on the pages of the books I read didn't compare to the pit in my heart. I had thought, so foolishly, that I wouldn't care. I cared more than I wanted to admit. Outside the sky swirled, unforgiving, and as much as I wanted to leave this suffocating room the relentless cold was no better.

The speech ended but there was no applause. No one moved, no one wanted to face the bitter cold. Then slowly, people rose, we were husks, a hollow place forever carved in our hearts. We walked a sad ensemble to our cars, too tired to run from the wind, carrying too much to appear carefree. We followed the big black car that carried the ashes for what felt like hours. Turning, twisting, around and around we went. Finally, we reached the cemetery.

This place was filled with sadness, I could taste it in the air, feel it in every step I took. The ghosts surrounded me. I couldn't see them but I sensed their presence, looming and dark. How unfortunate that my great-grandmother was doomed to be with them for the rest of time.

I turned to my grandma. She had lost her mother, and if I was struggling, she was crushed. I couldn't imagine how I would feel if I had just lost the person I called every night. If I lost the person that raised me, changed me, shaped me. If in the end I had killed her by accepting a surgery when she was already on the brink of death. She had fought so hard to keep her mom alive, but in the end there was nothing she could do. My great grandma's life had already been carved into stone.

When we made eye contact she walked over to me. I tried to smile but I could feel how feeble it looked, fake, plastic, wrong. I reached out to hug her, and we stayed for a moment holding each other, protecting each other from sorrow and pain. Her hands, tired and worn, pulled me in, tighter, and tighter. Her skin, snow white and fragile. The folds in her hands showed years of experience, carefully crafted to show wisdom.

Suddenly she spoke, her voice scratchy but sure, *"This is how we do funerals in America."*

I froze, my veins turned to ice. *Had she really said that? My grandma? We had cooked together, read together, we had both gone through heartbreak together.* As my brain processed her words the emotions flooded over me, confusion, pain, despair. Then it hit, outrage. I was drowning in my thoughts, being pulled down by wave after wave of fury. It was all I could do to nod silently. I couldn't even look at her, swirling, swirling, my mind pulled me down as I tried to understand. *I was born in America. I was, wasn't I? No? Yes? I was born in America. Have I ever been to a funeral outside of America? I couldn't remember one if I had.* Then it clicked, understanding. My grandma must have thought I didn't know how American funerals worked.

I justified her words over and over in my head, protected her, saved her. It was no good, she had said I was not American enough to know how funerals were done. *It was because of the color of my skin.* None of my white cousins had been told what American funerals looked like. My heart burned, my grief replaced with rage.

My face caused discrimination even within my family. My eyes threatened to tear up and my nostrils flared in anger. I had been betrayed. I was supposed to feel safe with my family, but I could never, would never, feel the same about her again. If my own family was discriminating against me, what would other people say? I would have to

work harder than everyone else. Prove to everyone that I was capable of doing more than they could imagen. I would have to earn my right to a job, a family, and friends. I would teach my grandma that I knew more than she could imagine.