

Family Portrait

The funeral for Morgan's parents was a quiet affair.

Peering discreetly over her shoulder, she counted the number of bowed heads in the pews. Fourteen. Fifteen, if she counted the priest. More than she'd expected.

Attendees listened respectfully to a pipe organ rendition of "Ave Maria," only uttering soft *amens* when the priest finished rasping the Lord's Prayer. Morgan wondered who they were. Her father's former coworkers, maybe. A few of his distant cousins.

She couldn't imagine anyone showing up for her mother.

White roses and hydrangeas had been tastefully arranged on and around the caskets. On the altar, framed photos of her parents smiled at the congregation. Judging by her mother's sallow wrinkles and the salt and pepper coloring in her father's hair, these must be recent photos. Morgan wouldn't know. She hadn't seen either of them in over a decade.

Before today, Morgan had never truly appreciated the strict structure and efficiency of Catholic ceremonies. The process of the rites and liturgies took less than an hour. When the notes of the last hymn trailed into silence, Morgan stood and filed into the aisle with everyone else, allowing the long curtain of her hair to obscure her face. She wanted to avoid the possibility of an uncomfortable conversation for as long as possible.

"Morgan? Morgan Holbrook, is that you?"

Morgan sighed. So much for that.

Siobhan, her parents' housekeeper of thirty years, waddled to her side. "Oh sweetheart," she said, sniffing. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Losing both parents a few weeks apart is so—! You must be beside yourself."

"I could be better," said Morgan, shifting her weight. "Thank you for coming, Siobhan. I'm sure they would have appreciated it."

Dabbing her cheeks with a handkerchief, Siobhan swept her watery gaze around the emptied church. "I know it doesn't seem like it right now, dear, but in situations like this, it's actually *good* to not have much family. I can't tell you how many times I've seen perfectly amicable siblings turn into absolute animals over will disputes."

"Uh, yeah. I guess that's true."

"You get to keep the house, I take it?"

Morgan had almost forgotten about Siobhan's penchant for intrusive questions. "Yep. I inherited everything."

"Oh, good," said Siobhan, smiling delicately. "Your mother could be a real spitfire. I wasn't sure if she donated everything to some local charity, or the humane society."

"That was probably the plan. She just didn't get around to it in time."

Siobhan pointedly ignored the acid in Morgan's tone and said, "Regardless, at least your parents are together now. I know Keith struggled with your mother's passing. Two days before his heart attack, I came to clean up and check on him, and you know what I saw? He was speaking to her."

Morgan blinked. "Speaking to her?"

"Yes, yes. At the end of the hallway, next to your mother's favorite portrait. I imagine he missed her very much, because he was carrying on a conversation all by himself, addressing the air as if she never left."



Later that evening, the sky darkened to a deep plum as Morgan pulled into the driveway of her childhood home.

Little had changed about the house since she last saw it. Familiar beige curtains blotted out the windows. The old doorway mat etched with the words *Welcome Home!* laid at the

entrance. She shivered. The house was a time capsule she had locked away in the halls of her memories.

Luckily, she thought, now I can sell it and pay for ten more years of therapy.

After scrounging around her purse for the key, she unlocked the front door and stepped inside, wrinkling her nose at the pungent wave of dust and vanilla diffuser. Vanilla was her mother's favorite scent. Even now, inhaling the aroma made Morgan's palms sweat.

Josephine Holbrook wasn't the worst mother in the world. To anyone who gave her a cursory glance, she simply appeared *protective*—a common adage of the helicopter parent. However, as far as parenting styles go, Josephine's version of *protective* was highly unusual.

Rather than enroll her daughter in public or private school, Josephine hired a string of private tutors to oversee Morgan's education. Schools were plague dens filled with violent heathens, argued Josephine. She wouldn't risk sending her child to one. That didn't stop Morgan from begging to enroll. She wanted to meet people. To make friends. But Josephine always handed down a hard refusal.

"Friends are liars and backstabbers," Josephine often lectured. "You will be stronger without them. Now be quiet and go back to your room."

Josephine held similar views toward sports and outdoor activities. Frolicking was strictly forbidden. For exercise, she gave Morgan specific instructions: jumping jacks, push-ups, and sit-ups. Repeat. If Morgan ever forgot to perform this daily exercise routine—or rebelled against it—Josephine would drag her from bed in the middle of the night and force her to stand barefoot on the cold, wet lawn. Neither of them would sleep until the routine was done.

In stark contrast to her hyperfocus on Morgan's physical health, Josephine couldn't care less about the actual content of her education. She allowed Morgan to read anything, watch anything. Scour the internet as she pleased. When Morgan was twelve, she converted to Buddhism, Hinduism, and then Taoism. Josephine took the news in stride, shrugging every time Morgan pledged to another belief system. Eventually, atheism was the only creed that stuck.

Treading past the living room, Morgan caught a glimpse of the shag carpet and the seaweed-green couch where her father slept most nights. If Keith and Josephine loved each other, they never showed it. But Keith seemed happy to let Josephine dictate every aspect of his life. Maybe that was love.

The rest of the house was largely unaltered. Plastic covered the dining table. Floral

wallpaper adorned the interior. Even the locks on the fridge and the pantry were still installed—barriers intended to keep Morgan from eating between meals.

When Morgan left the kitchen, she stopped. Her pulse quickened.

The portrait remained at the end of the hall.

Her mother had once called it a family heirloom. The painting depicted a woman shrouded under a veil, her pale fingers folded politely over her lap. Though the veil outlined her silhouette, it completely eclipsed her facial features. Only her eyes pierced the shadows of the fabric.

As a kid, Morgan hated the portrait. She had to creep past it to use the bathroom at night, enduring the woman's heavy gaze as it followed her down the hallway.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Morgan walked forward. She was a grown woman. Her mother was dead. The portrait was creepy, but it couldn't hurt her.

Yet something wasn't right. The woman in the portrait seemed...different, somehow.

Morgan frowned and leaned in close. The woman's silhouette had changed. Her shoulders were broader. Her previously skeletal, weathered hands had thickened. The way the veil draped over her seemed disheveled, as if the woman had shifted positions.

Morgan would have likely found more inconsistencies if not for the grating voice that shattered the silence.

"Morgan."

Gasping, Morgan fell backward. She knew that voice.

That was her mother's voice.

Tossing her head around, she searched wildly for Josephine. The purple light of the evening was fading, casting long shadows through the house. She couldn't see much of anything.

"M-mom?" said Morgan, trembling. "Mom, where are you?"

"I'm right here."

To Morgan's horror, the woman in the portrait stood up. Reaching forward, the woman gripped the edges of the frame, pulling herself out.

The woman's head emerged first. The shape of her jaw gnawed against the fabric, taking a deep, gasping breath as she broke through the barrier. Her arms came next, elbows bending, splaying her fingers on the frame. With a powerful shove, she heaved the rest of her body out of the portrait. Her black dress billowed as she tumbled to the floor.

For a long moment, nothing and no one moved. Then, the woman raised her head.

“Oh, Morgan,” rasped Josephine Holbrook. “I knew you would come back.”

“No, this isn’t possible,” whispered Morgan. “You’re dead.”

Her mother’s lips curled under the veil. “I’m not dead, sweetheart. I figured out how to cheat death a long, long time ago.”

Morgan could only watch, frozen, as Josephine crawled toward her. Her limbs burned with fear, weighing them down. The smell of vanilla saturated the air.

The rustle of Josephine’s dress reverberated through the house. “I see you’ve dyed your hair. Pink? Really, Morgan? Ridiculous. At least that’s an easy fix. You look skinny, so losing weight won’t be an issue.”

“W-What?”

“*What?*” repeated Josephine in a mocking tone. “Don’t play dumb, dear. I always thought you were the smartest of my daughters. But perhaps not. Stupid little girls, the lot of you. Always running away. Always thinking your bodies are yours.”

Morgan realized that tears were streaming down her face when she tasted salt. “Mom, I—I don’t understand what you’re saying. I have sisters?”

Squeezing Morgan’s ankle painfully, Josephine dragged her forward. She clambered atop her, caging Morgan under her body. Morgan’s subsequent cry was hushed when Josephine cupped her face between her icy palms. “You used to.”

Her mother’s face was the last thing Morgan saw before the world plunged into darkness.

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Later, Morgan wished she hadn’t woken up.

She thought at first that she must be swaddled under layers of blankets. Or buried under a mound of sand. Some odd force enveloped her body, restricting her movements. No matter how much she struggled, she could not budge from the spot.

When she opened her eyes, she found herself staring into a mirror. She was still wearing the clothes she’d worn to the funeral that day: a leather jacket and jeans, but her hair was tied up in a bun style she didn’t recall putting it in.

Her reflection grinned. “Thank you for taking care of this body for me, Morgan,” her voice said. “I hope you’re comfortable. You’ll be here for a while.”

Comprehension dawned on Morgan. A slow, horrible comprehension that set her alight

with terror.

She was trapped inside the portrait.

Josephine, in Morgan's likeness, puffed her lips in a pout. "Don't be too upset, sweetheart. You never could have escaped me. I've been doing this for hundreds of years."

Give me back my body! she wanted to scream. *Let me go!*

"I must say, the modern age has made growing my replacement bodies such a drag. Modern women suddenly have so many opinions. When you got that disgusting tattoo and cut contact with us, I realized I had to take matters into my own hands. Had to make Keith poison himself. Nasty business."

Please, let me go! Don't leave me here!

"We'll probably chat again in about...three decades, give or take. See you around, Morgan. Or rather, you'll be seeing me."

Josephine strolled down the hallway, her receding form soon disappearing from view. Morgan screamed and begged some more, her curses breaking into sobs.

She continued to scream during the days, weeks, and years that followed. Her small window into the hallway provided fleeting relief from the madness of her existence.

No one could hear her screams beyond the portrait.